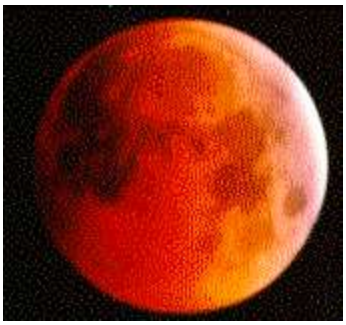

Moonbeams in Asia

A memoir by Teri Ekland

Introduction

In 1975, I came home from the Army and listened to Alan Watts on public radio. I became a Zen Buddhist, essentially, and went to college. (seeing my difficult Army experience as a diving board for the betterment of myself.) Seven years later, after finishing my MA degree in English, I headed for my first overseas teaching position in China. But first, I swung by India to attend a Hindu wedding in Calcutta. A Brahman Bengali Wedding to be precise. After China, I spent a year in Culture Shock living in Thailand. I ran between my job at Prince of Songkhla University and my bungalow investment across the Peninsula on an island called Lansom.

Thai professors resented me because I made more money. Missionaries in the Malay Muslim community became my only allies. They saved me, for a pause.

My last job in Asia took me to Kuwait University (in 1985, pre Gulf-War). I only suffered a new variety of culture shock. In Kuwait, a friend introduced me to the Tarot Cards, which have become my Spiritual Tool.

This book is written from my Asia Journals but is mostly my post-travel exploration of world religion and spirituality. I labored over this book for five years (off and on with other projects such as, In a Word -- To be Absurd).

I invite you to explore with me Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism, Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism and Hegel's Dialectics.

Chapter One: A Brahman Bengali Wedding

"Ululululululu..." tongues trilled as conch shells thundered and rice rained on the bride. In her gold trimmed red sari, she sat cross legged on a hassock while four men carried her around the silk-enshrouded room scented from camphor incense. Gold bangles adorned her slender wrists, jasmine garlands dangled from her shoulders, and a white paper lace tiara crowned her head and secured the sheer red veil over her face.

Among hundreds of wedding guests at the bride's house in Calcutta, I eagerly anticipated the Seven Steps -- the main ceremony of the three day Brahmin Bengali wedding. Women flourished the room with brilliant pink, purple, green, and blue rustling silk saris along with flashy necklaces, clanging bangles, large finger-rings linked to thick bangles, and silver nose-rings connected to lace caps with jewels.

We surrounded a magnificent altar pavilion of silk draped over four pillars. On a stone hearth in the center of the altar burned the flame of Agni -- the ancient god of fire who symbolically resides at all Hindu ceremonies. Sitting crosslegged on the marble floor, before the flame, the groom, the bride's father, and a Hindu priest in a loincloth awaited the bride.

It was strange to see my friend Arya Banerjee, the groom, in a collarless long sleeved *kurta*, and a *dhoti* skirt wrap, instead of his typical blue jeans and T-shirt. He looked dazed. His eyes were wide open and his thick moustache was as straight as his smile. Gold and white dots glistened above his brows and on his head towered a white paper lace headdress that resembled a tiered wedding cake.

Arya and I had met that summer during sailing lessons on the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon. I was immediately captivated by Arya, this tall man from Bengal, India -- the place where tigers lurk in the jungles and little dark men clad in loincloths magically levitate into thin air or charm cobras into hypnotic dances. But after we shared a sail boat for several lessons, Arya seemed more American than Indian. He dressed and behaved casually and even joked flippantly about American things, such as characters from Saturday Night Live.

Nothing romantic developed between Arya and me. Soon after we met he told me of his plans to marry. Besides, I had just ended a relationship and hardly wanted to start a new one, or disrupt my graduate studies in English, or my goal to travel through Asia. Until Arya invited me to his wedding, I had planned to spend two months exploring China and then heading for my first overseas teaching position at a university in Wuhan. This had been my only job offer and, although I had hoped for a well-paying job in the Middle East, I worried that if I didn't accept the offer another year would pass before anything else came along. And I was eager to leave Portland. Not that I hated my hometown. It's just that sometimes people must leave the place they were born and raised for reasons that aren't always clear. This may not be true for everyone, but it was for me.

Arya's news that his mother arranged everything about his wedding, including the selection of a bride, astonished me. "How does she go about it?" I asked one evening, while

jibbing the sail of our small boat. Arya explained that his mother advertised his availability to marry in the Calcutta newspapers. I found this incredible and had to steer my mind from "Portland, Oregon thinking," when I asked what else the ads contained.

Arya smiled, seemingly entertained by my naivete. He said the ads included his degree in electrical engineering, status as an only child, and his father's education, job and salary. Additionally, the ads specified that Arya was a Brahmin, a member of the highest of four major social divisions in traditional Hindu society. As Arya explained it, such information was a vital part of the arrangement because an Indian marriage unites two families, instead of two individuals, as in an American wedding.

"So your mother finds you a bride and that's it?" I asked while a vibrant breeze careened our boat through the brown choppy waters of the Willamette.

"Hardly. First I must interview the girl and, if I like her, my mother will consult a Hindu astrologer. If the match offers promise then my family and hers will plan our wedding on an auspicious day. If it's an unfavorable match, then I'm afraid my mother will have to continue searching for another girl."

Arya leaned back on the low side of the boat and became absorbed with sailing across the river. As he did so, I questioned whether I'd ever choose to have a prearranged marriage. No dating hassles. No trying to get to know someone. No questions about sex before marriage. My future would be organized and settled for me, just by asking my mother to find me a husband. Although, I probably wouldn't like the guy simply because she chose him. And the very act of her finding me a spouse would really lock me inside my hometown, or at least, my home culture. I treasured the freedom of choice when it came to marriage, but, at the same time, there was something comfortable and reassuring about parents finding their offspring a spouse. Arya was

assured of having a wife while I may never meet the right guy. Or perhaps I'd end up settling for someone out of desperation. The thought made me question whether my freedom to choose for myself brought with it too many uncertainties. Maybe I had too much freedom when it came to making decisions.

"Would you ever marry an American woman?" I asked, not that I had myself in mind.

"Fall off," he shouted and I pulled the tiller away from the sail. In a moment the boat steadied and Arya said, in a serious tone, "My mother tells me I'm free to marry whomever I wish, but all my years of experience tell me to marry an Indian woman. An Indian wife will understand me and my strange habits in ways an American woman never could."

"Watch the sail!" I shouted, and then, as we heeled to leeward, I said, "I guess it's your karma to marry an Indian woman."

Arya glanced at me, the wind bunching up his hair, and he said in a somewhat annoyed tone, "Americans always say *karma* or *nirvana* and they don't even know what they're talking about."

Arya's remark didn't offend me. He was, after all, merely stating fact and karma certainly held more meaning to a Hindu than its fashionable use during the Beatle and hippie era. Karma encompassed an entire philosophy well beyond my Portland childhood, and it represented one of the mysterious Eastern philosophies that enticed me to explore Asia. In fact, my drive for learning about differing world views led me to an undergraduate degree in anthropology. But formal education offered only a technical overview of culture and religion. I wanted to learn first hand from people like Arya and, it seemed, my philosophical quest began that evening when I asked Arya if karma meant a person's life-sworn duty in accordance with fate. "Isn't it your duty, after all, to marry an Indian woman?"

"Dharma is duty, at least in a general sense. Karma is more like cause and effect. That is, what you do in the present will affect your future."

"Like the ramifications of an act?"

Arya laughed at my pompous comment but made no further explanations. I returned my thoughts to sailing. Answers to my questions would have to wait until my arrival in Calcutta the following December. In the mean time, I reveled in visions of Arya's wedding and the adventures that I would soon encounter.

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Arya met me at Calcutta's Dum Dum International Airport in his chauffeur driven Indian car, an Ambassador, that resembled a 1940's Fordor Sedan. In the airport parking lot Arya's driver, a scrawny dark man in a sarong and shirt, stood next to the car as we approached. He stared at me as though he expected something. Was I to give him a tip? Without a word the driver opened the back door and I climbed in beside Arya, feeling incredibly inept even with Arya to guide me through this strange mysterious world.

Calcutta in December was as warm as any June in Portland, but the air was burdened with smog and unpleasant to breathe. During the hour drive to his house on Monopukka Road, Arya explained the sights swirling by. Most of the time I silently gazed in awe at the passing street scenes. Buses and trucks spewed black exhaust whenever they stopped or started and soon the soot clogged my nostrils. Horns blared, motors revved, and buses chocked and sputtered. The chaotic turbulence of intertwining streets splashed onto sidewalks where vendors stood behind derelict carts or sat on the cracked concrete and peddled food, rags, bottles, and old books. Here and there men lay asleep on the bare pavement, and women nursed or carried children. Some children -- naked, sooty, and unattended -- played in gutters or in brown water gushing from

broken hydrants. Our progress to Arya's house was hindered by motorcycles, pedicabs, bicycles, push carts, pedestrians, and buses overcrowded with men hanging out the doors like clusters of grapes. I winced at the thought of people being smashed in the traffic. "Do they ever fall off?" I asked.

"All the time." Arya winked.

Arya's driver continually honked the horn as he drove inconsistently on the left side of the four and six lane roads (the left side being the right side in India, though there were rarely any division lines for this to matter). Somehow he circumvented every potential accident that came our way and more than once he barely sideswiped another vehicle. At one point we were aimed straight for an oncoming truck. I closed my eyes, expecting the worst, but nothing happened. When I opened my eyes we were back on the left side of the road. "Good God Arya!" I exclaimed. "What happens when you get in an accident?"

"If you hit someone, he'll probably beat you up -- that is, if he survives." I was used to Arya's flippant sense of humor, but at this point I took everything he said quite literally. The surrounding scene was too unreal not to.

At an eight way intersection, the car jerked to a stop. In the center of the intersection, on a concrete platform, stood a traffic guard clad in a white uniform and high top black boots. (So far, I hadn't seen much else in the way of traffic signals.) With a whistle in his mouth, the man randomly swirled his arms about the air, as though he were desperately trying to interpret the general flow of traffic. Suddenly, the dark face of a woman appeared at my window. Her bloodshot eyes urged me to look in her arms at the skeletal child that wore nothing but a pouch around its neck. "What's in the pouch?" I asked Arya.

"Spices, I suppose, to keep the child alive. These people are superstitious, you know. And their children usually die before reaching one or two."

It was troubling to sit in Arya's car and realize how protected I was from this woman and her hideous environment. Why was I so lucky and she so devastated? My future held golden opportunity, adventure, while hers held nothing but a few coins to sustain her and the child's life. The child was probably dying, and when it did, this woman would have another child destined to die before growing very old. It wasn't long before the woman's pitiful gaze made me look away and reach into my pocket for some change. I unrolled my window and quickly handed her the coins, hoping she'd go away. Instead, dozens of beggars hustled up to the car, like an angry mob. I felt I was being yanked from a pit of starving rats when our car sped away from the miserable crowd of beggars.

"This is why we Hindus give alms through our temples and not on the streets," Arya said as we drove past the intersection. "Besides, even when these people receive money they must turn it over to the beggar in charge. You see, begging is a business and these people work in specific areas that are carefully watched over by a head man. Sometimes, parents even maim their children in order to increase their chances at getting more money."

The thought of parents crippling their own children sickened me. And the reality of people trapped in a cycle of poverty, generation after generation, was equally hideous.

The numbing scenes of poverty appeared endless as our car swerved past crude sidewalk dwellings pieced together from oil drums, scraps of corrugated aluminum, cardboard, palm fronds, or whatever could be pillaged off the streets. A putrid stench of excrement and decay reached inside the car, as people everywhere, thin, dirty and clothed in filthy rags, rummage through the garbage heaps edging the streets, along with mangy dogs, rats, and crows. Were

these indigent people were the untouchables I had read about? The outcasts of Hindu society who were viewed as so poor and dirty that Hindus of caste believed it defiling to be touched by one.

"Is garbage their only means of food?" I said while watching a mother feed her child an apple core found on the street.

"Not at all. They look for such things as human hair to sell to wig makers, or golden threads from discarded saris, to sell to cloth makers. Nothing's wasted on the streets of Calcutta."

This is the opposite of American materialism, I thought. But America's wastefulness looks a whole lot cleaner, more orderly, and healthier than Calcutta's austerity. How could such enormous poverty evolve? Who had let it happen? Powerful people, no doubt, repressing others to gain more power. Was this a law of nature? Survival of the fittest. My training in anthropology would have me view Calcutta's slums objectively, analytically, as an outside observer who does not feel disturbed by the manner in which other people live. But I did feel troubled by the slums, and when Arya's car turned onto Monopukka Road, a wide, clean avenue lined with stately houses from the British Raj, I felt like the most privileged person in the world. And this was not comforting.

The driver pulled up to the scrolled wrought iron gate at 33 Monopukka Road, opened the gates, and then drove up the curving gravel driveway through a well trimmed lawn edged by yellow painted stones. We stopped at a large portico embracing the facade of the two story concrete house. At the front steps under the portico stood Mr. Banerjee, a paunchy man, balding, and a foot shorter than his son. He held his hands behind his back and wore black rimmed glasses and a brown vest over his white kurta and pajama trousers. Mrs. Banerjee, a small woman with thick wavy black hair worn at the back of her neck, had on a sweater over her

orange sari. I was honored to be their guest and to witness one of the most elaborate of Hindu ceremonies. At the same time, I wondered what Arya's parents thought of me -- the strange American girl their son had invited to his wedding. What had he told them about me? That I was an English teacher on my way to China? Was their culture unprepared for friendships between men and woman? I was most concerned with how Mrs. Banerjee viewed me because I especially wanted to learn about her life, values and beliefs, as a Hindu woman.

Over the next few days, as Arya's relatives steadily arrived, Calcutta's slums seemingly disappeared while the events surrounding the wedding swept me into a whirlwind of color, sound, and sweet, woody, spicy aroma. The walls throughout the Banerjee house were decked in reams of silk, ceiling fans held strings of white flowers, and every table and mantle held bowls of burning sandalwood incense and bouquets of irises and orchids. I slept on the floor of the back drawing room, along with dozens of Arya's female cousins. Each of us had our own mattress and mosquito net, but often the girls, who seemed to relish my exoticness, wanted to sleep beside me, as if I were a doll. Generally, one of the mothers came in the room and rescued me by telling the girls not to smother "auntie" with so much affection.

With the arrival of each of Arya's aunts and uncles, a ceremony took place in the large front foyer. Arya touched the feet of an aunt or uncle, in a gesture of reverence, and the elder relative reciprocated by touching Arya's head. Amid all the Bengali chatter that arrived with each wave of guests, I kept hearing "*accha*," a word that means something like, "OK," "I see," or "uhuh." Arya generally added something important about each guest he introduced. "She is the former Miss Teen India." "Her father is a doctor to the king of Nepal." "His father owns an elephant farm." "They own several race horses." The guests never ceased to impress me or to

leave me feeling rather ordinary. My only claim to fame was my nationality. "This is Teresa. She comes all the way from America," the relatives would introduce me. And as soon as they learned I liked spicy hot Bengali food, they'd add, with amusement, "And she very much likes chilies."

Ceremony continually filled the vast and airy rooms throughout the house and it was difficult to distinguish one from another as I wandered from room to room asking questions. Outside of Arya's welcoming ceremonies, the real Bengali wedding lasted three days and the main event, the Seven Steps, was the only ceremony I witnessed at the bride's house.

For each important event the girl cousins helped me into the red sari I had bought for the wedding. They tucked one end of the silk into my floor length petticoat, then wrapped the remaining thirty feet twice around my waist making pleats in the front. I marveled at how they dexterously arranged the final portion of silk over my left shoulder, and aligned the gold brocade so the garment looked carefully tailored. In addition to dressing me, the girls brushed and braided my long brown hair, doused me with floral perfumes that made me sneeze, painted my face with rouge and lipstick, and lined my eyes with black antimony. The final touch was what the girls called a *bindi*, a red felt adhesive back dot placed above the ridge of my nose. The various sizes of bindis came in packets like false finger nails.

"Isn't the bindi for married women?" I asked.

The girls giggled at my question until one said, "Anybody can wear a bindi. It's for beauty and not so significant as all that. At least not today."

The girls stood me before the wardrobe mirror so I could admire myself. My cheeks looked haphazardly painted, my eyes heavily rimmed in black, and my lips were thickly smeared bright red. The girls claimed I was stunningly beautiful, but, not being used to makeup and extravagant garments, I felt a little gaudy.

On the night before the Seven Steps, women sang and chatted until their excitement peaked in the auspicious trilling "ulu ulu ulu ulu ulu ulu." They were preparing gift trays for the bride and her family. The wooden trays, placed on the floor of the back veranda, contained jewelry, perfumes, cosmetics, leather purses, slippers, sandals, dried fruits, churidhar kameezes (Punjabi dresses), silk saris, and cakes shaped into fish, shells, and stars. The bride's hand-woven sari was red, the traditional color for a Bengali bride. A cousin explained that the bride's sari was in the *kanya* tray. "In Bengali we call the bride kanya -- she who desires a husband." Each tray was wrapped in amber, red, blue, or green cellophane paper, and tied with a golden ribbon.

Early on the morning of the Seven Steps a messenger took the gifts to the bride's house to announce that the groom would soon arrive. Also on that morning I witnessed *the Sacred String Ceremony*, or the *Upanayana*, a ceremony that turned out to be almost as important as the wedding itself. For Upanayana, Arya's mother and aunts eagerly prepared a back room. They hung garland draped portraits of men and women on the walls, and placed piles of fruit, vegetables, rice, and white cotton dhotis on the marble floor.

While I pondered what was going to happen, Arya caught up with me and commented that Upanayana wasn't even a part of the wedding. "Not a part of the wedding?" I felt sure he was teasing me.

"Really. I should have gone through with it when I was eight or ten, even twelve... but I must go through with it now, before I marry." Surprised by this, I asked why he had postponed the rite for so many years. "Just lazy, I guess."

This didn't surprise me. I could picture Arya as a boy complaining to his mother about having to go through with the "silly" rite. Although he took great pride in being a Bengali Brahmin, Arya seemed embarrassed with the pomp surrounding him as he dutifully followed his

family's traditions, for the benefit of his relatives and mother. Was his sense of duty what the Hindus meant by dharma? If so, was I following dharma when I obligingly spent Christmas with my relatives, even though I wasn't that sentimental about the holiday? Or did dharma go further and require a person to live the traditions fashioned by his or her culture? If I were to live according to dharma would I be a mother and housewife instead of a career minded woman exploring foreign lands? If so, I had no use for dharma.

Mrs. Banerjee hurried Arya off to another purification bath -- a rite he underwent before each ceremony he participated in. Purification, Arya had explained, was an important part of all Hindu ritual, especially for the Brahmins. Traditionally, Brahmin men were the Hindu priests and therefore the closest to God, and the most in need of keeping clean and pure.

After Arya left, I met up with a chubby aunt in a forest green sari who was busy adding oranges to the piles of fruit on the floor. "More gifts for the bride?" I asked unknowingly.

"Oh no. These are gifts for Arya's grandparents and great grandparents... His ancestors." She gestured to the many pictures around the room.

This struck me as peculiar. Since none of these people were living, they were hardly in need of gifts.

As the aunt continued to arrange the oranges, the concept of reincarnation stirred through my mind. According to Hindu belief, shouldn't the dead be living in a new body? And in this case, how could they actually receive their gifts? I asked the aunt what would happen to the gifts after the ceremony. She laughed with delight and said, "Everything will be taken to the temple for distribution to the poor."

Ah ha, I mused to myself. Perhaps in this way Arya's ancestors really will receive their gifts.

When Upanayana was about to begin, the relatives gathered around the room. I stood by the aunt in the green sari and said, "Arya mentioned that this ceremony isn't really a part of the wedding."

"Not really. Upanayana is the first stage in the life of a Brahmin boy."

"A sort of Hindu *Bar Mihtz-va*?"

"Sorry, my dear?"

"A boy's rite of passage."

"Yes, yes, that's right. According to Hindu tradition, a man has four such passages or life stages. Upanayana is the first. Marriage the second. In the other two stages a man becomes a hermit, or Sannyasin, who devotes his life entirely to God. But these last stages are rarely followed today because in them a man must forever leave his wife and family, and that's hardly fair, don't you agree?"

"True. What good is it to desert your family and then keep enlightenment to yourself?"

She chuckled at my comment. "Understand, my dear, the ideals of India are more spiritual than worldly."

At this point, a small Hindu priest dressed in a loincloth entered the room and sat on a floor mat. He lit the brass lamp that would burn the symbolic flame of Agni. While he did so, Arya's father entered the room and sat beside the priest to partake in the ceremony.

"Are these four life stages exclusively for Brahmin men?" I asked the aunt.

"Certainly marriage is for everyone. But it's true that passage rites are for Hindu men."

"What's the essence of the Upanayana?"

"After Upanayana, the boy learns the sacred Hindu scriptures and becomes a twice-born Hindu man."

"Twice-born? Sounds like a born-again Christian."

"There you see," the aunt took hold of my hand, "we have many similarities in our religions, don't we?"

Her comment amused me. Most of Arya's relatives assumed I was a Christian, even though I was not religious at all. I merely wanted to learn about world religions and the roles of women in religious traditions. So I asked the aunt, "Are the twice-born only men?"

"It is so written in our scriptures. Additionally, the twice-born are men only from the three upper castes -- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. It is true that in Bengal, however, Upanayana is restricted to Brahmin boys -- which makes a Bengali Brahmin a most impressive fellow, wouldn't you say? But India is greatly diverse, my dear, and in other parts all but the Sudras partake in Upanayana."

"Sudras? Are they *the untouchables*? The beggars on the streets?"

"Oh no. Sudras are the once-born caste, and these untouchables you speak of were formerly the outcasts of Hindu society. But Gandhiji delivered them from repression and renamed them the Harijans -- Children of God. You see, India is changing for the better."

The guests began cheering as Arya entered the room dressed in a new white silk dhoti. He looked more like a character from an anthropology text than a friend of mine from Portland. He sat on the floor and touched his father's feet and placed his hands together against his chest in *namaste*, a prayer-like reverential gesture. In reciprocation, Mr. Banerjee touched the head of his son and threw rice on him and the lamp.

Arya began chanting the names of his ancestors back seven generations, calling on them to witness his rite. When he finished, the priest placed a shawl over Arya's head. "This is so he

can recite *Gayatri Mantra* in seclusion," the aunt whispered. "No one else in the room is supposed to hear these sacred words. They are bestowed exclusively on the twice-born."

When the priest removed the shawl, I whispered to the aunt, "So only the twice-born know the meaning of this verse?"

"Oh no," she said aloud. "This is what is customary. We all know the meaning of Gayatri Mantra. It's the greatest prayer in Hinduism, and it goes, 'Om... May the glory and wisdom of the God stimulate our thoughts and attitudes so that we may realize what is true even in the shadows of night... Om.'"

The Upanayana ended after the priest tied three strings over Arya's left shoulder and under his right arm. "These strings remind the twice-born of his intelligence, his relationship with God, and his duty to his newly acquired status in life..." Arya stood up and blushed as his relatives cheered and clapped. "And now," the aunt said, "Arya is officially a twice-born Brahmin and he can get married."

The Bidding-Farewell-to-the-Groom Ceremony took place that afternoon, just before Arya left for his bride's house. Relatives and friends gathered in a room where Arya sat on the floor with his mother. She washed the feet of her son for purification and to display her service and reverence toward the groom. Then she put a wet rice and turmeric mark on his forehead and said, "My son, where are you going?"

"I am going to fetch you a new daughter."

Everyone laughed at Arya's ceremonial remark while I wondered if Mrs. Banerjee would really welcome Arya's bride as a household helper, like most traditional Indian mothers? Or was Arya's mother more contemporary in thought, like her son, and without domestic expectations for her new daughter-in-law? I had wanted to speak with Mrs. Banerjee, but seldom found the

chance because she was so busy with the wedding and her other guests. She appeared delighted to play the role of groom's mother. Was it an important role for her? An end to her duty as a mother and a Hindu woman's unacknowledged rite of passage into another stage of life? And were her views and ambitions similar to my own, despite our differences in age and culture? That is, was she aware of being stuck in a role and if so, did she dislike it?

Cheers filled the air and disrupted my thoughts. I followed Arya and the crowd of guests onto the front portico. The Ambassador car idling at the bottom of the steps was caught in a web of white flowers and red roses. Arya walked down the steps to the car while relatives touched his feet and wailed their blessings, revering him as the Hindu god Vishnu off to fetch his goddess Lakshmi.

Shortly, a hired bus pulled into the driveway to take Arya's wedding party to the bride's house. I wasn't expecting the sort of discomfort I encountered that night, especially in my splendid new silk sari. Because Hindu astrologers had designated that evening as auspicious for matrimony, hundreds of weddings took place and thousands of cars and buses traveled across the already congested city to the houses of prospective brides.

Three hours after we left Monopukka Road, our bus became trapped in the middle of an intersection. An uncle among us decided we could walk the remaining mile to the bride's house so everyone left the bus pegged to the street and reassembled under a street light. Urine tainted the air, horns blared and people shouted as they stirred among the stalled traffic. Across the street a naked boy defecating over a gutter, a sight that would have sickened me, but I was already nauseated from the smog and harrowing bus journey.

I followed the wedding party down a sidewalk littered with indigent people sleeping -- or dead, and with pot holes, cracks, and marks of phlegm and orange *betel nut* spittle. The women

near me giggled when I raised the bottom of my sari to avoid dragging it in the filth. At the same time, they astonished me by letting their expensive garments drag on the pavement. At last we reached a tree lined avenue leading up to an open gate beyond which stood a magnificent neoclassic house with white pillars at its portico. Arya's distraught wedding party was warmly greeted by the bride's relatives, mostly women who sprinkled me with perfume.

I followed the procession into the house and down a long hallway festooned with silk and banners and scented with camphor. At the end of it, sitting crosslegged on a hassock, was the bride, formed by gold, silk, perfumes, and flowers. At her sides, perched like ladies-in-waiting, sat her child-maid-of-honor, and two close friends. The bride's face was whitened with powder and intimately painted with gold dots. Her palms were detailed with henna mandalas and she wore large gold earrings. When I reached her I could think of nothing to say but, "You looked beautiful."

"Naturally," she replied, matter-of-factly. "With all these things on, how could I not?"

After leaving the bride, I followed the procession upstairs to the large room where Arya, the bride's father, and the Hindu priest awaited the bride. The scantily dressed priest wouldn't be marrying the couple in the manner a Christian priest or minister does. Instead, he would guide each phase of the ceremony and cite scriptures for the bride, her father, and the groom to repeat. During the event, he continually threw rice and clarified butter -- a substance of purity, onto the burning hearth of Agni.

"Ululululululu..." At the altar two women held a red sari in front of Arya to shield him from his bride. The four men carrying the bride around the room carefully set her beside Arya and the guests tightened around the altar. I moved close to a pillar for a clear view. The sari shielding Arya was placed over the bride and groom so they could have their first glimpse of each other.

But this was only customary. Just the evening before, Arya, his friends, cousins, and I had snuck out of Arya's house, took a taxi across town and picked up the bride, Bela, and her child-maid-of-honor. Then we headed to a night club to listen to music and drink beer. Arya and Bela seemed very much in love. I felt happy for them, although a bit jealous with the ease they had in finding each other.

The wedding guests cheered and threw more rice at the couple while Bela's father ceremoniously gave his daughter to Arya, an enactment known in Bengal as the "Gift of a Virgin." "On this auspicious day..." he repeated after the priest, "I give away my daughter who is pure and in perfect health and beauty to this groom." Three times Arya accepted his gift and the crowd cheered and blew conch shells. It was like New Year's Eve after the noise makers have been passed out. I had the urge to whistle on each outburst, as I can do quite loudly with four fingers in my mouth, but I didn't want to appear unfeminine or stranger than I already was, as the only Westerner in the crowd.

The bride and groom exchanged garlands and Bela's father tied the top portion of his daughter's sari to Arya's scarf. These acts symbolically united the couple, like the exchanging of rings in a Christian ceremony. The father declared Arya as the god Vishnu and his daughter as Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and beauty. The stunning bride, with her bright brown eyes, long lashes, high cheek bones, and broad smile showing straight white teeth, perfectly embodied Lakshmi, the Venus of Hinduism.

Throughout the ceremony, I had repeatedly asked my neighbors when the Seven Steps would occur. When it arrived, guests nudged me from all sides. As I joined the crowd in throwing more rice, the priest coaxed Arya and Bela to stand and Arya to lead his bride around the flame of Agni. The couple, looking downward, took small steps around the altar, and the

priest recited the Hindu verse: *When the groom leads his bride around Agni, he shall say, "I am heaven, you are earth. Come! Here and now we shall marry. Take one step so we may have strength."*

His bride shall reply, "Within your worthiness, I take this step."

"Take the second step so our lives will be filled with vitality."

"I am born to share in your joys and sorrows."

"Take the third step so we may for one hundred autumns live in prosperity."

"My lord, I am forever yours."

"Take the fourth step and we shall ever have joy."

"I am devoted to you. My love and prayers are for your happiness."

"Take the fifth step so we shall serve the people."

"I will follow you my lord and teacher. With me, you shall keep your vows and serve the people."

"Take the sixth step so we shall follow the sacred duties of our religion."

" I shall forever follow you in observing our religious vows."

"And take this final step so we shall forever live as friends."

"You are my lord, my best friend, and my highest teacher."

"Let us beget many sons who will live to become wise old men."

Suddenly, a flow of laughing people and rustling silk ushered me down the stairs and out to the back of the estate where a pavilion the size of a circus tent hovered over the yard. This was the bride's reception, an event scaled according to the wealth of her family. I could hardly

imagine how much the whole affair had cost -- or how many impoverished people it might feed, and for how long.

Under the pavilion stood long rows of tables decorated with garlands and brass vases of irises. Glass chandeliers dangled from the center rafters, and colored lights looped from pole to pole, like Christmas lights. The feast began after Arya took the first ceremonial bite of food and shared his plate with Bela. Then the guests settled down to their own feast of hot spicy fish and vegetable curries, tangy lentil soups, yogurt with cucumbers, hot bitter mango and sour lime chutneys, greasy flat breads, and platters of aromatic rice tinged with saffron.

After the feast, Arya and Bela invited me to stay up for the night with them and their cousins and other friends. The newlyweds would not be alone until two nights later, at the Flower Bed Ceremony, the concluding event of the three day wedding. But I felt exhausted that night and decided to return to the Banerjee house to sleep, even though this meant another bus ride across town.

Just before noon on the following morning, Arya and Bela returned to the Banerjee house. They both wore fresh garlands and their paper laced headdresses, as Arya carried his bride over the threshold. He then led the cheering crowd into the drawing room where preparations had been made to welcome the bride. Here, Mrs. Banerjee, who, according to custom, had not been present at the bride's house the night before, ceremoniously pointed to a vermilion mark in the part of Bela's hair. "This is *sindoor*," a girl cousin pulled me aside and explained. "It is worn only by married women as you once thought about the bindi." Mrs. Banerjee placed a drop of honey on Bela's lips and ears so her new daughter would utter or hear nothing but sweet words.

At noon that day, the guests sat on the dining room floor for *The Rice Touching Ceremony,* an event that displayed the bride's obedience to her new household. Ceremoniously Bela served each of us a banana leaf plate containing a spoonful of rice, of dhal, and of fish curry. A servant woman followed behind to dish out more complete portions. Following the meal, Bela lighted cigarettes for the men and offered everybody some bitter *pan,* the Indian word for "betel nut" -- a palm nut and herbal mixture that's chewed throughout Asia for its narcotic high, one that resembles the effect from a cup of strong coffee.

Later that afternoon, while almost everyone napped and the house fell remarkably quiet, I sat on a sofa in the front drawing room. I wanted to compose my thoughts concerning the similarities between the Hindu and Christian weddings, especially the way both traditions glorified the bride as chaste and as subservient to her husband. In both traditions, the bride takes her husband's name after her father has given her away to him, as if she's a piece of property instead of a free individual. Then, in a romanticized display of affection, the husband carries his new possession over the threshold to his house. In the Christian wedding the bride wears white to represent her purity and virginity, in the Hindu wedding she wears red to represent the same thing. I could never be a traditional bride. Such a role would offend, not flatter me. My husband would have to fashion with me a wedding based on our shared ideals, which would include equality. It puzzled me that most American women loved traditional weddings that portrayed them as unequal and dependent. Why was I so different from the majority? Why did I watch ceremonies with the droll analytical eye of an anthropologist, instead of with the passionate emotions of a romantic? Was something wrong with me? Would I always stand on the rim of cultures and religions -- just to observe -- without ever becoming personally involved? Perhaps.

While I sat on the sofa, deeply absorbed in thought, Arya's mother entered the drawing room, sat beside me, and asked to read my journal. Her request surprised me and I couldn't think of what to say. Because she had made the time for a visit, I wanted to be as gracious as possible. At the same time, the contents of my journal were too personal for her to read. "The thing is..." I said, feeling awkward, "I'd be embarrassed to have you read it because... I haven't been careful about the spelling and grammar."

Mrs. Banerjee smiled and took my hand in hers. "My dear Teresa. You must feel more comfortable with me. Let me assure you, I too am a clumsy fellow. You are so far away from your home and your mother. You must make yourself at home in my house. We welcome you with open arms. And please, you must call me Kumala."

I quickly felt at ease with Arya's mother, and to avoid showing her my journal, I asked her why there had been so many elaborate ceremonies during Arya's wedding.

"My dear child," she said, "these ceremonies are how we teach tradition to our children and to future generations. How can they otherwise learn about their heritage?"

"Through fairy tales, books, and television."

"Television may be tradition in America, but it is not so much in India. I tell you, customs are bound to the culture we are born into... What the Bengali sees or believes about the world, is determined by his being Bengali. But the world itself is not Bengal."

"Nor America," I said, feeling charmed by her wit. "But do you think tradition is really that important to pass on generation after generation? It seems that certain traditions need to change as society changes for the better."

"But if we change our traditions, we disconnect ourselves from our heritage. Without knowing our past, how can we discover a continuity between ourselves, our ancestors, and our

future generations. This continuity is as important to us Hindus as I'm sure it is for you Americans."

"I'm not so sure we value continuity. You see, Americans come from all over the world and we tend to lose connections with our ancestry as generations go by. For example, I don't even know the names of my great grandparents..."

"Why, this is interesting," Kumala said, her eyes bright with curiosity. "You must tell me all about your family in America. There's so much I don't know about your country. Arya tells me nothing other than what he thinks I want to hear. That he's happy at his job and with his living arrangements. But I worry about him, you see. I can't help it, in the same way I'm sure your mother cannot help worrying about her little Teresa. Tell me, how do you find the courage to travel all the way to India?"

Amused by Kumala's motherly concerns, I smiled and said, "Really, I'm here because I'm fascinated with the customs and beliefs of your country."

My comment delighted Kumala and she said, with a teasing grin, "So you have come to India to seek knowledge. This is wonderful and I'm sure you'll discover much about yourself in the process."

When I asked Kumala about her life in Bengal, she enthusiastically told me her paternal grandparents had moved to Calcutta at the turn of the century from a part of Bengal that is now in Bangladesh. "Do you know about the Partition, in 1947?"

"When Pakistan broke from India?"

"Accha," Kumala said. "When Bengal was ripped asunder the Muslims went to East Bengal and thousands of East Bengali Hindus fled to the streets of Calcutta. It is not natural to

divide a people like this and such a separation can only lead to suffering and conflict. And now, as you can see, Calcutta is like a way station for the unwanted and the needy."

I admitted Calcutta's slums were depressing and she said, "When you return to Calcutta after your travels through India, I will show you the sights of our fair city and teach you the positive aspects of India. Otherwise, I'm afraid you will only see what is negative when there is much more to Calcutta than meets the eye. Ours is a city of beauty, of intelligence, and of great emotion."

"India is truly diverse. You have such vast contrasts between the rich and poor, and among the many religions and languages."

"Accha. This is very true... but you must understand that there is much harmony and unity in this diversity. To understand a country like India you must understand her history, just as the child must learn his own heritage. Otherwise, how can he feel he is a part of something bigger than himself? This Teresa, is what you must remember about Arya's wedding, and about the people of India."

I smiled at the warm, intelligent woman beside me, feeling sorry I was leaving the next day for two months of travel through India. It concerned me that by the time I returned to Calcutta, Kumala wouldn't so warmly welcome me. After all, I'd no longer be the exotic guest at her son's wedding?

Chapter Two: Travels in South India

After spending the night in the south Indian city of Madras, I took a bus down the Coromandel coast to the beach side village of Kovelam. I found a clean comfortable room at a green stucco one story hotel, the Traveller's Inn. The Inn stood in the center of the village and had a front dirt courtyard surrounded by a stucco wall to keep out everyone but the paying guests.

During my week in Kovelam, Christmas passed unnoticed, which I quite liked. I had no reason to celebrate it and I didn't miss my family since I hadn't been away that long. Besides, every day in Kovelam was like a child's Christmas morning. I'd stroll along narrow dirt roads, passing bamboo shops, leaning coconut palms, and sheep, cows, and goats that seemingly wandered as aimlessly as me. Naked boys frolicked in irrigation ditches near fields of green rice glimmering beneath the hot tropical sun. Several times a day I'd stretch out on the long white beach edging the village and the Bay of Bengal. The aqua blue waters splashed ashore and gleamed under a bright blue sky that was so vast it seemed like eternity. I'd listen to the surf, the sea gulls, and to the songs of fisherman who sat on beached log catamarans as they repaired their nets. I wondered what they thought of their lives. They seemed so hard working and yet so full of song and laughter. Perhaps the setting offered them as much tranquility as it did me.

Occasionally, I sat on the steps of the veranda outside my room and talked to Sanji, the caretaker of the Inn. Sanji, a thin, dark complexioned man, wore his *longee* (south Indian sarong)

above his knobby knees. His life astonished me. He never left the Inn and the only time he saw his wife and son was when they brought him his meals, or whatever else he needed. "I am houseboy by day and watchman by night," he said. And for all his work he earned about ten dollars a month, plus any gratuity a traveler left him.

"You have too much work," I told him.

"Madame, I am a family man with wife and boy child. For them I work. Not for me." Sanji's dedication to his family and work seemed incredible. He was unlike anyone I had ever met, including American workaholics who, for the most part, strive to gain financial reward. But no matter how much Sanji worked, he would always live in the same way and have the same job and probably the same pay. Yet, he seemed untroubled about his situation, as if the work in itself were reward enough.

On my second day in Kovelam I met Cholan Coomaraswami, a lanky old man with a scraggly gray beard who used a cane and wore a wool vest over his long sleeved shirt and longee. When I first saw him, while I was eating lunch at an open front cafe, the old man seemingly appeared from the rhyme -- "There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile...." Cholan inched up to my table in the cafe and enthusiastically welcomed me to his village. I invited him to join me for lunch, which seemed to be what he had in mind anyway. He spoke excellent English as he said he lived in "penury." While he scarfed down the breads and slurped his tea, I quickly decided that this old man rarely had enough food to eat and that tourists were his main hope for survival. When he mentioned he was a retired dentist, I chuckled to myself at the thought of his bare hands pulling the teeth of local villagers and then applying betel nut paste to ease their pain.

After the old man appeared to be sufficiently full, he sat back, ran his bony hand over his beard, and asked me why I had journeyed so far from my home. I said, to his satisfaction, that I had come to enjoy the beaches and sunshine of South India and to explore the famous seventh century Hindu temples in Mahabalipuram, a village about ten miles south of Kovelam. "Ah yes my friend. The stone cut temples," Cholan said after sipping his cup of sweet tea. "I'll take you there, if you could see to paying my way." Without hesitation, I accepted the old man's offer. Certainly, he would make a better companion than my Lonely Planet's guide book.

Early the next morning we caught the local bus to Mahabalipuram. As soon as we got off the bus we headed to a small cafe for some tea and tart South Indian cakes called idlis. While Cholan rested and enjoyed an Indian cigarette, he explained that the temples were dedicated to the Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva, and to the heroes of the Mahabharata epic. "India has two major epics, you know," he said with much pride. "The Ramayana and the Mahabharata -- the latter being the longest epic in the world. It is eight times longer than your Iliad and Odyssey combined."

He further explained that the Mahabharata epic takes place during the second millennium BC, and concerns the five Pandava brothers, heirs to a Ganges valley kingdom. The eldest Pandava brother, Yudhistira, loses his right to the throne over a game of dice with his cousins, the Kaurava brothers. Because of the gambling debt, the Pandavas are forced into exile and, as a result, they and the Kauravas become rivals for the kingdom.

From the cafe, Cholan and I sauntered along a narrow dirt path while he frequently stopped to cough and clear his throat. Our slow pace through the temple site didn't bother me, although I worried my curious questions might wear him out. But the frail old man seemed

pleased to share some of the many things he knew. Perhaps it gave him a sense of purpose beyond his daily efforts to survive.

We stopped at a stone cliff with bas-relief carvings, and Cholan said, as he rested on his cane, "This is called the Penance of Arjuna. He was the middle Pandava brother and the hero of the epic. He is standing beside the Ganges river asking the god Shiva for a boon. You see," he pointed his cane at the rock, "the Ganges flows to earth through the matted locks of Shiva. We Hindus see the river as our Mother -- bestower of life and nourishment." As he spoke, I stepped back to take a picture of Cholan standing before the sculpture. He seemed timeless and could have stood as he was twelve centuries before, when the rock was carved.

From the Penance of Arjuna we headed toward a grove of trees where vendors sold sodas, flowers, and stone carvings. As we neared the vendors, a boy in a tattered T-shirt and longee approached and asked me to buy one of his miniature soapstone carvings. While I followed the boy to his table of wares across the path, he bragged about speaking five languages -- Tamil, Hindi, English, French and German.

"Where did you learn so many languages?"

"I have many friends, Madame. They teach me."

"*Parlez-vous français*?" I tested his claim.

"*Oui, Madame, vous achetez quelque chose a moi*?"

"*Sprechen Sie deutsch*?"

"*Jawohl, Mogen Sie etwas kaufen?"*

"What a remarkable kid," I said to Cholan who had slowly trailed behind me while gulping down his second soda. It was hot in South India and the old man often needed to quench his thirst.

I looked over the many carvings and bronze statues on the small wooden table and picked up a five inch casting of a god standing on a pedestal and encircled by a ring. I had seen the image before on a travel poster of India. "What's it called?"

"That is Nataraja, the dancing Shiva. Madame like? *Aimez vous*? Only 100 rupees."

"Maybe," I said, while examining the statue. Each of its delicate four arms and two legs either held or did something. "What's he standing on?" The statue's left foot held down a squat figure lying on its belly.

"The devil, Maya, Madame. The ignorant mind of man that casts upon itself the web of illusion that we call Maya. Look." The boy indicated the circle around the dancing god. "A ring of fire to destroy illusion. Very beautiful, n'est pas? And this hand holds a drum. The boom boom boom of creation. Left hand holds fire of destruction."

"What do the symbols mean?"

"Creation and destruction go hand in hand *pour toujours,* into infinity. But you see, with this hand turned upward, Nataraja also tells us, 'do not be afraid because I will protect you in my dance.' Yes Madame. Only 90 rupees. *D'accord?"*

"What's the meaning of his dance?"

"He dances to destroy and create all the universe. This is the nature of existence -- birth and death, birth and death, birth and death. All *hier,* today, *und morgen.* Nataraja dances into *naissance* and dances into death. And through all of time, he dances *ananda*."

"Ananda?"

"Bliss. Nataraja dances the dance of bliss. Within you Madame. Dance of universe is rhythm of your soul... *Dansez vous, Madame? Tanzen Sie, Fraulein*?"

"That's marvelous." The boy made me laugh. "Where do you come up with these things?"

"Please Madame. You can take this Shiva to your guru and ask many questions. Nataraja is very beautiful cosmic dancer for your house, only 95 rupees, *si vous plait*."

"I thought you said 90."

"OK, 90 rupees for you. I know you like very much."

In the end, I paid 80 rupees for the Nataraja and I bought a tiny soap stone carving of the elephant headed god, Ganesha, a son of Shiva and the legendary scribe of the Mahabharata. I wasn't superstitious, but the boy promised Ganesha would bring me success, riches, and would help me overcome obstacles -- all of which sounded especially good since I was embarking on a new journey and career.

From the vendor's table Cholan and I strolled toward the beach to the main temples of Mahabalipuram, named after Ganesha, the five Pandava brothers, and their one common wife, Draupadi.

"Five brothers sharing one wife? I should be so lucky!" I joked after Cholan revealed this part of the story.

Seemingly unsure of my meaning, Cholan continued to explain that this unusual polyandrous marriage results after the hero Arjuna wins the princess Draupadi in an archery contest. "After our hero returns home, his mother, who is unaware that Arjuna's prize is a woman, suggests he share his winnings with his four brothers. Because Arjuna cannot disobey his mother, and because his mother cannot take back her words, Draupadi gains all five Pandavas brothers as husbands."

Cholan and I walked around the temples, which stood in a line carved from sections of enormous boulders. The pillars at the base of one temple had lions in different stages of carving. Some were majestically finished, others half complete, and a few were barely emerging from the

stone, as if struggling for their freedom. Cholan pointed out the various bas-relief Hindu gods in the facade niches of the temples. Each god stood frozen in an almost sensual dance, and, like the Nataraja, held a religious symbol -- a flower, a flame, or a shell.

We stopped before one of the niches and Cholan pointed with his cane to a god he called Ardhanarishvara. "You see, this side is shaped like a woman, the other like a man. Ardhanarishvara is the lord who is half Shiva and half Uma, daughter of the Himalayas."

I stared at the image, noting how both sides seemed delicate but only one side had a round breast. What struck me was that the image was the most realistic God I'd ever encountered. The God I prayed to as a child was a totally masculine force. There had been nothing feminine about Him or about the entire Protestant religion. I wasn't a man. So why was God entirely masculine? Why did my family's religion consider women as side issues in the world of men? Women weren't any more or less significant, and, as I stared at the temple god it seemed clear that I had abandoned religion because it said nothing about my views of femininity and womanhood.

So Cholan could rest, we walked to the shaded side of the Draupadi temple and leaned against its hard cool stone. I joined him and as I watched his eyes close and his breathing eased, I wondered why this witty, intelligent old man had ended up living in poverty during his final years of life. Was it because of the Indian government, or his nation's overpopulation? I knew that Indian families customarily took care of their elderly parents, but Cholan, who had a son living in Hyderabad, said he preferred his independence. He seemed content with his life, never really complaining about his poverty. Rather, he'd matter-of-factly state that he was poor so I could help him out.

"These temples are called rathas which means chariot." Cholan perked up, as if in mid thought. "They represent the chariots of the Mahabharata war between the Pandavas and their rival cousins the Kauravas. Do you know the story of the great battle scene? When Arjuna faces his enemies with Lord Krishna as his charioteer?"

"I've heard of Krishna," I said, recalling the Hare Krishnas chanting in downtown Portland.

"To us Hindus, Lord Krishna is God Almighty in human form."

"Sounds like Jesus. Is Krishna considered the son of God?"

"No my friend. Krishna is the incarnation of God. An avatar of Vishnu. Not a son."

"Do you worship Krishna?" I asked, not knowing quite how to put it. If he were Christian, I would have asked if he were Baptist or Methodist.

"Actually, my family worships Lord Shiva. But all Hindus cherish Lord Krishna who, in his divine wisdom, teaches Arjuna to seek union with God. Before the battle takes place, there is a famous conversation between Arjuna and Krishna called the *Bhagavad-Gita*, 'Song of the Lord.' The Gita tells of Arjuna's reluctance to enter battle. He is confused because his enemies are his cousins -- his own flesh and blood. You see, Arjuna is tormented over whether he should fight heroically or flee to the Himalayas. He seeks a way out of his discomfort, and for this reason he complains to Krishna...."

"Discomfort? Who's ever comfortable about war?"

"Ah yes indeed my friend. But Arjuna worries about the outcome of his decision. Will he win or lose? Will the result make him happy or sad? He approaches the world through his ego, instead of his higher spiritual self. Krishna tells Arjuna not to run but to fight his enemies... or more to the point, to face his own weaknesses and fight against his desire for a favorable

outcome -- the cause of his present bewilderment. 'Engage in action,' Krishna speaks. 'When the result comes, accept it as gift from God.'"

I thought about Sanji at the Traveller's Inn. He seemed content with his life, rather like Cholan did. Was this because both men worked without thought of reward, as Krishna taught Arjuna to do? Perhaps this was why they found comfort where I saw only distress and purposeless toiling. Was I missing something by disavowing religion? Was there something to the strange philosophical Gita that could enhance my world-view? Perhaps I lived too much for the future, for who I'd one day become, or what I'd one day gain from my efforts. Maybe India would help me settle my mind in the present so that I could value my day to day life as much, if not more, than my hopes for a promising future.

I turned to Cholan, who was hunched forward while resting his hands on his cane, and I said, "Work for the sake of working contradicts the American dream. But I guess according to Hindu philosophy you work through life for the sake of... is it dharma or karma?"

"Dharma?" Cholan chuckled and coughed. "Dharma lies at the very heart of the epic... And the Gita' primary teaching is dharma, the way to obtain a peaceful inner soul detached from worldly desires."

"Doesn't dharma mean to honor your family and social status?"

"In one sense... But in another, dharma is that which sustains and fulfills the higher truths of life. The hero devoted to dharma stands steadfast in the face of adversity, even if all the world is his enemy. In the same way, Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna to throw himself into battle so that he may find his higher inner truths."

"Christianity sure seems a lot easier than Hinduism." Cholan coughed but made no response to my remark. So I continued, "Christians simply surrender themselves to Jesus and

follow Him on the path to God. But, as I understand it, the Gita teaches people to follow their true nature to be at one with God."

"Ha!" Cholan heftily laughed. "Every religion seeks the ultimate cause of existence. Hinduism offers many paths to God called Yogas. Karma yoga is the path of working without attachment to the success or failure of the outcome. This is how Arjuna throws himself into battle, as we all must do if we aim to reach the highest state of being."

"I'm not sure about the yogas, but dharma's a philosophy I can live by... If it means finding your own inner truths."

The old man rubbed his beard and playfully grinned. "We each must look within ourselves to discover where dharma abides." Cholan leaned back against the stone ratha and closed his eyes. He had grown weary from our lengthy conversation.

What a wise old man, I thought while looking at Cholan. He depends on the generosity of tourists to help him make it from day to day. Was it his dharma to live like this? Or was it destiny that created his condition? Had the same laws of fate fashioned my own life? I doubted it. My life was designed by me. I had worked hard to be a traveler exploring world-views. But was I a seeker, too? I had no desire to become a mystic, a champion of the spiritual realm seated on a snow capped mountain. Exploration suited me, and there was no shame to this. Then why did I sometimes feel confused? Did I need God in my life? In many ways I felt like Arjuna facing the chaotic world with uncertainty. But Arjuna had Krishna by his side. I have no one but myself.

***

On my last morning in Kovelam, I awoke to a tremendous clamor. I angrily lunged out of bed, flung open the door, and saw four small naked boys jumping and screaming on the veranda outside my door. Each boy had his head shaven, presumably as a precaution against lice.

"Hello, Madame. You like Tamilnadu?" I heard a woman say. I looked to the neighboring room and saw, smiling at me, an excessively thin woman, about my age, seated on the veranda floor. She wore her oily black hair in a long braid, and she had on a bright orange and green sari that contrasted with her dark complexion and tired looking eyes. With her sat an older plump woman in a black sari with white dots, a bare bottomed baby girl, and two girls about eleven. Standing behind the women, leaning against the veranda rail, stood a short pot bellied man, in his forties, wearing a white shirt, pajama trousers, and the white laced skullcap of a Muslim man. They all smiled at me and soon the younger woman invited me to join her and her family for breakfast at the nearby cafe.

In this way, I met Nazeera Sharif, the younger woman, and her parents -- Mr. and Mrs. Thiru H. Y. Sharif -- her brothers and sisters, and Nazeera's own three children from an estranged marriage. Nazeera lived with her parents in Arni, an inland village of Tamilnadu province, and the family had come to Kovelam to vacation at the beach for a few days.

I spent the morning with the Sharif family, playing in the surf with the children and Nazeera, who swam fully clothed in her sari. By the time the family invited me to lunch, I was wearing, at Nazeera's urging, one of her brightly colored polyester floral saris. I felt hot and uncomfortable in the garment, but I wanted to please my new friends. They seemed as fascinated with me and my exotic foreignness as I was with theirs.

During lunch at a small cafe, Nazeera invited me to return to their village, with the words, "Madame, my father requests your presence at The New Sharif Hotel."

This was the sort of opportunity I sought, and the "New Sharif Hotel" conjured exotic images of perfumed rooms colored in Persian carpets and filigree screens. "So your father owns a hotel?"

"Yes, Madame. My father and his three brothers own The New Sharif Hotel in my village. We wish you to come and stay with us. You would be a great boon to my family."

This amused me, having never thought of myself as a boon before. I gladly accepted Nazeera's invitation and for the rest of the day I eagerly anticipated my upcoming stay at The New Sharif Hotel.

At the six o'clock sunset that evening, the Sharifs and I set out on what would be a harrowing excursion. In the darkness of night, we changed crowded, dusty, dilapidated buses five times. I felt wretched. I was developing a cold and the sari Nazeera insisted I wear made me feel sweaty and sloppily dressed. None of her bodices fit, so I wore a T-shirt and looked like a hippie roaming through Asia. I couldn't imagine why this family would take three days and go to the seashore, with two of those days spent in horrendous travel. But undoubtedly, the Sharifs paid little attention to the discomforts that plagued me.

At last we reached the Arni bus stop, a coconut log portico beside a concrete open front cafe. Even at this late hour, crowds of villagers clambered about outside the bus. While the Sharifs collected my bags, I stood nearby looking around and feeling completely disoriented. Although, in my disheveled appearance, I fit into the surroundings quite well.

The steps leading up to the open front cafe held scrawny old men and women who watched me in awe as I followed the Sharifs inside. Wooden benches and tables with oil lamps

lined the side walls of the one room cafe. At the back stood a counter with charcoal burners on which sat black pots steaming with the odor of boiled meat.

Nazeera prompted me to sit at a table along with her, her mother and the Sharif children. Nobody else was in the cafe except for Mr. Sharif, who had gone to the back counter to stir the pot of food. This is odd, I thought, wondering if the cafe were an adjunct to the Sharifs' hotel.

Mr. Sharif dished up a plate of what turned out to be stewed goat intestines and placed it before me. Not wanting to offend my new friends, I dabbled in the stew, feeling nauseated and anxious for Nazeera to take me to one of the hotel rooms. But she only sat beside me and said, "Eat Madame, eat." Soon a crowd of villagers gathered around the front of the cafe to stare in at me, and one toothless old woman wandered up to my table until Mrs. Sharif shooed her away. Finally, unable to stand the situation anymore, I exclaimed, "Where is The New Sharif Hotel?"

"What?" Nazeera asked with a puzzled look. "Madame, this is The New Sharif Hotel."

"But where are the rooms?"

"What rooms, Madame?"

"Where am I going to sleep?"

"In my house. We can go now if you like. You cannot sleep here. This is a restaurant."

"A restaurant!? Then why do you call it a hotel?"

"Hotel is an English word," Nazeera said matter-of-factly as she stood up and motioned for her family to leave the cafe. "In my language, Urdu, we say Four Sharif Brothers Restaurant."

Unsure of the reasoning behind what Nazeera had said, and in no mood to figure it out, I gathered up my bags and followed the Sharifs outside the concrete open front cafe that was not a hotel, nor anything close to new.

Nazeera's father and his brothers shared the three story flat roof house that stood on a dirt hillside road like a huge square concrete fortress. The Thiru H. Y. Sharif family lived in the upper left portion of the blue painted house, off a third floor landing. Here an iron gate screeched open to a foyer where everyone threw off their sandals. Beyond the foyer a hall led to three pit toilet stalls, and to the right of the hall was an unfurnished concrete central chamber. From this central chamber, six metal doors opened to the other rooms, including the kitchen.

On the night we arrived, Nazeera offered me my own room behind one of the metal doors. The alternative was to sleep on floor of the neighboring room along with Nazeera and the children. Unwilling to entirely give up my need for privacy, I opted for my own room.

The concrete room Nazeera offered me contained nothing but a window and a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling. I could scarcely believe how these people lived. They were not poor, and yet they had no furniture.

Ready to collapse from exhaustion, I began spreading my clothing on the concrete floor to use as bedding. But Nazeera stopped me and then she and her mother opened another metal door to a room that must have contained everything the Sharifs owned. The two women rattled about the room for a while, then pulled out a cot made from a solid sheet of metal. They placed the cot in my room and I started unpacking my clothes and making my own mattress. But Nazeera stopped me once again and said they had a mattress. She and her mother returned to the storage room, clanged around some more, and pulled out two sheets of plywood. This was the only mattress they had to offer me.

On that night, while I at last made up my bed, Nazeera closely watched me unpack and she even rummaged through my bags seemingly without a thought that this might bother me. But I was much more intrigued than bothered by her curiosity over my possessions. She opened my

box of Q-tips, sniffed my deodorant, and searched through my cosmetic bag, pulling out emery boards and dental floss. My toothbrush and toothpaste puzzled her because, as I soon learned, Nazeera used her finger and black powder to clean her teeth. She wondered about my roll of toilet paper because, as I had already discovered, Asians use water and the left hand for this indelicate hygienic task.

My box of tampons bewildered Nazeera the most. She took one out, unwrapped it, and exclaimed, "Madame, what is this?" I told her, but she had difficulty understanding, and even after she did, she couldn't imagine *why* I would use such a thing. I asked her what Indian women did during menstruation and she said, "We must stay in the house three days and not see men. Until after we are clean, we cannot pray or read from the Koran."

I wasn't surprised by this for I recognized Nazeera's situation as typical in so many cultures around the world. To these cultures and to most world religions, menstruation is an abomination, a curse to holiness. In Hinduism, I had read, the male bodily fluids are exalted as sacred but the woman's are condemned as defiling. I had heard the same thing about Judaism and now I met a Muslim woman who was forced to hide away during menses. I felt sorry for Nazeera, but she seemed unbothered about her restriction, as if it were a normal part of life. But if I were to believe that my very nature fouled what the world held in highest esteem, I'd live in quivering shame of myself, and of course feel like an inferior creature deserving of lifelong punishment. No wonder I aimed for objectivity and sought to question the truths I encountered. I saw nothing symbolically holy or unholy to this monthly flow of blood. It was a physical property of womanhood and no more or less alarming than going to the toilet or secreting saliva or genital juices. But so much of the world made a woman's natural cycle into an emblem of unholiness. I had to believe that such notions developed through societies that viewed women as

inferior to men. I could imagine the forefathers of world religions, placing the blame for their lustful side on women, so they could trek off into the mountains and feel holy with their God. Such thoughts made religion and culture, not menstruation, seem like the real curse to women.

The next morning, the door to my room burst open with a wild bang and six naked children ran giggling up to my bed. Startled, I sat up, shooed them out, and shut the door, but they kept returning until Mrs. Sharif appeared and chased them away. Soon after I had fallen back asleep, the door reopened. I started to scream at the children but quickly saw a group of women standing at the threshold and smiling at me. Clearly, privacy was a luxury I had left behind in America, so I obligingly sat up and greeted those eager to meet the boon to the Thiru H. Y. Sharif household.

"Madame." Nazeera appeared amid the women. "They are my family and neighbors. They wish to meet you."

The women began to argue over whose sari I would wear until Nazeera interrupted and said, "It is time for Madame's bath. You can visit her later and bring her your saris to wear."

I began each morning of my week long stay at the Sharif house by bathing from a large brass pot of heated water. Although Nazeera assured me that men never entered the house during the day, including her father, I bathed in my T-shirt and under skirt because the bathing area lay in view of the front iron gate. While bathing, I faced the side wall of the house which was made of concrete blocks staggered to create geometric open spaces that were either meant for air conditioning or to flush air through the rancid smelling toilet stalls near to where I bathed. Through these spaces I had a clear view of a crude wooden hut beside a muddy canal (Arni's sewer system?) where a large pig and her piglets wallowed in the filthy water. Every time I

looked at this canal, I was dumbfounded by the sight of a bald, completely naked soot covered man pacing along the bank. He flailed his arms, shook his head, talked to himself, and played with his penis.

This can't be normal, I thought. This man has to be some kind of a shaman, or a geomancer. When I asked Nazeera about the man she said he was the craziest person in her village. I could have guessed this all along, but somehow, just by being in Arni, I assumed that what was strange was really something mystical.

Throughout my stay, I became totally lost in the strange events revolving around me. It seemed that every moment in the Sharif house brought me the unexpected wonder of a foreign culture. Often, I sat with Nazeera and her mother on floor mats in the central chamber as the children ran in and out rooms, excited by the very sight of me.

Mrs. Sharif, Nazeera's mother, always wore the same black sari with white dots that I had seen her in when we first met in Kovelam. It seemed as much a part of her as her motherly doting on me. She generally had beside her a wooden box containing the ingredients for a *pan* chew. After the evening meal, she brought out her leather pouch of pulverized tobacco. "This is very bad for my mother," Nazeera would say as Mrs. Sharif snorted the snuff. "But she cannot help it because she has grown too old."

Once Nazeera said to me, "Madame, my mother would like you to take me to America."

I could hardly imagine what the two women were thinking. They weren't poor and they didn't seem terribly unhappy. So why would Nazeera want to go to America? What did my country represent to her and her mother? Could it be freedom of opportunity, the very manner for which I fashion my life? But Nazeera grew up as a Muslim woman restricted to her house, so how could she think of suddenly venturing off to America and extinguishing her cultural values

and background? Although she was outspoken and friendly, Nazeera seemed rather simple and naive about the world, and going to America would take great courage and the stamina to endure tremendous change. Did these women envision me as their guardian angel? If so, how absurd. No. I could hardly guess what these women really pictured. "But what would you do in America?"

After discussing my question with Mrs. Sharif, Nazeera replied, "My mother says, that I can cook for you while you help me meet a good American husband. Maybe your brother, if you have one." I told her that I wasn't planning to return to America for quite a while and the women decided Nazeera could wait.

The Sharif women were very curious about my family in America. They were surprised that my mother worked outside of the home, and astonished that I didn't even know some of my first cousins, let alone live in the same house with them. On one occasion, they asked me about my plans to marry. When I told them I had no such plans, Nazeera said, "Then my mother and I will pray you meet a handsome youth of your noble stature."

Although divorced, Nazeera wore silver wedding rings on each of her second toes. She wanted me to wear one but even my small toe was much too large. Nazeera had married her first cousin (the son of her mother's sister) at the age of seventeen. For seven years, Nazeera lived with her husband-cousin at the house of his father -- Nazeera's uncle. About six months before I arrived in Arni, Mrs. Sharif had convinced her daughter to take her three children and move back to the Sharif house.

"He is no good man," Nazeera exclaimed about her estranged husband. "He like bad woman, but now he wants me back instead of his bad woman. I must never go back. This my mother tells me and I agree. What do you think Madame?" I told her I didn't know what she

should do but I would pray for her. Not that I was one to pray, but I sensed this would please Nazeera and her mother. And it did.

Whenever we sat in the central chamber, Nazeera's bare bottomed baby daughter crawled around the concrete floor. Whenever the baby relieved herself, Nazeera or her mother would scream for their thirteen year old servant girl, Malica, to clean up the mess. Malica's parents, Nazeera explained, hired out their daughter's services to the Sharifs in a fairly typical arrangement between the poor and the wealthy villagers of Arni. The only time Malica returned to her family's home was when the Sharifs were away. I loved hearing the name "Malica" echo through the empty chamber, as it often did because the Sharif women were continually calling for the girl clean up or to bring me food that either she had made or had come from The New Sharif Hotel. This food was some of the most tasty I'd had, and I was always eating it. If I claimed to be full, Nazeera assumed I was being polite. For breakfast I ate spicy potato masala dosas -- south Indian crepes, and for lunch I had rotis, hot spicy curries, and sweet pickled mangoes.

One afternoon, while I was eating rice and curry on the floor of the central chamber, Nazeera and her mother entered the storage room and pulled out towels, a can of talcum powder, and a bottle of oil. They then called on Malica to fetch a pot of heated water and a bucket of smoking coals. To satisfy my curiosity, Nazeera explained that they needed to bathe the baby to prevent the cold it had developed from worsening.

As I watched in awe, Nazeera undressed her baby girl and held her up as Mrs. Sharif circled the pot of smoking coals around the child, clockwise then counter clockwise. While this was taking place, both women chanted and the baby cried, seemingly from fear over the treatment. Nazeera set her baby on a mat, picked up the pot of coals, and circled it around the

child, clockwise then counter clockwise. At the same time, Mrs. Sharif vigorously rubbed the baby's skin with water until it squeaked.

Just when I thought I was grasping some of what the women were doing, Nazeera held her daughter up and blew sharply into the baby's mouth. Phlegm jetted from the baby's nose and onto the concrete floor. Malica ran to clean up the mess while Nazeera tenderly applied oil and powder on her baby and wrapped her in a towel. I just sat there aghast and unable to finish my food.

Nazeera took me on many tours of the entire Sharif house, leading me into and out of rooms and up and down passageways, as if no private boundaries existed among the four sections of the extended family home. The back courtyard appeared festive with its many clotheslines strung from wall to wall, whiffling colorful petticoats, bodices, bright saris, white kurtas, and trousers. In the center of the courtyard sat a stone well that provided the household with all of its water.

Nazeera's eldest uncle lived in the section of the house that was the most unusual simply because it was furnished. Like Thiru H. Y. Sharif section of the house, many south Indian homes were sparsely furnished because of the insect infestation and the tropical climate. Nazeera claimed that furniture heated the house and that it was much more comfortable sitting, eating, and sleeping on the bare floor. Evidently, her elder uncle thought differently. His bedroom had a large wooden bed with a canopy, a chest of drawers, and a vanity with a large ornate mirror -- not the sort of furnishings I expected to find in Arni. One day, Nazeera opened the top drawer of the vanity and pulled out brass vials and bottles. From one she poured fragrant oil in her palms, ran them through my hair and said, "There, now you are so lovely you can sing a happy song." I

didn't sing, because my cold was turning into laryngitis, but I chuckled and marveled at how she must have viewed me. Did her eyes behold some kind of exquisite doll, or a lovely princess from a far away land?

Nazeera's kitchen radiated color and aroma. I loved to sit in it and smell the appetizing flavors of cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and cumin while I gazed at the baskets of green coconuts, pink onions, red chilies and tomatoes, and yellow and red lentils. At one corner squatted an adobe hearth with a large cast-iron pot filled with steaming water, and along the far wall sat charcoal burners and clay pots brimming with rice and flour. Often I tried to watch Malica cook, but Nazeera always insisted that we didn't have time. She had more important things in mind for me than watching her servant girl work, such as showing me off around the village.

Nazeera often took me for long walks through Arni. When we left the house, she sometimes threw on her burqa, the black cape a Muslim woman wears to shield her in modesty. She seemed to wear it only when she remembered to and not as a religious observance. Usually, during our walks through the intertwining village roads, Nazeera's sons and siblings would secretly follow us, peeking round corners of walls and buildings to catch a glimpse of me.

Arni, set amid rice farms, coconut groves, and gentle hills, was a labyrinth of concrete houses, mud hovels, flimsy open front shops, mosques, elaborately colored Hindu temples, sewage canals, and roads run amok. But the village didn't possess the hopelessness I had seen on the streets of Calcutta. Only one or two people ever approached me and begged for money. And they seemed to do so only as an after thought in seeing me -- the eccentric boon -- walk by. I doubted the villagers had seen many tourists before; Arni was not in any guide book and it was well off any traveler's route.

In the center of the village was a park with coconut palms, sea oak trees, lantana flowers, and a lawn trimmed with stones painted blue and green. On my first visit to the park, I heard spats of laughter coming from a crowd of villagers gathered around a large concrete box in the center of the park. As it turned out, the structure housed a television that was turned on three hours each day and then locked up at all other times.

One afternoon, Nazeera, her baby and I headed for Arni's one movie theater to watch the matinee. But on the way, my stomach cramped from my hot spicy lunch and I had to hurry back to use the toilet at the Sharif house. When I emerged from the toilet stall, Nazeera grabbed my hand and led me to the central chamber where she had placed on the floor a bowl of cold rice, a pan of water, and a pot of burning coals. Nazeera prompted me to sit on the floor as I wondered about this new ritual that would be centered on me. Even with my stomach still cramped, I patiently and willingly let Nazeera place some of the cold rice in my mouth. She instructed me to spit it into the pan of water. After I did, with a certain amount of gusto, Nazeera put three chilies into my mouth, one at a time, and had me spit each into the pan. She circled the pot of coals around my head, clockwise and counterclockwise, and then, in a sudden eruption of steam, dumped the coals into the pan of water. I thought the ritual was over, but Nazeera coaxed me up and walked me around the steaming pan -- clockwise, then counter clockwise. She sent me back to the toilet and when I returned to the central chamber, Nazeera lifted the pot from the pan and said, "See, now it is red. Your bad stomach is here." Surprisingly, my stomach ache did go away and Nazeera, the baby and I continued on to the movie.

The front courtyard of Arni's cinema abounded with young women and children. Men, Nazeera explained, weren't permitted to attend matinees. The teenage girls and young mothers with babies wore saris that clashed in oranges, purples, pinks, greens, yellows, and blues, and

each wore her long oily black hair in a braid ornamented with jasmine and purple flowers. The sweet floral scent saturated the air as we headed into the theater complex and entered the barn-like side doors. We crammed into uncomfortable wooden seats and when the film started, someone shut the side doors but left a sizable crack. Through this crack sun light streaked across the middle rows of the theater, and illuminated the boldly colored saris and purple flowers. The magnificent sight struck me as something almost magical, as if the sun forbade the brilliance of these women to be hidden in darkness.

Nazeera, like the other mothers in the cinema, brought along a plastic sheet for her bare bottomed baby. During the entire film the viewers excitedly chatted and giggled while mothers constantly got up to clean off their babies at a water trough outside the doors. I paid more attention to the activity than to the Tamil movie itself. It was about a brother's devotion and love to his younger sister. When she is murdered by the man she refuses to marry, the loyal brother commits suicide because he cannot live without her. The story seemed a bit maudlin to me, but it was enormously appealing to Nazeera.

Across the street from the Sharif house lived a Christian man, Ratnam, and his wife Kali. Ratnam, who spoke with a British accent, was tall and thin, unlike his wife who was short and slightly overweight. He wore a neatly pressed Western shirt tucked into his loosely bound longee. On a few afternoons, I visited Ratnam on his front veranda while he chiselled epitaphs on tombstones. Because he was a professional painter and carver, tombstones, posters and billboards for local politicians or for upcoming movies cluttered his yard.

Kali, who had a cheerful smile and bright brown eyes, was the village primary school teacher and one of the women at the threshold of my room on the first morning I awoke in Arni.

In fact, I had ended up wearing her sari on that day. Kali always joined Ratnam and me on the veranda, usually to serve me a cup of tea with lemon. "Good for your cold," Ratnam would say. He typically spoke for the three of us. Kali couldn't speak English, and with my teetering laryngitis, I usually could only whisper.

One evening Ratnam mentioned that his wife wanted to stroll with me around the village and introduce me to her friends. Nazeera, who came over to fetch me back to the Sharif house, urged me not to go, voicing her disapproval in front of Ratnam. She claimed I might get lost, but I suspect she didn't want to lose me for the evening. It seemed that even my visits with Ratnam and Kali were allowed only under the scrutinizing eyes of the Sharif women. For the most part, I didn't mind the attention they lavished on me, but on this night, I wanted a change from their smothering affection. And so, despite Nazeera's protests, I accepted Kali's invitation.

Kali beamed with delight as she led me to Arni's quieter places, or so it seemed since she couldn't talk to me. We walked along the dirt roads and narrow alleys, stopping at the Roman Catholic Church Kali attended, and at an open field where we sat and watched the sunset while eating the sweets Kali had brought.

After sunset, Kali led me down an alley edged on one side by an adobe wall and on the other by a row of concrete huts. The doors to most huts stood wide open, and I followed Kali into one. A middle aged balding man dressed in a longee and white T-shirt enthusiastically welcomed us. "Ah," he said, vigorously shaking my hand, "this must be our friend at the Sharif house. How pleased I am to meet you at last." I wasn't surprised he knew about me. It seemed the entire village did. He introduced himself as Shiv and invited Kali and me to sit on a floor mat while he went to the back room to make some tea.

The small front room contained little other than a Hindu altar high on one wall that burned sweetly scented incense. On the floor were mats and along one wall lay an impressive array of Indian percussion, string, and brass instruments. I was dazzled by the sight and when Shiv returned I asked if he played all of the them.

"Accha," he said. "Everyone of them. They are my pride and joy. My children, if you will. Although, I am at best a player of the Sarasvati veena." He indicated the largest and most beautiful instrument in the room, a type of lute between three and four feet long. It had delicately inlaid ivory at the rim of its lute belly, and the upper end of its stem, which was supported by a large gold painted gourd, curved back into the head of a dragon.

"So you're the village musician?"

Shiv laughed at my question and said, "I am musician for any beneficial occasion. My music is my pleasure as I can only hope it is for my listeners. Actually, I inherited these instruments from my mother's father. He was himself a player of the Sarasvati veena... Do you play any instruments?"

"I only wish I could."

"Ah, but you can sing. Please, sing for us an American song."

"Well, I really can't. As you can see I barely have my voice."

Shiv smiled, excused himself and soon returned with a tray of tea and cups. He set the tray on the floor beside us, and as he poured our tea I asked, "Will you play your sitar for me?"

"Veena you mean. Sarasvati veena. It is not a sitar."

"I know but I couldn't remember what you called it and the sitar is the only Indian instrument I've heard of..."

"Sitar is North Indian. Veena is South Indian. Have you seen the temple pictures of our goddess Sarasvati holding her veena?

"No. I haven't been to a Hindu temple, except in Mahabalipuram."

"Ah yes, Mahabalipuram. Well, Sarasvati is our goddess of wisdom and learning. Her name means 'the essence of your own self.' Always she is holding her veena to show us she will tune our minds to the rhythm of the universe."

At this point and without a word, Shiv set his tea cup aside and fetched the veena. He then sat crosslegged a few feet in front of me, positioning the veena diagonally across his lap with the lute belly on the floor to his right and the golden gourd on his left knee. "It will take some time for the veena to warm up," he said, as the agile fingers of his right hand plucked the strings of the belly while his left hand occasionally stopped them along the long row of frets. "Veena has seven strings, four over the twenty-four frets, and three to the side, for rhythmic accompaniment and minor drone."

When Shiv strummed the instrument, his fingers barely touched the strings as each note seemed to shoot through the room and vibrate echoes through my ears and down my spine. The music at first reminded me of a guitar, but the veena sounded more powerful and playful.

I closed my eyes and soon heard Kali clapping her knee, keeping time to the melody. I wanted to join her, but was unsure of the unfamiliar timing. It was more complex, more electrifying than anything I had ever heard before.

The penetrating veena cast in my mind visions of a crisp colorful kite flung high into a sun lit sky. The kite whirled as it tore through the vast blue space, for it had no tail to contain it. Instead, it had an echo trailing its swift weightless flight. At times, I felt I were the kite flying so wildly it seemed I'd lost control, then without warning, the musician snapped the string and

pulled the kite to earth. But only to let it free once more to dance in its lively and wonderful flight.

I became so possessed by the veena music that when Kali and I left the musician's house, I wasn't sure whether it was eight o'clock or hours past midnight.

After we turned onto the dimly lighted street to the Sharif house, Nazeera ran down the hill to meet me. She pulled me from Kali's arm, scolded me for being out so late, and led me by the hand all the way to the central chamber where her mother sat waiting. Both women were utterly frantic about where I had been and why I had been away so long.

"She is a bad woman!" Nazeera exclaimed about Kali. "Don't go with her anymore. She loves a bad man. You go to evil house. My mother very much afraid for you, Madame." I was speechless, baffled. How could I, the "boon," unleash such bashing emotion in these women. Presumably, they were overwhelmed with jealousy at having lost me to Kali for the night. The Sharif women had become obsessed with me, as though I were a sacred object. And this was frightening.

Because I stirred such emotion in the them, I decided to leave the following day. Before setting off, I gave Nazeera my cosmetic bag, a pocket mirror, comb, hair clips, and a spare passport picture of me -- things she admired. She then escorted me to the bus stop where she asked me to return to Arni as soon as I could. Though this seemed doubtful, I promised to try and then added that I'd pray for her and her family's prosperity. These seemed to be the right words for Nazeera looked very pleased, even proud, as she watched me board the idling bus beside the New Sharif Hotel.

Chapter Three: Travels in North India

As soon as the rusty old bus dropped me off in Bangalore, I bought a first-class air-conditioned sleeper on the express train to New Delhi. I usually spent money more sparingly, but my cold sapped my energy, and I longed for privacy and a taste of comfort. Unfortunately, my first class sleeper was a fold down upper bunk along the aisle, across from a noisy family with bratty children who stuck their tongues at me whenever I shushed them. To make matters worse, the two day journey aggravated my cold. I spent most of the time on my flimsy top bunk sweating from fever while my head pounded with each clank and clatter of the train. I kept thinking that such agony was too dear a price for adventure.

When the train pulled into New Delhi, I dizzily steered my way through the bustling station that reeked of sweat, urine, and of rancid Indian tobacco. From nowhere a woman appeared, pinned a paper Indian flag on my blouse, and asked for a donation. I nearly fainted but she took hold of my arm and guided me to a taxi parked along the curb. The driver sped off through the boisterous streets, stopping in front of a clinic on the first floor of a two story building. He helped me inside to a nurse sitting behind a desk in the foyer. To the right of the desk, lining the narrow hallway that extended to the back of the building, dozens of men, women, and children, crammed together on rough wooden benches. No one looked particularly sick and I feared I'd have to squeeze onto the bench and wait with them. But shortly after I arrived, a middle-aged woman with a white smock and stethoscope over her sari approached the nurse's desk.

She introduced herself as Dr. Maheswari and ushered me past the waiting patients, like an honored guest, and into a small examination room. On the examination table, I rested my head on the pillow as the doctor took a sample of my saliva. She gave it to an orderly who took it to be examined for tuberculosis bacilli. This worried me. I could imagine having contracted something

like stomach flukes, or brain fungus, or another horrible third world tropical disease. To my relief, the orderly soon returned and reported negative results.

The doctor then placed her hand on my forehead, took my pulse and temperature, and said, "I'm afraid you have lower lobe pneumonia." Even in my muddled state, her quick diagnosis sounded impressive though suspect.

I sat up ready to leave, but Dr. Maheswari stopped me and asked the orderly to fetch us some tea. "What about the other patients?" I asked. "I don't want to take up all of your time."

"Oh don't worry about them. Most of these people come here on a regular basis for a quick examination and prescription. They pay what they can afford and go merrily on their way. You'd think they have nothing better to do. Anyone with a real emergency goes to the hospital."

After drinking our tea, the doctor prescribed about four different pills and then helped me to the front of the clinic where the taxi driver waited. She told him to take me to the nearby Crown Hotel so I could return to the clinic if my condition grew worse.

In my hotel room, I collapsed on the bed and remained there for the next two days. The only light entering the mildewy room slipped through a chip in the painted window high on the block wall. Whenever I failed to sleep, abysmal melancholy took over. Visions of dying in some old Delhi slum stirred through my mind. I would not be found. Eventually, I'd deteriorate into the greenish gray sludge that drools along alley gutters into the streets and down to the river. In the end, I'd become one with the ooze at the bottom of the Indian Ocean.

When my fever finally broke, I left the hotel and went to the Central Telephone Office. I wanted to call my mother to say I was in New Delhi with lower lobe pneumonia. While I waited for my call to go through, I sat on a hard wooden seat and stared at the wall ahead of me. After an hour had passed, a young man with a bulbous nose and a pock marked face sat beside me. He

wore trousers, a turtle neck shirt, and a shawl draped over his shoulders. New Delhi had a slight chill to its otherwise warm midwinter weather.

The man greeted me and introduced himself as Aftab Haboosh, MBM candidate, "That is," he added, "candidate for a Masters of Business Management."

He asked my name and I told him Allen, to create a formal distance between us. As a woman traveling alone, I never trusted any strange man who approached me for a friendly conversation. Typically, they were looking for sex with a "fast and easy" American woman. Through the lustful eyes of many Asian men, a woman traveling alone must be a slut. It was a wretched curse that stamped me throughout my travels, but at times I was willing to see what the stranger had to say. And when I met Aftab, I wanted someone's help after being so ill and isolated. "Do you know of a good place to stay in this city?"

"Why yes!" He perked up and enthusiastically described the YMCA International Guest House. "I'd be happy to take you there, if you like." I decided to postpone my call and accept the stranger 's help, even though I didn't completely trust him. He was overly friendly and had that mischievous look in his eyes.

Aftab diligently escorted me to the YMCA on Parliant Street, and after I checked in he insisted on carrying my bags up to my room. I allowed him to do so only because of my weak condition. However, before unlocking my room, I turned and thanked Aftab for his help, hoping he'd get the hint to leave. But he just stood there, smiling at me, until I explicitly told him to go.

The room had a bed with a regular mattress, and a normal bathroom with a tub, pedestal sink, and luxurious sit toilet. The best part was the balcony overlooking the central courtyard garden. On its rails grew thick magenta Bougainvilleas that flushed the room with sweet scent and luscious color. In no time, the clean fresh ambiance lulled me to sleep.

When I awoke, feeling more refreshed than I had since leaving Calcutta, I headed downstairs for something to eat in the dining hall. In the lobby, Aftab sat on a sofa, reading a magazine. Annoyed, I hurried past him, hoping he wouldn't notice me. Before I got very far, though, his voice called from behind, "Allen, over here."

I walked to the sofa and said, "Why are you still here?"

"Why, this is the perfect place to spend a quiet afternoon, don't you agree? It's temperature regulated, you see, so I'm reading here a while. That's all. By the way, how do you like the room?"

"It's just fine thanks," I said and headed for the cafeteria.

"Would you like some tea?" Aftab said as I neared the doors.

"Yes." I turned. "But really, I want to be alone. I don't feel very well you know."

"Then let's settle on tomorrow night, after you've rested. I'll take you to dinner."

For a moment, I considered calling the YMCA guards to chase Aftab away. Then I realized my utter disconnection from this strange city, and that Aftab formed my only link to it. So I decided to accept his invitation. He then left me alone to wonder what I'd gotten myself into.

During the next few days, Aftab continually called me on the pay phone down the hall from my room, or he'd loiter in the lobby with the excuse of enjoying a temperature regulated environment. I sometimes avoided him, but the pull of having someone to show me the sights India's capital generally made me put up with Aftab. He was an informative guide as we took taxis around the city. Although, he never let me forget that I was desirable. "Do you realize, Allen," he'd unexpectedly say, "that sex is a natural and wholesome act between a man and woman." Or "If you are feeling lonely, you can stay at my flat. It is a humble place, but clean."

Twice Aftab awkwardly tried to kiss me in the back seat of our taxi. Each time, I socked him in the jaw.

When I felt recovered enough to travel back to Calcutta, I asked Aftab to help me get a train ticket. "But this is wonderful, Allen. I tell you why. Coincidentally, I am traveling to Patna in a few days, in relation to my graduate work. You can join me on the long train journey to Patna, from where you can continue on to Calcutta."

Only after Aftab promised to help me get the rest of the way to Calcutta, did I agree to his plan. "Where is Patna, anyway? Is it anything worth seeing?"

"Oh my yes!" he said. "Patna is the most historical city in India. Come to think of it, you really mustn't miss out on Patna."

With my return to Calcutta settled, I slipped from Aftab and took a YMCA bus tour to nearby Agra, to see the Taj Mahal. On the way, the tour bus stopped at Fort Agra, a red stone fortification beside the Yamuna River. The fort had been built during the sixteenth century reign of the Moghuls, India's third and only Muslim dynasty.

From the bus, I wandered to a parapet at one end of the fort, where, through a narrow window, I watched dozens of green parrots fly from tree to tree in a small forest. As I did this, a voice from behind said, "Hello friend. Have you viewed the Taj from the Octagonal Tower?" Startled, I turned and saw a tall, nice looking Indian man in a sarong and untucked Western shirt. He smiled charmingly and added, "A parrot speaks repetition but the soul speaks its own truths."

"What?" I asked, unsure of his comment.

"Would you allow me to show you around the fort?" the stranger asked.

"No thanks." I turned away, suspicious of his intent. But when he told me that, for a modest price, he could explain the history behind the fort, I accepted his offer.

The vast interior of the fort was like a small city of pink sandstone mansions and mosques amid gardens sweetly scented with fragrant jasmine and gardenias. The buildings had towers, sunken niches, and arches with spandrels of pink, blue, and green flowers, chevrons, arabesques, and Persian Koranic calligraphy. In contrast to the Hindu temples, there were no angels or gods on the building facades because Islam permits only calligraphy in its religious art.

"During the fifteenth century," the man explained as we crossed a garden path, "Agra was capital of the Moghul empire. The first emperor was Babur, a descendant of Genghis Khan. He was a noble leader, a victorious warrior, and a poet who drank from the fountain of Sufism."

"Sufism?" My interest was stirred. I knew very little about this mystical sect of Islam, but I had read Sufi poetry during college, and I especially knew of Omar Khayyam, the tenth century Persian astronomer and author of "a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou." I remembered Sufi poetry as being similar to the Psalms of the Christian Bible, in that both passionately sang of love for God. Sufi verses told of meadows on moon lit nights where Nightingales sang while lovers tasted the sweet wine. Though they appear to be about romantic love, Sufi poems are spiritual longings for union with God, the Beloved. Through his poems, a Sufi rips open his soul and seeks to devour the very essence of God. I remembered how the Sufi's image of wine, the elixir of divine love, and bread, the body of divinity itself, seemed identical to the Christian's partaking in the blood and body of Christ during communion. I had wondered if the Sufis had been influenced by the Last Supper of Jesus. Or maybe wine and bread were universal symbols for the soul of God -- Allah's for the Sufis, Jesus' for the Christians. I told my guide about my fascination with Sufi poetry and asked him to tell me more about the mystic sect itself. "How

does Sufism differ from the rest of Islam?" I asked my guide as we walked across a marble plaza toward a hall of thick round pillars and multifoil arches.

"Sufism is a pilgrimage into the soul.... Like the *Hajj* to Mecca. Do you know about the five laws of Islam?"

"You mean the Five Pillars of Islam?" I recalled my learnings from a class on comparative religion.

"Yes. The Five Pillars of Islam. To pray five times each day, to give alms to the poor, to fast during the holy month of Ramadan, to profess that Allah is the one and only God and that Mohammed is Allah's *final* prophet..."

"And the fifth pillar is the Hajj to Mecca," I added.

"Exactly. The Hajj to the great mosque of Mecca where a Muslim bears his naked soul before Allah as he circles the Kaaba -- the most sacred shrine of Islam. The Kaaba is a stone cube in the courtyard of the great mosque. Muslims walk around it seven times then touch the black stone of eternal wisdom on a corner of the Kaaba."

"Isn't this black stone actually a meteorite?" I asked. I remembered reading this in an astronomy book.

"Maybe. But Muslims believe it was a gift from the angel Gabriel to Ishmael, son of Abraham. They say that on judgement day the black stone will recognize all those who have touched it..."

As he spoke, I pictured an ancient person witnessing the famous meteorite falling to earth. Naturally, he'd interpret it as a gift from an angel if he only viewed space as a mysterious heavenly realm.

At the Octagonal Tower, I had my first glimpse of the Taj Mahal on the distant bank of the Yamuna River. "It took 20,000 men 17 years to build such a magnificent palace," the man said, as he leaned against the tower wall. "This, my friend, is what a Sufi finds at the end of his spiritual quest."

The guide leaned on the wall to stare at the distant Taj, a sight he must have seen a thousand times before. Still, his gaze held deep admiration as if he were viewing it for the first time. Is he Sufi? I wondered, unwilling to disturb his tranquility by asking him whether he was. He seemed so glowingly filled with the sight, like a Sufi poet intoxicated with visions of God.

I imagined possessing such unquenchable love for the All Pervasive Spirit of the Universe. It seemed beyond me. At least, it used to, but now India was tugging at me from all sides, tempting me to become spiritual. But could I travel inwardly, like a Sufi, even if I wanted to? "You mentioned that the Sufi journey has to do with touching the black stone on the Kaaba," I said to the guide.

"Accha... This is one way to understand the Sufi's spiritual journey. Most people reach for what is outside the self, but the Sufi's Hajj is a pilgrimage inward, to the Kaaba of his soul."

"How does the Sufi make this inward journey? Through meditation? Or is it, as you said before, through poetry?"

"A Sufi needs a master to guide him on the path. He must learn to embrace life with open arms and not a closed mind, to balance his reason with intuition, and to *not* mimic the world around him. People are not parrots, yet most behave as if they are."

"Which is what you meant when you said 'parrots repeat...'"

"Parrots speak repetition but the soul speaks its own truths."

"And in order to become a Sufi, you need a Sufi master?" I asked.

"The Sufi has to follow his own heart. He is the seeker, and a master can only lead him to his path. The ignorant seek quick and easy methods for spiritual awareness. But the Sufi journey is not an easy one. It is a continuous struggle... The real *Jihad* against his own ignorance..."

"Like Arjuna facing battle according to his dharma," I interrupted.

"Ah Yes. These are similarities among religions, indeed. But the Sufis above all others believe in beauty, love, poetry, and art. In fact, Babur first decreed to establish gardens along the Yamuna River before you."

"Was Babur the most famous Moghul emperor?"

"No. That was his grandson -- Akbar the Great who ruled the Moghul empire from 1556 to 1605. Akbar was a man tolerant of other religions. He listened to Sufis, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians alike. He proclaimed as his state religion the 'Divine Faith,' a combination of ideals from all these religions."

"Sounds like a religion I could adopt. That is, if I selected for myself what I liked from each religion. Anyway, what happened to this Divine Faith?"

"I'm afraid it died along with Akbar."

"It wasn't Akbar who built the Taj Mahal, was it?"

"No, no. That was Shah Jahan. Although he was not a great emperor, such a one as he left the world with this splendid monument in memory of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, the lady of the Taj. Mumtaz died during the birth of her fourteenth child. Shah Jahan grieved over her for the remainder of his life."

"So the Taj Mahal is really a shrine to love."

"Exactly," the man continued to stare at the distant mausoleum, "it is the sepulchre of a man's undying love and sorrow."

When it was time to head back to the tour bus, I generously paid my guide and asked if he was a Sufi. "No, my friend," he said. "I am but a simple man who tries to be tolerant of many religious views."

The bus dropped us off in front of the Taj Mahal where, at the entrance, there stood a tall red archway with inlaid black marble inscriptions from the Koran, Islam's sacred book of revelations from Allah to the prophet Mohammed. The verse reminded me of the karma yogic philosophy of working selflessly... "*Have We not lifted up your heart and relieved you of the burden which weighed down your back? Have We not given you high renown? Every hardship is followed by ease. When your task is ended resume your toil, and seek your God with all fervor."*

Beyond the gate, the domed white marble palace with four minarets appeared at the end of rectangular pools that were much smaller than they appeared in any picture I'd ever seen. As I looked at the pool reflections, images of the Sufi gazing inwardly came to mind. Could I ever catch reflections of my soul and feel the spirit of the Sufi's quest to know God? Perhaps I could fashion my own Divine Faith and in doing so, touch my soul like a pilgrim touches the Kaaba. The sight of the Taj loomed before me like a heavenly palace. It was so majestic that as I neared its marble platform, my imagination soared with visions of journeying toward the center of my being....

I am climbing steps crowded with pilgrims, but not as many as travel to Mecca. None see my presence, for mine is an inward quest made alone by me, the seeker of the soul. I enter palatial doors. In dim light, behind a fretted screen and beneath a crowning dome, lies the cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal, Beloved Lady of the Taj.

My soul lies in this crypt and I long to free it from its sleep. My hand rests on the cold stone box and I wonder if within lies the treasure I seek? No answer comes. I imagine a loaf of bread beside a golden chalice of red wine on one end of the cenotaph. "Drink," a voice echoes through my mind, "the ever flowing wine of ecstasy. The essence of your being. Of your God. Eat of this my heart. Feast on the soul of your Beloved."

I come to touch my soul, I think, not to taste Divine Love and Promise. No answer comes but on the center of the tomb I see a lighted candle. Nearing the flame, the warm glow makes me thirst to know why I exist and if I will one day cease to be.

I've come to embrace my soul, I call, but hear no answer. My hand reaches for the warm candle flame... my mind inscribes an epitaph... "Here rests Mumtaz, Lady of the Taj. Long ago her life fluttered away, like the moth that nears the candle flame. Behold the flash! It is so written that the moth is gone, as will be your life. You cannot stop the forces of nature. But you can awake and join the soul. Taste the Rapture. See the Glory. Listen, and hear the mystic song of God, the unveiled Beloved."

I returned to the tour bus feeling spun on a spiritual course that had perhaps begun with the veena music that sent me soaring like a kite. Now I wanted to know the beauty and feel the spirit of divinity. Certainly, I wouldn't attain a spiritual nature overnight. Such awareness takes a lifetime of dedication. After all, most Easterners believe it takes them many lifetimes to weave out their dharma, their inner quest to be at one with God. And I'm an analytical Westerner who has barely dipped her foot into the pool of spiritual reflection. Still, my visit to the Taj Mahal had been an encouraging start.

***

Three days after my visit to Agra, Aftab and I were on the train to Patna, the capital of Bihar province. We arrived late in the evening and the cold night of this northern city caught me unprepared. I bundled up in my only sweater while Aftab arranged for a pedicab to take us to the Hotel Pataliputra. He claimed that this was the only suitable hotel in town.

At the hotel desk, the clerk told me the rooms cost fifty dollars a night. I pulled Aftab aside and said this was way beyond my budget. "Allen, I tell you plainly, there are not any other places to stay in Patna. Unless you want to stay in the student dormitory with me. But I assure you, the rooms there are not comfortable."

I ended up registering at the Hotel Pataliputra and Aftab left for his student dormitory, promising to meet me in the morning to take me to the train station. My room was fairly nice -- twin beds and a bathroom -- however, the heat didn't work. I returned to the front desk and complained to the clerk, but he only offered to send another blanket to my room. This annoyed me and I was about to insist that he turn on the heat when the telephone rang.

"Hello," the clerk said. "What? Who? Ah, yes. She is in fact standing right here."

He handed me the receiver and I heard, "Hello Allen! How is everything?" Of course, it was Aftab.

"Everything's fine as soon as they heat up my room." I gazed at the clerk.

"Yes? Hello. Are you there?" Aftab shouted.

"Yes, I'm here."

"I have telephoned to suggest I join you for a late night meal at your hotel."

"That's fine, as long as you can get this guy to turn on some heat." The clerk looked away.

When Aftab arrived, the clerk assured him that the heat was not working and that nothing could be done about it. In turn, Aftab complained to me about the vicious cold in the student dormitory and he repeatedly asked if he could sleep on the extra bed in my room. "You've already paid dearly for the accommodation. It would be a shame to waste the extra bed." In the end I told him he could, with the warning that if he came anywhere near me I'd scream as loud as I could. He knew I would.

Early the next morning, Aftab and I went to the train station and I bought a ticket for the next train to Calcutta. Aftab could not see me off because he had some business pertaining to his graduate program. So at the ticket booth I parted company with Aftab Haboosh, MBM candidate.

In the empty station cafe, I sat at a rusty table assuming I had about a three hour wait, but that was gambling that the train would be on time. After an hour passed, and while I was writing in my journal, an Indian man in his forties entered the cafe and sat at a table across the room. He was dressed in a shirt, tie, and trousers and had a full handlebar moustache. He unfolded his newspaper and was about to read when he noticed me looking at him. "Hello. You are also waiting for the train to Calcutta?"

"Yeah," I muttered, resuming my writing. The man then got up and, to my surprise, came over to my table as if I had just invited him. Oh no, I thought, not another Aftab.

"Do you mind if I join you? We have a long wait before the train arrives. I understand it's two hours late."

"No. Go ahead," I said as I continued to write.

"Are you a student in India or are you traveling?" the man asked after he was seated.

Not wanting to appear as a mere traveler, I looked up and replied, "Actually, I'm on my way to teach English in China."

"How very interesting," the man said as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He took out a card which he handed to me. It read, Akhilesh Kumar Shahi, Managing-Editor; Press Service of India. The intruder suddenly changed into someone worth talking to. "We'd be very much interested in hearing about your experiences in China. You could send articles directly to my office in Patna."

"Thanks," I said, setting my journal aside. "I'd be interested in doing that."

"Have you seen much of the city?"

"No, actually I'm only here by chance. Besides, is there really anything to see in Patna?"

"Oh my yes! Patna. I would say..." He paused to sip his tea, "is the most historical city in India. Why here, like the Ganges herself, flows the very history of this country. Have you heard about the Mauryan and the Gupta dynasties?"

"Briefly. The Mauryan was India's first dynasty... Sometime during the third century BC, right?"

"That is -- the first unifying dynasty. You see, India tends to be fragmented from time to time. It was Chandragupta Maurya who unified the tribes along the Ganges. And he formed his capital..." The editor leaned back in his chair and gently tapped the edge of the table with both hands. "Here, in Patna. This, my friend, is -- Pataliputra."

"Sounds like the name of my hotel."

"Ah of course." He laughed. "The site of Pataliputra has been excavated... not far from here. If we had the time I would be delighted to show you. But there's no telling when the train will actually arrive."

"That's for sure." I reopened my journal to jot down some of what the editor was saying.

"And naturally you have read about Asoka Maurya, India's most famous king. Asoka was grandson of Chandragupta and he reigned here in Patna -- or rather, in Pataliputra, for many years."

"Well, I've had some Asoka beer.... but honestly, I don't know too much about him."

"Asoka beer!" He politely laughed. "This is very funny. In all seriousness we can say, Asoka combined rule with religion. In fact, if it hadn't been for Asoka, I doubt that Buddhism would be where it is today. Asoka became a Buddhist and left a series of religious edicts throughout his empire. He also sent missionaries throughout Asia and he held the third Buddhist council here, in Pataliputra."

"Was this when the split occurred? Between Mahayana and Hinayana?" I said, referring to the two major branches of Buddhism, which was about all I recalled of the religion.

"No. The division you speak of occurred before Asoka, during the second Buddhist council which met one hundred years after the historical Buddha. This reminds me of another important fact. Were you aware that here, under the pipal tree, Buddha attained his enlightenment?"

"Here?"

"Accha. Beneath a full moon."

"In Patna? I had no idea."

"Oh. Not exactly in Patna... but very near here, in Bihar. Bodh Gaya. You can journey there and back in one day."

"Then Buddha came from around here?"

"He was born about 250 kilometers northwest of Patna... In Lumbini Garden, Nepal, probably in 563 BC. But he preached his doctrine throughout what is modern Bihar. Would you take another cup of tea?" The editor motioned the waiter over.

"I'm afraid I've had my fill," I said, and excused myself to search for a lavatory. Upon returning, I found a fresh cup of tea and plate of sweets before my chair.

"Oh? How much do I owe you?" I reached for my money.

"Never mind. This is my treat."

I smiled, sat down and sipped some tea. The editor asked about my travels and listened with interest as I spoke about Arya's wedding, Mahabalipuram, and the Sharifs. Eventually I asked him whether he could tell me the differences between Buddhism and Hinduism.

The editor smiled with enthusiasm. "Certainly. It's a fairly simple matter. The Buddha... In fact, we shall call him Gautama Siddhartha, his name before he became the Buddha. At age twenty nine, Siddhartha abandoned his princely world in search of the meaning to life..."

"You mean, to follow his dharma?"

"Why yes. This is a notable connection between Buddhism and Hinduism. You see, Buddha was a Hindu prince and when he set out establishing his dharma he accepted certain principles of Hinduism, such as reincarnation. But he rejected the Hindu caste system and the path of self-denial, like the Hindu Sadhus who mistreat starve their bodies. In his first sermon, Buddha taught the Middle Way, that is, not to live by extremes. Don't be the wastrel, the hedonist, nor the beggar or ascetic. And control your harmful emotions. Anger, jealousy, sadness, hatred and so on."

"Sounds like a suitable philosophy for me. Especially by keeping my anger or depression in check during frustrating situations." The editor smiled at my remark. "I've heard of this Middle Way, but I didn't know it came from Buddha's first sermon."

"You know about Deer Park, in Sarnath?"

"Not really."

"In Deer Park, Buddha set the wheel in motion.... Why, there, on your bag. The Wheel of Asoka." He indicated the small Indian flag pinned on me by the woman at the New Delhi train station.

"Is that what this is? I thought it represented Gandhi's spinning wheel. What does it represent, this wheel of Asoka?"

"Actually, it's the Wheel of Law, or the *Dharma chakra*, the most celebrated symbol in Buddhism. It represents Buddha's teachings... His dharma."

"Like the Hindu dharma?"

"Similar. Buddhists consider dharma as truth, morality, and the *Way* of Buddha, or, the Way toward Enlightenment."

"You mean nirvana?"

"Accha!" The man nodded. "And the Dharma chakra reveals the Way. During his first sermon, Buddha set the wheel rolling, and it's still in motion today."

"Sort of a snow ball effect...."

"What? Well, that's an interesting analogy."

"But what exactly did Buddha teach in his Deer Park sermon? I mean, what is the Buddha's Dharma chakra?"

"In Deer Park, Buddha taught The Four Noble Truths. That life is suffering and that man suffers because he desires. When desires are eliminated, through unselfish action, man will no longer suffer. The fourth noble truth is called the Eightfold Path -- the eight spokes of the Dharma chakra. Living non-violently with self-control according to the right behavior, speech, views, aims and so on. If a man carefully follows this Dharma chakra, he'll reach the supreme and blissful state of nirvana. If not in this life, then in the next one."

The editor offered me a cigarette and lighted it. I then ask him about the lack of Buddhist temples throughout India. "If Buddhism originated in Bihar, then what ever happened to it? There don't seem to be any Buddhists around."

"At least not very many. You see, not long after Asoka died, the Mauryan dynasty collapsed and India returned to disunity. These were the dark ages of our nation. Then there emerged, once again in Patna, the Gupta dynasty. It's a shame you'll miss the Patna Museum. It has a fine collection of Gupta Art."

"Maybe next time. What happened to the Guptas?"

"They were overthrown by hordes from central Asia. Ancestors of the Rajputs who dominated Northern India until the Muslims arrived, even here, in Patna. And by this time, the Buddhist temples of Bodh Gaya had already been converted to Vishnu temples. In fact, Buddha himself was considered the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. In this way the Hindus made Buddhism a sect of their own religion -- a Vishnu sect. But this is a Hindu perspective and not one shared by the Buddhists."

In the distance, there came the clanks and whistles of an arriving train. As we got up from the table, I asked the editor, "What brought back Hinduism to the main religion of India?"

"Why, the Bhagavad-Gita, my friend."

The editor had made the long wait for the train to Calcutta pass by quickly, and I hated to lose his company. But we would not be riding together on the train -- my ticket was first class and his was second class unreserved. When he left me at the platform, he reminded me to write to his office in Patna about my experiences in China. I never did.

Chapter Four: Return to Calcutta

I returned to Calcutta hoping to spend the two weeks left on my visa at the Banerjee home. During my taxi ride from the train station, I worried my visit would intrude on the Banerjees. But my concern quickly subsided when the taxi pulled up the Banerjee's driveway and Kumala ran out the front doors and hugged me, as if I were her long lost daughter. She took my hand and led me up the porch steps saying, "My dear child. I have been terribly worried about you, especially after you wrote about your illness in New Delhi."

I had sent a postcard to Arya during my depressing bout with lower lobe pneumonia because it seemed he should know about my plight in case something terrible happened. Now I regretted having worried Kumala needlessly, although her motherly concern added to her warm reception. "I'm a lot better now," I told her as we passed by the tiny servant woman standing at the entrance, grinning at me.

"Where have you been otherwise, all this time?"

I could think of nothing else to say except, "Patna... I've just come from Patna."

Kumala stopped short of the drawing room and looked at me with widening eyes. "Where? To Patna! You went to Patna? Of all the places to see in India. Nobody goes to Patna!"

"But it's historical," I suggested as my face heated from embarrassment in fear she'd ask more. And I hardly wanted to explain Aftab. But to my relief her servant woman took hold of my hand and led me to one of the guest rooms where I freshened up.

Later, I joined Kumala in the drawing room for some tea. I learned that Arya and Bela had already returned to Portland and Mr. Banerjee was in Bombay on a three week business trip. Their absence, and that of the wedding guests and decor, made the large house seem like a sanctuary.

The scent of sandalwood drifted through the drawing room from incense burning in brass holders on the fireplace mantle across from where Kumala and I sat. Beside the incense leaned two pictures draped with fresh marigold garlands, like the pictures at Arya's Sacred String Ceremony. One picture was of a woman sitting crosslegged with long black hair falling down her right side. The other was of a man with cropped hair and a scraggly beard, sitting crosslegged and wearing a loincloth. His squinting eyes were staring straight at me. I recognized the mantle display as an altar, and wondered who Kumala worshiped. "Are they relatives?" I asked, hoping to discuss her religion.

She set her tea aside and, without saying a word, stared at the pictures until her eyes began to tear. I felt terribly awkward, unaccustomed to such intense emotion. "I'm really sorry," I said taking her hand as she dried her eyes with a dainty handkerchief. "I didn't mean to be so personal. I'm just curious about your religion...."

"Forgive me child." Her gaze remained on the pictures. "As you can see, I'm a silly emotional fellow. What you asked was not personal. It's just that I have so much love for Sri Ramakrishna, our saint of Bengal -- the man in the picture. He is as pure and holy as your Lord Jesus. In everyone and everything Ramakrishna found God."

"You mean the Brahman?" I referred to the supreme god of Hinduism, as I understood it.

"As you say. Ramakrishna saw all religions as leading to the same Supreme Reality. He explained it this way. We all drink water though we don't always call it by the same name..."

"Water is water..."

"And we all must drink it in order to survive..." She looked back to the mantle. "Sri Ramakrishna was intoxicated with holiness. In his passionate search to know the nature of God, he even took on, at one point, the life of a woman, clothing and all. He adulated womanhood and felt that as a woman he might know and feel the love of God."

"Who's the woman in the other picture?" I wondered if she too, were Ramakrishna.

Kumala stood up and walked over to the mantle. "She is wife of Sri Ramakrishna -- Sarada Devi, our Holy Mother. They married when she was only six years of age. But theirs was a union of purity and holiness. Sri Ramakrishna saw in his wife the incarnation of divinity. She was a goddess, born to teach spiritual knowledge, to spread the ideals of motherhood, and to restore the dignity of Indian woman. She became Mother of the order after the death of Sri Ramakrishna."

Kumala namasted to the pictures. She seemed radiant, fulfilled in her spiritual devotion. I lacked such religious emotions because my childhood God was entirely masculine. But now, before me, stood a woman praising a man who tried to be a woman to know the feminine side of God. Perhaps by resisting religion, I cheated myself of life's most fulfilling rewards? Could I find my spiritual nature by embracing god as goddess, through an inward journey, or through a saint like Ramakrishna?

"Did Ramakrishna worship a goddess," I asked. "Like Sarasvati, the veena player?"

"Oh my yes. As a Hindu priest at the Dakshineswar temples, Ramakrishna dedicated his life to the Divine Mother Kali, namesake of Calcutta. I tell you what. Shekhar Shamar will be visiting us in a few days. I'm sure he won't mind taking you to the temples. Normally I would take you there, but Indian women cannot so freely go places without their husband, father, brother, or son."

"Shekhar Shamar's coming?" I asked, recalling my conversations with Arya's attractive Nepalese friend during the wedding.

"Accha. He stays with us whenever he conducts business here in town."

Shekhar Shamar... I could hardly believe my good luck. Not only was Shekhar sophisticated and good looking, he was polite, good humored, and fascinating, especially because his father owned an elephant farm in the Himalayas. I often imagined visiting Shekhar in Nepal to ride elephants in the snowcapped mountains. Once or twice, I nearly asked him if he'd mind a visit from me on my way to China. But I always lost the courage to ask and once the wedding had ended, Shekhar and my adventuresome visions of romance vanished. Until now. Shekhar Shamar was returning to Calcutta.

The following afternoon, after a restful night's sleep and a lunch of spicy fish curry, Kumala and I relaxed on a blanket under the shade of a large Flamboyant tree at one end of her back yard. The pavilion for Arya's wedding reception had long been disassembled, but traces of trampled ground remained in the green and neatly trimmed lawn. A breeze brought us the sweet fragrance from the pink and white oleanders trimming the yard. Occasionally, the clamor of traffic or the chatter of crows eclipsed the radio program Kumala played. Presumably, the

broadcast was a Bengali soap opera because of the dramatic way the people spoke and when a woman started sobbing desperately, I asked Kumala what was going on.

"The woman protests that her father forbids she marry her sweetie. And now, she threatens to run away."

I smiled and picked up my novel to read. Shortly the power went off, as it often did, and chirping birds and rustling leaves replaced the distressful voices on the radio. Before long Kumala asked me about life in American, adding, "The thing is, my son wants me to stay with him while he settles into marriage, and I'm afraid to go to America."

"But why?" I sat up on my elbows. "Think of the opportunity."

"I'm afraid of too many changes. And, I understand you don't have servants in America."

"Actually, we don't need servants because we've got dishwashers, washing machines, garbage disposals, vacuum cleaners, and coffee makers."

"You see, this is my point. America is too complicated. Teresa, will you write to my son and explain why I cannot go there?"

"Sure, but I don't think you should worry. I mean, you'd be with Arya."

"Yes I know, but it's much too big a step for me to take. Certainly, the idea deserves thorough consideration, don't you agree?" Before I could reply, Kumala launched into questions about my teaching job in China, adding, "But why would you want to teach in China? Such funny little men running around with their hair in plaits. Why don't you stay in Calcutta? You could teach here, and live in our home. You are my Teresa, like Arya is my Arya."

Surprised and touched by Kumala's motherly affection, I said, "I do like India a lot. There's so much to learn here about philosophy, religion, history, music..."

"Music!" Kumala perked up and smoothed out the blue sari draped over her legs.

I told her about my rather mystical encounter with the veena in Arni. This thrilled her and she explained that, while her son was in grammar school, she had taught Indian vocal music -- the one thing she had done during her adult life outside of being a housewife and mother.

"Can you teach me about Indian music?" I eagerly asked.

"What you mean is Northern classical music which we call Hindustani ragas. I tell you, Teresa, to learn raga takes years of devotion and concentration. Now I can do little more than lead you to raga." While keeping meter with her right hand in an OK gesture, she began singing, "*SA RE GA MA PA BHA NI ri ga ma dha ni.* Twelve notes to raga... Seven natural and five changeable. Each raga differs according to the player, season, or time of day. Raga is intuitive and each moment extemporaneous..."

"And spiritual, like everything else in India."

"Accha. Raga is pure unbroken melody, not like your Western music where you concentrate on repeating phrases of 2, 3, or 4 beats."

"Is raga rhythm?"

"Rhythm is *tala*, the organization of time by beat. Think of your life as a piece of music. Raga is breath -- inhale and exhale in a natural unbroken cycle." She placed one hand on her stomach to emphasize her breath. "And tala," she continued, "is your heart rhythmically pounding." She placed her other hand over her heart. "Both tala and raga are necessary in Indian music, and where music joins life, there is bliss." She again sang, "Da da da.... *SA RE GA MA PA BHA NI ri ga ma dha ni.* Twelve notes to raga."

"But what exactly is a raga? Is it the song, the scale, or the melody?"

"It is precisely the 'not knowing,' Teresa, that gives Indian music its vitality. Think of a string of radiant pearls. Each pearl is like a single note. Only together do they make raga."

"Can you write the scale down for me?" I asked.

"Raga is not written down. To learn the notes you need a teacher so you can listen and absorb the instincts of your master and develop your natural rhythms. The problem is, nothing can take the place of the student's willingness to learn. You see, most students are impatient. They want to perform before they are ready."

"When can the student perform?"

"Only after years of dedication. By the time the student is truly ready to perform, he has become the teacher."

"So if I were to learn raga I'd have to spend years in India..."

"Four years minimum. What I can teach you now is how to listen." Kumala paused, kept meter, and sang, "Da da da... *SA RE GA MA PA BHA NI ri ga ma dha ni*... Twelve notes to raga. You see, there are three kinds of people who attend Indian raga concerts. Many come to see the performance strictly as entertainment, others try to analyze the musician, the raga, the instrument.... the essence of the music escapes them. The third and most advanced listener, comes to hear raga with all of his nature -- emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual."

"With mind body heart and soul, you mean."

"Exactly. To hear raga is a spiritual experience."

"But with so much involved, how can you be sure you're really listening?"

"Definitely listen without so much thought. Too many thoughts are misguiding. Don't just listen to the words of the song, I tell you. Feel what you hear, taste the colors and the texture of raga. The performer's voice and words are secondary to the listener. How can raga exist without the listener?"

"I believe I listened to the veena player in Arni. Something happened to me inside, once his music got going. I felt like the music touched my very soul."

"My dear Teresa. I doubt this was possible for you, not yet anyway. You are too analytical and must first learn to embrace the emotionality and spirituality of raga."

"In that case, I wonder if I could ever become such a listener."

"That is it! When you stop wondering -- you will hear raga." She again gestured and sang, "*Da da da... SA RE GA MA PA BHA NI ri ga ma dha ni...* Twelve notes to raga."

Suddenly, the broadcast erupted over the radio, but Kumala turned it down and said, "Don't run off to China, Teresa. It would be much better if you stayed in Calcutta and studied Hindustani music or attended Jadavpur University. They have a splendid department of comparative literature. Or you could follow whatever suits you. And you needn't worry about meagre funds. You are welcome to stay here as long as you like."

Kumala's warm invitation was tempting, but the thought of wearing out my welcome disturbed me. And winding up alone in Calcutta seemed intolerable. The city was nice only because of Kumala and the comfort of her home.

Before my thoughts traveled very far, Kumala began presenting activities that she and I could pursue together, if I stayed. It seemed my presence offered her incentive and inspiration. "The thing is, Teresa, you could help me while I help you. Tit for Tat. I tell you, we could hold a variety of classes in the front drawing room. Such a good idea. I'll put ads in the newspapers right away and I assure you, the response will be enormous. I'll teach music, maybe cooking... And naturally, you'll teach English... Although, I must warn you now -- you very much need to develop proper pronunciation. All your students will laugh at you if you say 'budder' instead of butter."

"But if I stayed, what about my visa? It expires in two weeks."

After a moment's thought, Kumala enthusiastically said, "Why, you could return to Nepal with Shekhar Shamar and get a new six month visa. This would be perfect. His family won't mind helping you out until you can return to Calcutta."

Return to Nepal with Shekhar. What a thought! My mind quickly cluttered with visions of opportunity and romance. I could always teach in China, but would I ever meet another Shekhar, or Kumala. No, the plan was nearly too tempting to resist, but I needed to carefully think it over. My lingering about India and Nepal would involve much money and I had brought with me just enough to modestly travel until my job in China.

Startling me from my musings, Kumala said, with a gust of inspiration, "I know -- we could open a creche!"

I remained silent, not understanding what she meant while wondering whether or not Kumala was going to call for her servant to bring us a soft drink. When she didn't, I asked her, "What's a creche?"

"What? Well, where is your little dictionary?" She referred to the Pocket Oxford I generally had with me when writing in my journal. Kumala called for Parool, her tiny, dark complexioned, fifty year old servant woman who dressed in the white cotton sari of widowhood. After fetching my dictionary, Parool kneeled, handed it to me, and giggled while covering her mouth with childlike shyness.

"Look at her," Kumala said as Parool continued to giggle. "She is always like this, laughing and carrying on so. She hasn't a care in the world -- not as we do. Do you think she ever concerns herself with issues about womanhood, overpopulation, or local politics?" Parool still

had her hand over her mouth, certainly aware that Kumala was talking about her. "Well... as they say, ignorance is bliss."

"Oh. A nursery." I found the word in my dictionary.

"I tell you frankly, dear, this stuffy old house has become dreadfully dull. I can't bear it much longer. I have devoted my life entirely to my son and to his father... with the utmost patience and civility. And in return -- nothing for Kumala. They have taken me for granted. Now that my son is married and away, it is time I do something for Kumala. Don't you agree?"

"Of course..."

"Women in India cannot travel so easily as you, Teresa. You have much freedom."

"Perhaps.... But sometimes I wonder whether I have too much freedom... It seems I always have to make a choice."

Kumala looked positively intrigued by my words. "Yes, I see. Too many choices are confusing. Tell me more."

"Well, it's like I'm always standing at the crossroads trying to decide which course to take. Should I take this job or wait for a better one? Should I study this or that? Should I keep a relationship or not? And now, I may stay in India instead of heading for China. Don't get me wrong. I value my independence. It's just that with such freedom comes a lot of difficult choices to make. And it's always up to me. This is often confusing."

Kumala turned off the radio and said with concern, "But your mother loves you very much. I am sure of this."

"Oh, I know. That's not the point. What I mean... Well, for example, it was entirely up to me whether or not I practiced the flute, which I never did so I never learned to play it. Now I wonder, what good is this sort of freedom?"

"Accha. You must write to Arya and tell him -- this -- is exactly why I cannot come to America... too much freedom, too many choices."

"Oh, I'm not trying to discourage you from visiting America. Freedom of choice is very positive, after all. But it takes a lot of responsibility to get anywhere with so much of freedom. Here in India, everything is arranged for you -- even before you're born. Don't you get a sense of security in such order, and in not having to -- blaze the trail -- everywhere you go? You know what to do, what is meant to be done, and how to behave. The order of dharma, right?"

Kumala nodded, but didn't answer. She was absorbed by what I was saying.

"Sometimes," I continued, "I'm at a loss because my life isn't so clearly defined. And there are times I even wonder whether America doesn't suit me."

"Because too many choices?"

"I'm not sure. It may also be because of my contrariness to traditional attitudes and values. Don't get me wrong. I'm certainly glad I have the freedom to travel around the world. But it seems that the more freedom you have, the more choices you encounter. This in turn increases your drive to question everything, including your own culture and the very nature of freedom itself."

A breeze stirred through the leaves as Kumala reached over, patted my hand, and said, "We have so much to learn from each other -- you and I. This is why I cannot go to America and why you must stay in Calcutta. Please, Teresa, tonight you will write to my son and explain all these important details."

The next morning, when I met Kumala in the drawing room, she excitedly said, "the Shankar Ballet is in town! Tonight we shall go to the ballet, just you and me. It will be my -- Roman Holiday!"

That evening, Kumala insisted we walk the ten blocks to the theatre, presumably to enhance the sense of her Roman Holiday. Along the way, she explained that the ballet was named after Uday Shankar, elder brother of the world famous sitar player Ravi Shankar (of Beatle and hippie fame in America). She also mentioned that I should closely watch for the facial expressions the dancers use to convey nine emotions, which she said were hatred, terror, fury, eroticism, apathy, wonder, comedy, heroism, and tranquility.

"How did they come up with only nine?" I asked.

"Can you think of more expressions for human emotion?"

"Well, yeah.... Happiness."

"This is wonder and tranquility."

"Jealousy," I suggested.

"This is hatred and terror."

"What about forgetfulness?" I asked.

She thought a moment and said, "How can you show such a thing as forgetting on the face? Forgetting is an act of the mind."

During our walk Kumala also explained that many of Uday Shankar's dance creations were actually stories from Hindu scriptures. I asked her about these stories and she explained, "Classical Indian dance begins with the famous contest between Shiva and his wife Uma, daughter of the Himalayas. In the middle of the dance, Shiva throws off his clothing and dances

like a man crazed with passion. In this way, he easily defeats his wife and is declared Nataraja, lord of the dance."

At the ballet, the night's performance included both traditional dancing and modern choreography about a cricket match. While hypnotic music melted dance steps and gestures, the dancers costumes flashed luscious pink, turquoise, red, lime, and persimmon. Both men and women wore jingling ankle bells and had their almond eyes thickly lined in black. The women wore dozens of bangles on each wrist, and platters of flowers, or cords of gold, braided in their long ebony hair.

The most spectacular classical dance was the dance of the shepherd boy Krishna and the cowherd maidens called *gopis*. The dance, *Ras Lila* or the Dance with God, is a circle dance symbolic of communion with God, rather like the Sufi's inward journey. In myth, Ras Lila takes place in the idyllic setting beside the Yamuna River, the river that flows beside the Taj Mahal. Many times after the ballet Kumala retold the myth of the dance while vivid images of young Krishna and the gopis filled my mind...

In the cool air of autumn, the youthful Krishna appears at the river bank. He is as fragrant as wild flowers and as beautiful as the full moon night. The flute he plays creates heavenly vibrations that soar through the forest, the village homes, and into the hearts of the beautiful gopi maidens. One by one a gopi leaves her village to join Krishna at the river.

Seeing Krishna is pure ecstasy, but he would tease his maidens. "Return to your husbands," Krishna says. "Go back to your fathers. You are not fit to be out in the darkness of night. Go. Resume your chores."

The gopis are saddened but cannot leave for they have only Krishna in their hearts. "We come for love of you O Krishna," the gopis plead. "We want to dance."

"Look!" a gopi calls. "Krishna retreats into the wilderness."

"Krishna, why do you disappear? Within, can you be found? Can moonlight be seen?" The gopis run into the forest to where not a drop of moonlight touches the earth. "Heart and soul we have given you, Lord Krishna. Lead us back to the riverside where we would dance."

Krishna leads the gopis to the moonlit waters. "Do not reason that I was not with you. I am always here. Even when you feel lost in the wilderness, I am with you as I am now."

When Ras Lila begins, angels sing and shower the dance with rose petals and moonbeams. Krishna seemingly multiplies to dance with sixteen thousand cowherd maidens, as he is in each of their hearts. A gopi does not see Krishna dance with any other but herself. With each Krishna dances the circle of eternal sublime wisdom. The circle that points inwardly to itself -- to pure glorious love, because Krishna is in the center.

Kumala arranged for Arya's cousin, Sumit, to take me to his travel agent to check on flights to Nepal. In the process, Sumit and his wife, Bimala, invited me to dinner. I had met Sumit, Bimala, and their three daughters during the wedding. As with most of Arya's friends and relatives, their impressiveness extended well beyond my modest background. Sumit owned race horses and a prosperous business that produced glue for building materials (not that there was a connection, as far as I know). Bimala, his wife, had once reigned as Miss Teen India. She was strikingly beautiful with large brown eyes, thick lashes, and long silky black hair.

At seven o'clock that evening, I was chauffeured across town to Sumit's large stately house. Bimala and her daughters greeted me in an upstairs drawing room where, soon after I arrived, everyone pulled out photo albums to show me pictures of weddings, birthdays, religious festivals, and family vacations.

"This is when Sumit and I first began dating," Bimala said, referring to a picture from her high school days. "Not all marriages in India are arranged by mommies and daddies."

Another album covered her year as Miss Teen India. "Don't let me bore you with so many pictures," she said. I assured her I was interested. "You see," she pointed to a picture of herself during the pageant, "I was much slimmer then. Now I am just a fat old mommy." After her year as Miss Teen India, Bimala had embarked on a successful modeling career that ended when Sumit insisted she quit. "He told me I cannot manage a career and a husband too."

Suddenly, I remembered Kumala's request that I ask about a university in Calcutta. Throughout that afternoon, Kumala had encouraged me to ask Bimala about the comparative literature program at Jadavpur University, where Bimala had earned her M. A.. Kumala hoped I would attend the university while staying at the Banerjee house. "Bimala could help you enroll," Kumala had said. "But don't let her talk only about the Miss Teen Pageant or you won't get a word in edgewise. I tell you, be persistent. Ask what courses you should take. And get the name of a professor that you can meet with."

When I inquired about the university, Bimala briefly described the courses she took and asked my opinion of Virginia Woolf. "I have read all of her novels," she added. "*Orlando* is my favorite." She named several other novels by Virginia Woolf to see which ones I had read. Embarrassed, I admitted I hadn't read any. I worried that Bimala assumed, since I had a degree in English, I would know all about American and British literature, which I didn't. For one thing, my English degree was in linguistics, not literature, which is why I considered the comparative literature program. It would offer me a broader perspective on the English language. But I was mostly tempted to stay in India to learn about the country's ocean of philosophy and culture.

Following dinner, Bimala sent the girls to bed and took me on a tour of the house. In the central section of the first floor, down a wide hallway, we stopped at a side door. "This should interest you," Bimala said. "Auntie tells me you are very much curious about religion."

She opened the door and turned on the overhead light. Before me, on the many shelves lining the three walls of what might have been a walk-in closet, were candles, brass incense burners, vases of flowers, and silver trays containing leaves, eggs, coconuts, fruit, and rice. Arranged in a row along one of the shelves, stood dozens of exquisite five to ten inch high golden and brass images of gods and goddesses. The stunning sight of so many idols reminded me of the golden calves the Christian Bible condemns as sinful. I held no such judgement, only fascination and curiosity about this unfamiliar form of religious worship.

"This is where we come to worship," Bimala said. "Although, quite frankly, my husband is much too preoccupied to pay attention to anything other than his horses or his business. So you see, I am left to take care of religious matters."

As we entered the room scented from oranges, and rosewood, I wondered if Bimala worshiped each idol as an individual god, or collectively, as the Brahman. I carefully pondered questions that might or might not be offensive or even silly, such as -- Do you actually bow down before all these golden idols? "Do you ever worship at the Dakshineswar?" I asked the relatively safe question.

"That is for pilgrimage. Unlike you Christians, we Hindus generally worship at home. In such a place as this."

"Which god do you worship? Shiva, Krishna, or Kali?"

Bimala laughed. "It is not that we worship so many gods -- even as you see so many before you." She paused to rearrange some of the fruit. "I understand you Christians worship three gods."

"You mean the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?" She nodded affectionately. "Sort of like the Hindu Trinity," I suggested, to her amusement, then added, "I'm really not as religious as you might think..."

"But very much curious." She grinned even more brightly than usual. "Understand, Teresa, that for a Hindu, God is the sun, the moon, the earth, and the many stars you see at night. He is friend, father, mother, husband, child, and even sweetheart. In order to understand God as such, we meet him on a personal level. We call this bhakti. The Gita teaches that we should devote ourselves entirely to God -- to bask in his glory."

"I've heard of bhakti yoga," I said. "Isn't it the path of personal devotion."

"When you put it like that we sound so terribly stuffy." She laughed. "Bhakti is an intense love for God that grows throughout your life. Such love takes a lifetime or many lifetimes before it becomes as natural as breathing."

Bimala namasted before the idols. "They are like our little children. We take them with us wherever we travel and each night I bathe them, put them to bed and cover them." She indicated a wooden cradle on one of the shelves. "In the morning, I take them out of bed, bathe, and dress them. In this way, we celebrate the daily awakening of God."

Bimala's openness in sharing her sacred room impressed me. Was her form of worship similar to the Sufi inward journey? Or the Ras Lila of Krishna where you look inward for God? In either case it seemed clear that Bimala wasn't sinful in following the tenets of her own religion. What difference did it make which religion you followed especially if the aim is to

know God? It seemed that one religion too easily condemned anything outside of itself, and this was another reason I found religion so distasteful.

"I can see from your expression that you have difficulty grasping the concept of bhakti," Bimala said. "This is the problem with something as precious as spiritual devotion. I know as well as you that these images are not in themselves God, but representations. By gazing upon them, I call on the idea of God."

"How do you go about worshiping?"

"Before entering this room, I put red powder here," she indicated the part in her hair. "And sandalwood paste here," she ran her finger down her forehead. "This helps me to concentrate on God...."

"The inward eye."

She winked. "I see you already know much about our religion. When I worship, I light the candles and incense to drive away ignorance and to illuminate intelligence. I sip holy water and sprinkle it around the room, for purification. Then I give offerings to God and fill my thoughts and heart with his glory."

The fragrance of the room caused me to sneeze and I stepped into the hallway. Bimala turned out the light and suggested we return to the drawing room for some tea. As she closed the door it occurred to me that ignorance was the sin and not the golden idols. That is, ignorance on the part of those who condemn without trying to understand.

At about eleven thirty that evening, when Sumit's driver reached the Banerjee house, Mrs. Banerjee's man servant stood outside the front gate, obviously waiting for me. He ran into the house before we pulled up to the front porch. Parool in turn appeared and ran to me as I got out of the car. She grabbed my hand and led me into the drawing room where Kumala sat at the

edge of the sofa, slightly turned from me. She muttered "hello," and mentioned something about having waited for me since nine o'clock.

I apologized and she faced me. "Never mind. Don't worry about Kumala. Well... Did you ask about the curriculum at Jadavpur University? Did you get the name of a professor? Or the details for enrollment?"

"I didn't ask much," I suggested with some hesitation. "Bimala showed me her worship room and I guess I forgot to ask anything more about the curriculum."

Kumala's face lit up. "I knew it! I knew I should have gone with you. She only talked about herself, didn't she? I was afraid this would happen. I should have made it more clear to you. You have to be persistent with Bimala, I tell you. What did she talk about all evening? Miss Teen India no doubt. Oh, I just knew you wouldn't talk about the literature program. I just knew it..."

Kumala's emotional display reminded me of the Sharif women after my evening with Kali and the musician. Was Kumala becoming obsessed with me, like Nazeera and her mother? Whether or not she was, Kumala's emotions didn't disturb me in the way the Sharifs' had. On the contrary, I found something endearing about Kumala's concern. She seemed honest, unable to keep her true feeling hidden from me. And this made me feel closer to her than to most of my friends and family. I wondered if Kumala's outward honesty had moved me in the same way the idols touched Bimala.

Not long after my visit with Sumit and Bimala, Kumala's elder brother and his wife, the Mukerjees, came over for dinner. With them was Mr. M. Ananda Chatterjee, a short, middle-

aged businessman with receding black hair. Mr. Chatterjee wore dark rimmed glasses and a black suit, instead of the typical Bengali white collarless kurta and dhoti Mr. Mukerjee wore.

Following dinner, we gathered in the front drawing room for tea and biscuits. At first the guests wanted to talk about my journey and my impressions of India. Mr. Chatterjee was amazed at my courage to travel alone in a foreign country. "What do your parents think about your being so far from home?" he asked.

This was always a difficult question for me, considering the differences between my culture and that of India. For one thing, American family members tend to be more independent from one another than members of a typical Indian family. "Nobody had much to say about it," I resorted to telling Mr. Chatterjee.

"She has come to India to seek knowledge," Kumala quickly added, making her visitors chuckle, though not at me, I was sure, but because I delighted them. This gave me a pleasant feeling.

Much of the evening was devoted to Bengali conversation. Unable to understand, I quietly sat back and enjoyed the sound of their language. Occasionally, for my benefit, someone translated what was being said. Topics included local politics, literature, horse races, and cricket matches. As the evening progressed, I detected a pattern to the conversation. First, someone made a statement and then there was a sort of dramatic debate that ended in total disagreement. Only on certain issues did everyone agree. I think they preferred to disagree because this meant they were having a productive discussion. When someone asked my opinion, Kumala often reminded me that I didn't have to agree.

It was Mr. Chatterjee who first apologized for speaking Bengali. He spoke in English a while but soon returned to Bengali, as if nothing could be said quite right otherwise. I assured

everyone that I didn't mind listening. In particular, I enjoyed the deep resonant voice of Mr. Chatterjee. "Bengali has a beautiful flow to it," I suggested, pleasing Kumala and her guests. They quickly agreed that Bengali was the most poetic language in India, if not in the world.

Not long into the evening, the room suddenly fell silent and sober. This was odd because I didn't understand what had caused the sudden change in mood. All eyes peered at Mr. Chatterjee who leaned back on the sofa across from me. He took a deep breath, and started reciting Bengali poetry. With each utterance, his face reddened with the same emotion Kumala had expressed over Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi.

Kumala and her guests listened intently, as Mr. Chatterjee's eyes filled with tears. I was sure he would lose his composure, but his deep voice masterfully controlled and delivered each Bengali word. After his recital, he took a deep breath and wiped his eyes.

"We were not aware that Mr. Chatterjee was a poet." Kumala broke the silence. "He has just honored us with a recital of Tagore."

"It was beautiful," I said to Mr. Chatterjee after he appeared somewhat recovered. "Now I'm really sorry I don't understand Bengali, but I felt the emotion of your words."

This pleased him. "Yes, yes. You must study Bengali." We all agreed this was the first thing I should do if I were to remain in Calcutta.

Mrs. Mukerjee suggested that it was probably difficult for me to listen and not know the meaning of the words. "After all, isn't it the words that convey the essence of the verse?"

"Naturally," Kumala said, "but the voice also conveys meaning. When we hear the song of a bird, we listen and enjoy, although we don't know what the bird is saying. In the same way, Teresa can understand Mr. Chatterjee's verse. Can you not, child?"

After nodding in admiration of Kumala's philosophical remark, I asked Mr. Chatterjee what he had recited.

"Verses from the *Gitanjali* -- Songs of Offering," he replied.

"By who, did you say?"

"By Rabindranath Tagore! Certainly, you have heard of him" Kumala said and it seemed the entire room evaluated my ignorance, as if I had never heard of Shakespeare.

Someone broke my spell of embarrassment by proudly saying, "In 1913, Tagore won the Nobel Prize for literature -- Bengali literature."

"Yes, yes. Tagore is considered as great a national figure as Gandhiji." Kumala took a plate of sweets from Parool. "Have some," she passed the tray to me, "they will help offset the chillies you had for dinner."

"As a matter of fact." Mr. Chatterjee leaned forward to stir his freshly poured cup of tea. "Tagore was the first to call Gandhiji the Mahatma, the Great Soul."

"Rabi gave India a sense of patriotism," Kumala said, affectionately calling Tagore "Rabi," as if he were a relative or a close friend.

"He brought pride and dignity to the people of Bengal," someone added.

"To widowhood and to womanhood in general..."

"Accha, and to the people of India as a whole."

"His verse reaches into the heart, mind, and soul...."

"Rabi's is a voice that sings of life."

"And of a longing to know God... He wrote, 'God's words are forever ringing in the world and only those who choose to be deaf will not hear them.'"

"He also wrote --'The traveler must knock at every foreign door to find his own, and must wander through outer worlds in order to reach the innermost shrine at the end.'"

"That's beautiful," I said about Mr. Chatterjee's quote. "And it seems especially suited to me."

"You see, my dear," Kumala said. "The voice of Tagore is the voice of us all."

Without warning, Mr. Chatterjee again leaned back and recited more passionate Bengali verses. Soon, he launched into English. "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge is free and the world has not been fragmented by narrow domestic walls; where words flow out from the depth of truth and tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection; where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; where the mind is led forward by Thee -- Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

"The words are beautiful," I said. "Even in English... That is, the meaning is beautiful..."

Kumala wiped her tears with the edge of her sari. "Words are beautiful when they come from the depths of truth -- even in English."

"This is the most famous verse by Rabi Tagore," Mr. Mukerjee paused to sip his tea. "It is also found in the Gitanjali. If Rabi's life had not been so tragic, he never would have produced such vitality in his poetry and prose."

"What happened?" I asked.

"His wife, to whom he was very much devoted, and his daughter died within the same year."

"And his sister-in-law, whom he relied on for counsel, committed suicide shortly after his wife died."

"But Rabi was quiet about his grief..."

"Accha, grief disguised is more overwhelming than grief expressed." Everyone agreed.

When the conversation died down, Kumala asked me to sing an American song for the benefit of Mr. Chatterjee. This took me by surprise and I told Kumala that I really couldn't sing. "Nonsense," she said. "You can at least try."

To avoid the ordeal of singing acappella, it occurred to me to play a recording I had of me singing French Christmas carols. When I told Kumala I would fetch my portable tape recorder she asked, "Why do you want to do that? We need only listen once. No need to record your songs at this time."

"But I have a tape of me singing."

Kumala laughed. "Don't be so silly, child. We want to hear you personally sing. A simple American song will do. Nothing elaborate."

"If she really doesn't want to sing..." Mr. Mukerjee intervened, but I interrupted and said it would be all right. I enjoyed amusing my Asian friends, and often this involved doing things I would never do among a group of Americans.

"Do you know of any song you'd like me to sing?" I asked.

They discussed this among themselves until Kumala said, "You are welcome to sing anything you like."

After a moment's thought, the only American song that came to mind was *Home on the Range* so I sang a verse and Mr. Chatterjee asked who wrote it. "Probably some cowboy," I suggested, satisfying everyone with my answer.

"By the way," Kumala said specifically to Mr. Chatterjee, "did you know our Teresa here is a poetess in her own right? She is writing many poems about her impressions of India."

Kumala's remark stemmed from my having shared some of my simple poems with her, after she showed much interest in seeing them. I believe she was more impressed by the fact that I wrote poetry than by the poems themselves. It probably meant to her that I had a spiritual, or philosophical nature, a highly esteemed quality among the people of India.

When Kumala asked me to read one of my poems to Mr. Chatterjee, I felt embarrassed once again. Nothing I had written or could recite would come anywhere near the passion expressed by Tagore or Mr. Chatterjee. Only after she practically insisted I read at least one poem, did I fetch my journal. I selected a poem written along the beach near Mahabalipuram.

"Silent footprints in the sand..." I hesitated, feeling my face blush. But everyone looked at me with much anticipation. So I continued, "A sea of resonance to the land..." I looked around. Everybody appeared enthralled, especially Mr. Chatterjee. This encouraged me.

"Water slipping through my toes...."

Suddenly, as if I had just reached the punch line of a well told joke, Kumala burst into laughter. I could hardly continue now. I even started to laugh finding the image of water slipping through my toes hilarious.

"Now, now," Mr. Mukerjee said. "You must not make Teresa feel you don't appreciate her poetry. Please, child, continue."

I may have continued reading, but my stomach suddenly erupted in a spasm from the hot spicy dinner and I had to rush to the toilet. Kumala, perplexed by my erratic behavior, hastily jumped up and ran after me yelling apologies for having upset me. Despite my condition, the misinterpretation amused me. At the same time, I admired Kumala for laughing at the silly line of my poem. It was another example of her endearing open and honest reactions.

I loved being in India. No other nation in the world could be more stimulating. And I loved staying with Kumala. She was a mentor, teacher, and a good friend. In addition to teaching me about Indian music and the poetry of Tagore, she pampered me like a mother during my sickness from the chillies by hand feeding me natural remedies of green bananas, rice, and yogurt.

Kumala enjoyed discussing the many plans she and I could pursue together -- the nursery, cooking lessons, English classes, while I attended the university. I hadn't decided whether or not to actually enroll, but as the days passed, I increasingly felt like staying in Calcutta -- or in Nepal with Shekhar Shamar.

Often, Kumala and I discussed Ramakrishna and the goddess Kali. I wanted to better understanding feminine spirituality, through Kumala's point of view, but admittedly, I had difficulty feeling spiritual in any sense, no matter how hard I tried. I even prayed to an abstract Divine Mother of the Universe, hoping this would steer my mind away from the programmed notion that God is entirely male, and make me feel more receptive to religion. For the most part, my efforts seemed contrived and unfulfilling. I knew it would take a lot of inward soul searching before I became spiritual.

During our many discussions concerning Hinduism, I asked Kumala the difference between *maya* and *moksa*, and she said, "Maya is where we are and moksa is where we aim to be."

"Isn't maya illusion and moksa the same as nirvana, the end of illusion?"

"Translations can be misleading. Maya is like your poetry which uses words to describe the world as *you* see it..."

"Through layers of my American upbringing?"

"Yes. And beyond this. Maya enshrouds us with prejudice and one-sided attitudes that create the world you see. If you are an angry fellow you will see the world through your anger. If you are foolish, the world will also be this way. People only see what they think they see, or, what is worse, what they desire to see. This is how we misguide ourselves and fumble. Do you follow?"

"I think so. In other words, maya is like believing shooting stars are stars falling from the sky, as I believed during childhood."

"And when you found out that stars were not thrown out of heaven, what new information did you believe?"

"Well, I studied astronomy in college."

"But whose astronomy? And when you return to your country, how will you understand the world? I very much doubt you will see it in the same light as you did before you came to India. This is because you will shed some of the notions you developed during childhood and previous lives."

With the curious topic of reincarnation reintroduced, I asked Kumala exactly how soon a person is reincarnated after death. "According to the Upanishads a man goes straight to the moon after he dies. If he is not pure enough to enter heaven, he returns to earth. But this is only mythological. Philosophically, what a man does during one lifetime creates the conditions of his next existence. This is his karma. If he is lazy and stupid he will be reborn a lowly animal. If he is good and pure he has a noble birth. If he is a saint, as Sri Ramakrishna, he no longer suffers rebirths. A man can live many lives before he reaches no more struggle or conflict. This is spiritual freedom and what we Hindus call moksa."

"The people living in the slum must have created some pretty bad karma in their previous lives."

She gave me a look of concern and said, "You see Teresa, the people of India accept their condition because they know it is of their own doing. Such an outlook gives the needy hope for a better life in their next birth."

"I guess hope is a motivation for living," I said, while thinking that reincarnation was more likely a justification by the privileged for the conditions of the poor, and that the laws of karma were really the laws of good or bad luck. I doubted some woman begging in order to feed her dying child had thought up such a concept. No, reincarnation seemed like another pointless frivolity of religion, like the notion of nirvana, heaven, and hell.

"We all hope for a better life and sooner or later everyone is destined to attain perfection."

"Sounds like the Christian ideal of perfectibility," I suggested. "Except instead of rebirths, the goal is to become perfect, or Christlike, in this life."

"Christians want to be as Jesus. But this is seldom possible in one lifetime."

"True, everyone dies before reaching perfection, which is probably why Christ offered forgiveness."

"We Hindus do not see salvation as so immediate, not while the laws of karma are forever at play."

The notion of divine salvation was another religious area, like heaven, hell, and nirvana, that held little value to me. What did it mean to be "saved" from this life? Saved from sin? From the horrors of the world, like the existing slums created by human endeavor? Maybe my privileged background, in comparison with the people of the slums, made me feel no need for

supernatural salvation. The harsh and cruel as well as intriguing and beautiful world was my reality, my heaven and hell, and needing to be saved from it, or from my own fear of death, did not concern me in the least. It seemed more reasonable to place human thought and effort on "saving" the slum people from their life of misery. But, evidently, hope for salvation or divine intervention is a much easier task.

I asked Kumala what the concept of "Brahman" meant, and she said, "*Sat Chit Ananda* -- Truth Consciousness Bliss. This is Brahman. When we believe ourselves to be separated from God we are enshrouded by the veils of maya. Only after we shed these veils can we discover our true identity and that we are one with Brahman. *Tat Tvam Asi* -- Thou Art That!" Kumala laughed. "Don't search for tranquility outside your heart. This is ignorance."

"But you said ignorance was bliss," I mischievously recalled her comment about Parool.

Kumala thought a moment and said, "'Ignorance is bliss' is but an expression amounting to nothing at all. You must recognize, my dear, there are many misconceptions about ignorance and wisdom. Innocence can be mistaken for ignorance and innocence in itself can be a form of wisdom. At the same time, knowledge -- which is often mistaken for wisdom -- can really be ignorance in disguise -- when it is mere conventionality. Because people cling to their possessions, environment, and finite time, they forget the wisdom of who they really are. *Sat Chit Ananda,* this can never be destroyed. Fully believe in yourself. This is true freedom... Which is very much different from the excessive freedom overwhelming you. No, Teresa, self-realization is the only path to God. This is your dharma and to follow it you must follow your intuition. Listen to the voice of God, to your own voice. Watch the dance of God, your own dance. This is what is natural and what is reality."

***

At last Shekhar arrived in Calcutta. I was sitting in the drawing room reading when Parool ran to the front door and shouted in excitement. My heart pounded and my face heated when Shekhar entered the room, as handsome as ever in his tailored tan shirt and pants. "Well," he said. "So you're back from your travels. Good to see you again."

I greeted him as Kumala ran into the room to offer her welcome and to explain that he was to take me to the Dakshineswar temple compound as soon as he could. He offered to take me there the following morning, seemingly postponing his business plans for the day. I was elated, although somewhat embarrassed by Kumala's brashness in asking him. But he was probably like a son to Kumala and couldn't refuse her requests.

Early the next day, in the warm winter sunshine of Calcutta, Shekhar and I took a taxi across town to the large temple compound beside the Hoogly River, a tributary of the Ganges. In front of the main entrance, vendors spread their wares on mats and tables. They sold religious statues and pictures, along with temple offerings of leaves, marigolds, roses, incense, and piles of vermilion powder. Shekhar and I stopped at a vendor's table to look over the many religious pictures. Among the Hindu gods I spotted Buddha in nirvana and Jesus on the cross.

The Hindu gods and goddesses appeared as unlimited as the beggars on the streets of Calcutta and I felt lost among them. "OK, Shekhar," I said, "you've got to help me tell these gods apart."

Shekhar, who stood beside me dressed in neatly tailored clothes, smiled at my question and picked up a picture of three gods standing on a pink lotus flower. "This is Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva -- the Hindu Trinity. Brahma is this one," he pointed to the flesh colored god with five heads. "Vishnu stands in the center and this is Shiva, with his trident."

"Isn't Brahma the head of the Hindu gods?"

"Brahma is the creator...."

"And Vishnu is preserver and Shiva destroyer." This much I knew, although it meant little more to me than "Krigmuffin is klagger and Hornigath is rumpper."

"Actually," Shekhar said, "all Hindu gods represent the one Supreme Being -- the Brahman. The unmanifested God."

While gazing over the pictures, it occurred to me how everything about India's culture and religion outwardly displayed symbols and emotions. No wonder India appeared to be inside out. "Hinduism isn't easy to understand," I said to Shekhar. "Why are there so many Hindu gods? And so many symbols?

"I think it's as difficult to understand Hinduism as it is to explain it. But I will try. Hindus attempt to describe the nature of the universe, which is why you see so many different faces and symbols. Through pictures and symbols, Brahman is made more concrete. Words fall short of describing Brahman. Pictures come a little closer, but even pictures are merely representations. Think of Brahman as having many overlapping qualities, as people do. Nobody is just good or bad, happy or sad. This holds true for the nature of the universe, of Brahman, and of the many gods that represent the universe."

Still feeling perplexed, I asked Shekhar to point out symbols distinguishing each god. He began with a picture of Vishnu riding an eagle, then pointed out pictures of Vishnu in his ten earthly avatars. These avatars included a fish, turtle, dwarf, Rama of the Ramayana epic, Krishna of the Mahabharata epic, and Kalki, the horse headed avatar who supposedly will appear on earth at the end of the present age. Vishnu's avatar Krishna had three aspects of his own -- the baby, the shepherd boy who danced Ras Lila with the gopi maidens, and the mature Krishna, teacher of

Arjuna. "You can always tell Krishna," Shekhar explained, "by his flute and the peacock feather in his hair."

"Shiva must have several aspects, too," I said. "Like the Nataraja I saw in Mahabalipuram. And the half Shiva half goddess...."

"Right. Ardhanarishvara. And this Shiva," he picked up a picture of a blue colored god sitting crosslegged on a tiger skin, "is his ascetic aspect. From the knot gathered at the top of his hair, the Ganges flows to earth. Also on this knot, rests a crescent moon symbolizing the phases of life -- birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth."

"Which gods are worshiped the most? Or are they all worshiped equally?"

"No, not at all. In fact, Brahma has only one or two temples in all of India. Shiva and Vishnu have the most popular followings. You can tell by the mark on a man's forehead whether he worships Vishnu or Shiva. Worshipers of Vishnu, or his ten avatars, wear three vertical lines down their foreheads, like a three pronged fork, and Shiva devotees wear horizontal lines, as in the picture. But some worshipers of Shiva wear a single dot here." He placed his finger between his eyes. "This is the third eye of Shiva, his inward vision -- a reminder that life cannot be lived by external vision alone."

To locate some of the distinguishing marks, I looked around at the people wandering in and out of the compound. "So most of these pilgrims worship either Vishnu or Shiva. What about Kali? Ramakrishna's goddess?"

"Accha. Kali is one aspect of Mother Nature or *Shakti*, the feminine energy of Brahman. Shakti is the third major following in Hinduism. Come, let's go and see the temples."

Inside the Dakshineswar, the courtyard bustled with thousands of devotees. Pigeons and sparrows flew overhead and roamed, along with skeletal brown cows, among the people and

temples, as if the animals were also pilgrims at the Dakshineswar. Near the courtyard entrance stood the Radhakanta temple, dedicated to Vishnu's avatar Krishna and his goddess consort Radha. The Kali temple stood at the heart of the courtyard and had eight domed roofs and a veranda overflowing with people. Along the banks of the Hoogly River sat Shiva's twelve identical hut-like white temples with two sectioned red domed roofs.

After visiting the room where Ramakrishna lived as a temple priest one hundred years earlier, Shekhar and I went to the Shiva temples and, according to custom, left our shoes at the bottom of the temple steps. Standing in the center of each temple was a foot high black stone on top of a black stone dish, about three feet in diameter. Devotees in one of the Shiva temples drop flowers and pour holy water over the center stone.

Outside the temple, while we slipped on our shoes, Shekhar told me that the black stone was called a lingam -- the phallic aspect of Shiva. This surprised me, having never heard of a lingam before. As it turned out, the lingam was the most widely worshiped aspect of Shiva, as Krishna is Vishnu's. And the round dish at the base of the lingam was the female counterpart, the yoni. "The lingam and yoni symbolize the male and female creative energy of the universe. But often the lingam is worshiped by itself."

"Really?" The idea struck me as no different from the Christian ideal of an entirely male God. As if men alone procreate life. "How silly," I said to Shekhar. "If the lingam and yoni symbolize procreation, then one is powerless without the other." Shekhar laughed and we headed for the temple dedicated to Kali.

Burning incense filled the inner sanctum of the Kali temple with the aroma of jasmine and camphor. Around the large room people chanted, marked the many statues with sandalwood paste, and placed rice, red powder, and flowers at the base of shrines. The main altar housed a

three foot black basalt statue of Kali. Beneath her feet lay a white marble statue of Shiva on top of a silver lotus. Kali had four arms bedecked with bangles and her tongue fell from her mouth like a piece of bloody flesh. She wore a garland of human heads and a belt of human arms. "You say she's an aspect of Mother Nature?" I asked, wondering what she could possibly represent. "But why is she so hideous?"

"In one way Kali is terrible, in another she is the Holy Mother, known as *Bhavatarini*, the goddess who leads her children across the ocean of life."

"All that in a name?" I asked.

"All that in an idea. The meaning of Kali is not to frighten her children but to force them to see beyond what is beautiful, pleasant, and orderly. This allows for a clearer perception of the world."

"What does the Shiva under Kali's feet represent? I assume it's yet another aspect of Shiva."

"Indeed. Together Shiva and Kali are the soul and driving force of the universe...."

"You mean the lingam and yoni?"

"No, the yoni is another goddess, another aspect of the Brahman. In this aspect of the Divine Mother Shakti, Kali dances so passionately that she loses control and Shiva throws himself at her feet to prevent her from destroying the world. Shiva is at rest, Kali is at play. Without her energy Shiva is but a corpse, and without rest Kali will destroy the world."

Momentarily, while I stood gazing with fascination at the altar, Shekhar asked, "Have you heard about the thugees of Kali?"

"You mean thugs?"

"Exactly. Thugs were men devoted to Kali. They sacrificed people to appease her thirst for blood."

"This makes Kali seem terribly evil!"

"Ah, but you cannot prevent evil men from using the name of God for their own self interest. In the case of thugees, they murdered in the name of Kali, but in name only."

I smiled at Shekhar, wondering if he was trying to astonish me. What did he really think about me and my curious questions? Perhaps I fascinated him, or, he really liked me. But how could I relate to him beyond our formal association? I wished we could go out to a night club or dinner, but this seemed impossible, unless of course, he asked me out. I doubted he ever would though, even if he wanted to. Kumala had entrusted me to Shekhar, and he seemed too polite and polished to step beyond the manners of his culture. Maybe things would be different in Nepal.

Shekhar interrupted my musings by asking if I wanted to go to the river and hire a boat. I agreed, then explained I wanted to explore the temple a while longer. He suggested we meet later outside the courtyard at the Bakultala ghat, the stone stairwell leading into the river.

When Shekhar left, I walked around the crowded inner sanctum and returned to the main altar to gaze at Kali. In a sense, I was glad Shekhar left because I wanted to be alone at the altar so he wouldn't view me as silly when I prayed to her. I wanted to feel the spirit of this Divine Mother and perhaps discover the feminine spirit of God within myself. Feeling drawn to the goddess, I closed my eyes to imagine Kali in her wild and passionate dance...

I hear people chanting and bangles clanging to the beat of Indian drums. Sandalwood and a strong odor of butter, sweat, and blood mingle in the air. Kali steps down from her silver lotus. She begins to dance like a wild African beauty with skin of midnight darkness made lustrous by the glow of temple candles. Suddenly, the beautiful woman becomes an old and

withered hag flashing her head at me. Fangs dripping blood protrude from her mouth. Her hair is green vipers; her breasts are shrivelled; her dance is on fire....

"Divine Mother," I say, "why do you sever the heads of your children? Is there meaning to this act of violence?"

"Child," she hisses, "see you not death and destruction? Where come you from otherwise? Be one with reality! Without death there is no birth. Without darkness can you know the light? I have come to shatter the walls of your soul. Hisss Hisss....."

"Mother of Death," I say, "if I follow, will you lead me to where I can find true freedom?"

Laughter booms and echoes through the temple. "Lead you! Lead you! How can you be so frail? You, who seeks the mother. Would you be pampered so? If so, where will you go? NOWHERE!!! Foolish child of milk and honey. I have not come to gently lead you to a cradle of bliss." In her dance, she holds up a severed head and swishes her bloody sickle through the air while wailing, "I have come to destroy you."

"But Mother. Show me the way. Lead me to my spirit. I want to touch my soul!" Sweat drips from my forehead as I look from side to side. Faces appear, one by one. A thousand Demigods. Animals. Worshipers. Faces -- hideous, beautiful, laughing faces. I become lost in faces and the roar of Kali's laughter.

I opened my eyes and looked at the altar. "Fear not," gestured her upper right hand, "I offer you unparalleled boons," signed her lower right.

The dark goddess transfixed my thoughts. Had I embarked on an inward journey toward the center of my soul? Would I ever come close to what Ramakrishna felt, or what Bimala and Kumala feel in their spiritual devotions? Was it Kali or Krishna or nothing but my imagination that lived at the depths of my existence?

A small woman suddenly appeared before me and touched my forehead with sandalwood paste. I handed her a few coins and left the temple for the Bakultala ghat.

Shekhar was not at the ghat so I sat on the top step to wait for him. At the bottom of the stone steps, men, women, and children of all ages chanted, prayed, bathed, and filled brass cups with the murky river water. Some even scooped up the water to drink. How they could do this without becoming sick? The Ganges may have been pure millenniums ago, but now I had never seen such polluted "purity."

I stood up to take a picture but a man standing nearby said, "Excuse me Madame, you cannot take pictures here. I'm afraid it's terribly disrespectful to the people at the ghat. This is a holy place."

Embarrassed, I sat back down to watch the river slowly flow by, caressing the people in their devotion. I remembered Kumala telling me, *"to a Hindu, life flows like the river, from past to future just as the Ganges springs from the Himalayas and ends its journey at the sea where all life merges into one reality... And where forms and names no longer exist..."* Am I really looking for God? The feminine Divine Mother? Or my soul? I had never before felt such a need to be spiritual. Perhaps the spirit and emotions of this nation and its people have affected me, and changed my attitudes and goals. And if I stay in India, or Nepal, how high will my spirit soar?

"Are you having a good time?" Startled, I turned and saw Shekhar standing behind me, like a dashing nobleman from a Kipling novel. "Ah, I see you have got the eye of Shiva." I had forgotten about the woman marking my forehead with the sandalwood paste. "Come," he said, "we are going out on the river."

We walked upstream to a series of long narrow boats pulled ashore. Shekhar and I climbed aboard the one he had hired and a man pushed us off. I sat on the flat open deck and

Shekhar stood at the stern to steer with a long bamboo paddle, like a gondola boatman. In the dazzling sunshine of late morning, we ventured toward the center of the river. City noise and pollution dwindled and a refreshing breeze blew off the water and through my hair. I stretched out my legs, leaned back on my elbows, and closed my eyes, wondering how such tranquility could exist in Calcutta.

"Do you know cremations take place at the ghat every sunset?" Shekhar asked. I told him no and he described how the eldest son of the deceased ignites the funeral pyre. "At a precise moment he splits the skull of his parent to release the soul onto its next life. The following morning, the son will return to immerse the ashes into the river so they can flow to the sea."

"The voyage to where all life mingles," I lazily remarked.

"Arya and Bela came here after the wedding, while you were away." I looked over at Shekhar. He seemed to be enjoying the boat ride as much as I. "They walked into the water with dhoti and sari tied in a knot and asked the river to bless their marriage."

Silence reigned over our boat as I mused about the river. Into these flowing waters come the poor, the diseased, the dying, the dead, as well as the young, healthy, and rich. The river doesn't discriminate. No wonder she's worshiped as divine. And to the river I come to discover what I'm really after. I turned on my side, supported my head with my hand, and looked at Shekhar. He appeared magnificent as he navigated the boat.

Yes, I'll skip my job in China and tomorrow I'll buy a ticket to Nepal. I closed my eyes and saw the mountains of Nepal. I would stay in Kathmandu with Shekhar and his parents. He would show me the snow capped mountains near his father's elephant farm. We would ride elephants to monasteries and far pavilions embedded in isolated cliffs. He and I would have a

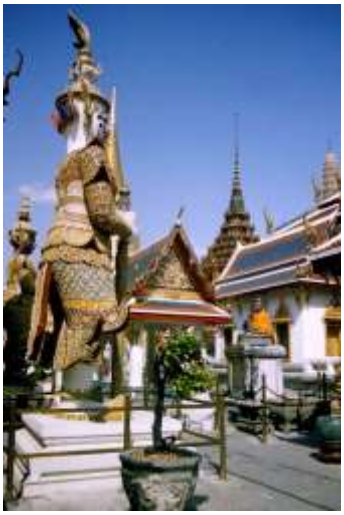
grand wedding... The cooling breeze against my skin was how luscious my wedding sari would feel....

"Will you marry soon?" I asked. He wouldn't suspect I had been daydreaming about our wedding.

"Probably." He yawned, setting aside his pole to sit and rest while the boat slowly drift downstream. "My mother has been hinting that I am becoming an old bachelor."

A cool breeze blew off the river, touching me on the open deck. My gaze was heavenward to where a large eagle spiraled around and around the river. I imagined Vishnu himself seated upon the bird, while the strings of the Sarasvati veena echoed through my mind. Jasmine and rosewood drifted through the air, and in the midst of temple chants, Kali burst forth in dance as Krishna appeared beside the river playing his melodic flute. "Come sweet maiden," he called. "Come join me at the riverside. Let us dance together, let us dance."

Chapter Five: Bangkok



I left India and headed for China, feeling sorry to have disappointed Kumala. She had pegged such high hopes on me and our endeavors together. But at the travel agency, I learned my air fare to Nepal would cost four times that of a Nepalese or Indian. This left me disenchanted because I expected to pay the modest fare Kumala had quoted. And if I wasn't going to have a job for a while, I had to conserve my money. I left the travel agency without a ticket but later returned, at Kumala's urging, to buy a ticket for Dacca, Bangladesh, to get my visa. Back at the agency, in a moment's time, I set aside all the promise of India and bought a one-way ticket to China. I guess I just couldn't see myself lingering around Calcutta trying to be spiritual, or flying off to Nepal in pursuit of idealistic romance. I needed a job and I wanted to see what China was like.

On my way to Hong Kong I stopped in the hot, humid, tropical city of Bangkok. My intent was to apply for work at Thai universities and in refugee camps along the Cambodian border, in case I didn't find a job in the Middle East after I finished teaching in China. For two weeks I stayed at the YWCA on Sathon Tai Road and spent every day on a bus meandering through the smoggy city's noisy and monumental traffic while looking for the refugee organizations, language schools, and colleges listed in the telephone directory. The American Embassy gave me the address of the Ministry of University Affairs where an undersecretary's secretary promised to circulate my résumé and cover letter to the universities in Thailand and to the refugee camps.

With this accomplished, I booked my flight to Hong Kong, leaving myself with a few days to see the wonders of Bangkok. I walked around the area near the YWCA and ended up in Lumbini Park, namesake of Buddha's birthplace. The park's greenery and ponds offered a refreshing haven from the chaotic city, although the afternoon heat forced me to rest in the shade

of a tree edging a pond. I soaked my feet in the cool water, leaned back on my elbows, and gazed at the fountain towering in its center.

In a while, I noticed on the bank about twenty feet away, a short Thai man who was smoking and occasionally looking my way. He had neatly trimmed black hair, was in his mid-twenties, and wore the typical clothes of Bangkok men -- polyester slacks, a short sleeved white shirt, and plastic sandals. Soon, he got up and sat near me, as I anticipated he would. This was hardly the first time a man in Bangkok had approached me with the excuse to "practice English," or to show me his city. As with Aftab in New Delhi, I never doubted these men sought anything less than a physical relationship with an "exotic and promiscuous" American woman.

The man flicked his cigarette into the pond and asked, "Where are you from?" A typical first question.

"America."

"Welcome to the Land of Smiles," he cheerfully replied.

Land of smiles... I had read this phrase before. It was a name Thai people call their country as affectionately as they call their capital city, *Krungthep Phra Maha Nakorn Amon Ratanakosindra,* the Royal City of Angels.

Deciding to leave the intruder at the pond, I stood up. In a final effort to capture my company, the man exclaimed, "Have you been to the Grand Palace? I can take you there if you like."

I hesitated. Since I hadn't seen this major Bangkok attraction, I considered letting the stranger escort me there. He might make a useful guide and I was tired of facing the congested city on my own. Often, it had taken me hours to travel from place to place and more than once I

ended up on a wrong bus or I got off at the wrong stop. To avoid more of this sort of hassle, I accepted man's offer.

Soon the stranger and I were on a bus traveling across town. The young man, whose name was Suwat, sat by the window and every time we passed a Buddhist temple or roadside shrine, he made a *namaste* gesture, or, as the Thai call it, a *wai*.

"Are you a Buddhist?" I asked, knowing he must be since Thailand was a Buddhist state.

"I have been ten years a monk."

"You're a monk?" This surprised me and quickly changed my attitude toward him. If the stranger was a holy man, he might be trustworthy. If not, he would at least make an excellent guide to the religious aspects of his country.

"No, I am not now a monk," Suwat replied. "In former time I am a monk. Two years ago I left the order to study in the university."

This surprised me because I compared leaving the Buddhist monkhood with quitting the priesthood. But in Thailand, Suwat explained, all Buddhist males become monks, or novices, for at least three months during their lives. Some remain in the monkhood for much longer, but anyone can leave the order at any time.

The Grand Palace was actually a large temple compound spread over several blocks along the east bank of Bangkok's river. The main part of the compound had plazas with heavily ornamented multi-tiered temples and statues of birds and giants covered with glass mosaic that glistened beneath the afternoon sun and resembled the legendary golden streets of heaven.

Near one of the temples people were freeing birds from small bamboo cages. The birds soared high, like ashes whirling above a golden bonfire. "You see," Suwat pointed to these people. "They make merit by letting free."

"How so?" I asked. "Didn't they capture the birds in the first place?"

Suwat laughed and said, "You are a funny lady."

As we continued through the compound I asked Suwat the age of the palace and he replied, "Since Rama I of Chakri dynasty."

"Chakri dynasty?"

"King Bumipol is Rama IX of Chakri Dynasty," he said about the reigning king of Thailand.

"Why is he called Rama?"

"From Rama of the national epic of Thailand, the Ramakian... It comes from the Ramayana epic of India," Suwat said, referring to an epic as treasured in Asia as the Mahabharata.

To show me murals depicting the epic, Suwat led me to a covered passageway, around a nearby temple where wall murals showed fantastic mythical giants, monkey warriors in jungle scenes, and palaces surrounded by heavenly gardens. In the epic, prince Rama and his wife Sita are exiled into a forest where a demon, Ravana, steals away Sita to his kingdom on Sri Lanka. Rama raises an army with the monkey general Hanuman, a major player in the epic. (One of the murals portrayed Hanuman as a giant lying across the sea between India and Lanka, forming a causeway for Rama and his army to cross.) Rama and Hanuman rescue Sita, but Rama decides his wife is corrupted from having lived in the demon's house. He renounces her and Sita builds a funeral pyre to demonstrate her purity. The flames change to flowers and prove Sita's innocence. However, after hearing scandalous rumors about his wife, Rama renounces Sita once again only to later beg she return to him. At this point the Thai version differs from the original Indian Ramayana epic. At the end of the Indian Ramayana, Sita decides she has had enough and asks

Mother Earth to swallow her whole. In the Thai version, Sita and Rama reunite and live happily ever after. Because I view fairy tale endings as having little to do with reality, I greatly prefer the ending to the original Ramayana epic.

From the wall murals, Suwat led me across a plaza to the Royal Temple, home of the most treasured relic in Thailand -- the Emerald Buddha. This Buddha is actually a thirty inch jade statue seated inside a glass box at the main altar in the back of the large sanctuary. Above it towers a nine tiered golden umbrella, and on each of its sides stand tall golden Buddhas beneath their own tiered umbrellas.

Before Suwat and I sat on the floor at the back of the crowded room, he carefully explained that I must sit on my knees to keep my feet from pointing at the Emerald Buddha -- an egregious affront in Thailand. While I sat quietly trying to see the Buddha through the swirling incense smoke, Suwat chanted. Soon he placed his folded hands to his forehead, in the Thai *wai,* and kowtowed to the floor. I was awed by the extravagant altar and the manner of worship surrounding me. The hypnotic chanting in the room echoed from wall to wall. It was nothing like the church services of my childhood where God always seemed boring and light years away. Now, it were as though God, in his physical form, sat less than ten yards in front of me.

Once back outside the temple, Suwat pointed across the plaza at two women with shaved heads, dressed in white robes. They were sitting on a bench under a broad leaf tree. When Suwat explained they were Buddhist nuns, I eagerly suggested we meet them.

After we greeted the nuns, one sister invited me to sit on the bench to her side. Suwat remained standing while speaking with them. In a moment he said to me, “They live in another temple and come here to see the Emerald Buddha and to hear a famous monk speak.” The nuns said something and grinned at me. “They want to know are you married,” Suwat said.

“No,” I said, smiling at the women and thinking about what questions to ask. I wondered about their lives, why they chose to be nuns, how they lived, and what scriptures they read. I began by asking the name of their most holy book.

Suwat translated my question and after a brief discussion with the nuns he replied, “Of course our most holy book is the Pali Canon. But we have many. How about you?”

“What about me? I’m not religious, if that’s what you mean.” Suwat translated this and the nuns giggled. “Bali Canon?” I asked once the giggling subsided. “Like the island?”

“What?” Suwat looked puzzled so I repeated the name. “No -- Pali,” he said, “Pali is the oldest writing in Buddhism. In former time, monks on Sri Lanka island write the Pali Canon. We call this holy book *Tripitaka,* or you can say the Three Baskets of Self-Help.”

“What do these three baskets teach?”

He thought a moment about my question, spoke with the nuns, and replied, “Do you know about the Three Gems of Buddhism?” I told him I didn’t and he said, “OK, the Three Gems are Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.”

“Buddha is God, and Dharma is his teachings, right?”

“No, Buddha is not God. He is a great enlightened teacher. Dharma is his wisdom and teachings.”

“And what was the third gem?”

“Sangha, order of monks who preserve the Dharma.”

“Like you?”

“Now I am not a monk! But in former time, when I am monk I was in the Sangha.”

“And the sisters... They’re in the Sangha?”

He laughed at my question. “Sangha is not for women.” He translated this to the nuns and they giggled. “Women cannot become monks. Maybe when she is born as a man she can become a monk.”

The idea annoyed me. Such discrimination so deeply ingrained in religious belief made religion itself seem unholy. “Your religion sounds pretty unfair,” I said.

“Why? It is written in the Tripitaka.”

Before I could respond, the nuns stood up to leave. They wished me well, *namasted,* and laughed like children as they walked away. Suwat looked at his watch and said, “OK. Now we can go see Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, across the river. We can talk about Buddhism another time.” Intrigued by the temple’s name and by a chance to cross the river, I agreed to go.

When we were seated in a taxi sampan crossing the river, the Temple of Dawn rose off the west bank in intricate tiers, like Arya’s wedding cap, except for its rounded top and weather vane. I asked Suwat how far the taxi boats traveled up the river, wondering if I could squeeze in such a trip before my flight left Bangkok. I asked if Suwat would take me upstream the next day and he eagerly accepted.

“What’s the name of this river?” I asked.

“We call this river Chao Phya, the Mother of Noble Waters.”

Mother of Noble Waters. I liked the name. It certainly carried more meaning for me than the Columbia or Mississippi.

For the next hour Suwat and I explored the narrow lanes surrounding the Temple of Dawn and then he invited me to dine at the Songtep, the best restaurant on the west bank of the river. Although hungry, I was worried about getting back to the YWCA, since it was dark by this

time. I expressed concern but Suwat assured me that the boats ran all night so we headed for the restaurant.

Over Kloster beers and a meal of rice, hot limey beef salad, and spicy chicken curry in sweet coconut milk, I continued asking Suwat about Buddhism. “Tell me, how could I become a Buddhist... If I wanted to?”

Suwat looked at me, as if deciding whether or not I was serious. He sipped his beer and said, “Give up evil and good...”

“Give up good? What about making merit? Isn’t that good?”

“No. You must have the right attitude when you make merit. Don’t do it to be good. Do it because it is right.”

“And follow the Middle Way?”

“That’s right. Follow Buddha’s Dharma. If you become a Buddhist you must not be angry or sad because this makes problem for other people. You must always keep a calm, happy face and you must follow the precepts.”

“What precepts?” I asked, thinking I had hit upon the ten commandments of Buddhism.

“What to do and what not to do. In former time, when I am monk, I have many, many precepts. Now I have only five, like every Buddhist.”

“Well, what are they?”

“To tell the truth, don’t kill, steal, drink, or go together with a woman.”

“Then why are you drinking beer together with me?” I teased. “I thought you were a religious man.”

“Sure. But sometimes, it’s OK to have a good time. I can make merit in temple tomorrow. And remember, I am monk for ten years. That’s plenty merit, believe me.”

After we finished eating, I suggested to Suwat that we head back across the river so I could catch the bus to the YWCA. “Now?” he asked. “It’s too late to go. No more boats. But don’t worry.” He looked at me reassuringly. “We can stay here tonight.”

“No more boats!” I shriek as my placid mood slipped into anger. “You said the boats ran all night. You lied to me,” I said as I continued to feel angry, especially at myself for believing this former monk. “Well never mind.” I got up from the table. “I’m going back to the Y by myself, one way or another.”

“No,” Suwat protested. “Please don’t go. I didn’t lie. I just forgot. Please, I know where we can stay. A good hotel.”

“How can you say that? I thought you were a holy man! You planned this all along, didn’t you?”

Suwat grabbed my arm, and said, “No. Don’t be angry.” He hesitated, “I love you.”

“Oh, give me a break!” I jerked my arm from his grasp. “Look, if you aren’t going to help me across the river then don’t even speak to me.”

“Please don’t be angry. I am afraid when you are angry and I don’t know what to do.” He got up and followed me out the restaurant door. “I can help you go to the YWCA by bus across the bridge, and tomorrow, remember, I can take you up the river. Come on. I can also show you *Jataka* Paintings at many Buddhist temples. Really. I know you like. Please don’t be angry.”

I stormed out the restaurant and stopped on the narrow and dimly lighted street. Where would I find a bus across the river? What a hassle! I was leaving Bangkok in two days and might never return. And my view of the city held little more than the inside of buses and language schools. I turned to Suwat, who had followed me out the restaurant. “What kind of paintings did you say?”

“Jataka paintings,” he said, enthusiastically. “From Tripitaka holy books. Famous stories about past lives of Buddha. Sure, I take you to see plenty Jataka paintings tomorrow. No fooling.”

I decided to give Suwat another chance. It was a compromise between the convenience of having an informative guide and the inconvenience of being with a man after a good time. This would not be the first time I’d make such a decision, nor would it be the last.

Suwat dutifully helped me find the right bus back to the Y that night, and the following morning we met at the YWCA cafeteria. I was eating breakfast when he sat across the table, grinned, and handed me a key chain with a Buddha inside a plastic bubble. “Your protective Buddha for your birth day.”

“My birthday? I’m afraid you’re months off.”

“Yes. But yesterday when I asked you what day you are born, you said Wednesday. This is your birth day Buddha for good luck and protection. Last night I think you are very afraid when you get angry.” I thanked him, and put the key chain in my pocket.

After breakfast, we traveled across the river to visit the temples with Jataka paintings. A white stucco wall surrounded each temple complex with its monastery, stupas, and rectangular main temple. The Jataka murals, on the walls of the main temple, depicted religious scenes as familiar to Buddhists as Noah and the Ark, Jesus and the fishermen, or Jonah in the whale, are to Christians and Jews. Jataka stories concern animal and human incarnations of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, ending with ten tales about men possessing one of ten cardinal virtues -- worldly renunciation, bravery, kindness, resolution, wisdom, perseverance, tolerance, a balanced attitude, honesty, and generosity. These ten virtues developed into the enlightenment of Siddhartha in Bodh Gaya, near Patna, India.

The most famous Jataka is the incarnation of Vessantara prior to the life of Siddhartha. Vessantara was a prince born with an obsession to give. His first utterance outside his mother's womb was, "Mother, what can I give away?" Prince Vessantara marries, has two children and is eventually banned from his kingdom, as are all great heroes. Before leaving, he gives away his possessions and while in exile he gives away his wife and two children. However, this Jataka ends happily when the family is reunited and Vessantara regains his kingdom.

From the temples Suwat and I took a taxi boat up the Chao Phya river, the Mother of Noble Waters. For most of the journey, I sat quietly on the side bench and watched the passing barges, sampans, and palm lined canals cluttered with decrepit houseboat junks and children playing in the dirty water. We spent an hour or two traveling upstream, stopping at various docks along the river so passengers, dressed in sarongs and Western clothes, could get on or off the boat. It seemed that Bangkok never ended, but Suwat assured me we were stopping at villages outside the city. The continual stopping didn't bother me, because the river breeze made everything seem fresh, even in the midst of Bangkok's heavy pollution.

Just before sunset, I suggested we head back to the Y. We got off at the next stop and Suwat asked a boatman standing on the dock when the next taxi returned down the river. The boatman, Suwat claimed, said there were no more returning boats that night. This worried me. I told Suwat to ask someone else and after he did, he confirmed that no more taxis were heading back to Bangkok.

I grew furious, convinced the former monk had duped me once more. "You lied to me again, didn't you!?"

"No, no. Believe me. I don't know there are no more boats tonight."

"Great! But what are we going to do now?"

“Please,” he said, “don’t be angry. I don’t know what to do when you are angry like this. We can take bus or regular taxi back to YWCA, I promise.”

“That’s fine. But you had better help me get back to the Y!”

“OK. Don’t worry. You can follow me.” We walked up the dirt path from the dock and came to a wide street congested with traffic and lined with one story shops. People were everywhere, as on any street in Bangkok.

Suwat led me to a cafe. “You sit here,” he said, touching a chair at one of the sidewalk tables. “Have some tea. Wait for me to find what bus we can take.” I sat down, speechless from anger. In the darkening sky, I watched Suwat cross the street and talk to a vender along the curb. He kept looking back at me which made me suspect he was worried I might leave.

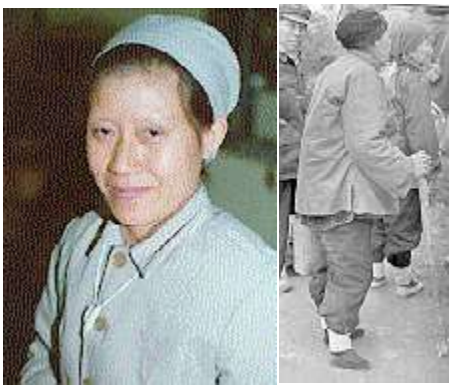
A waitress appeared and said something in Thai. I asked her for some tea but she didn’t understand. “Cha, cha,” I said impatiently, waving her away. When I looked back across the street, I couldn’t find Suwat. At first, I assumed he was asking somebody else nearby, but after fifteen minutes, worry invaded my thoughts. I remained seated and at least forty-five minutes passed. Then my anger changed to fear. The former monk had deserted me.

I left the cafe and walked to the pier hoping that maybe there really was a taxi returning down the river. But nobody was around the dock and although boats were traveling on the river, none stopped for me. Worry numbed me as I stood in the darkness alone at the edge of the platform. “Oh, this is just great,” I said aloud, while tears of anger and worry fell down my cheeks. “I don’t even know where the hell I am.”

I reached into my pocket for a handkerchief and felt the key chain Suwat had given me. Some protection you are! For a moment longer, I listened to the flowing river while contemplating ways to return to the Y. Before leaving the pier in search of a bus, I took out the

key chain Buddha, held it high and said aloud, “All right Mother of Noble Waters. Here,” I tossed it far into the dark river, “have a birth day Buddha.”

Chapter Six: Encounters in China



woman at pill factory was forced by her supervisor to be in my picture
other woman with bound feet on Wudang Mountain

The doorbell rang Beethoven's *Hymn of Joy* as I stood outside the apartment in Guangzhou, China. I was waiting to meet Mr. and Mrs. Chen, the parents of a Chinese student, Hao Chen, who had lived with my parents for a year. Hao had told me his parents lived alone on the sixth floor of the Guangzhou Artists Building, a complex housing art galleries and artists. Mr. and Mrs. Chen had received special permission for me to stay with them before I went to my job in Wuhan.

As the doorbell continued to play, I worried that nobody was home. Then what would I do? I had sent them a cable from Hong Kong. But what if they never got the message? At last the *Hymn of Joy* ended and the door slowly opened. A small frail man with a hunch back smiled at me. "Mr. Chen?" I asked, surprised because Hao hadn't warned me about his father's frail condition. Mr. Chen couldn't speak English, so he motioned me inside to where a plump middle-

aged woman with short black hair cheerfully welcomed me in carefully spoken English with a rich nasal accent.

The Chen's apartment had orderly rooms colored with cloisonne, lacquer ware, and porcelain vases. They had a sewing machine, two color television sets, a cassette radio, and a compact washing machine. On the refrigerator in one corner of the dining area sat a black telephone that rang frequently during my stay. Mr. or Mrs. Chen would answer it by shouting, in prolonged diphthongs, "*Wei!? Wei!* Most of the time the call was a wrong number.

The guest room Mrs. Chen offered me had a dark wooden bed with a thick cotton comforter that kept me warm on the cold winter nights of Guangzhou. Outside my room was a balcony with a view of a park across the street where old people practiced the slow moving martial art called tai chi, young couples rowed swan boats on a pond, and children chased ducks around the shore. On one corner of the balcony ledge were three small trees filled with oranges that appeared as golden coins when the sun set behind them. Mrs. Chen said the trees commemorated the Spring Festival (the Chinese New Year holiday season), which was due to arrive shortly after I left for Wuhan.

Mrs. Chen was an English teacher and her secondary school had closed for the Spring Festival season so she was free to show me the sights of Guangzhou. Mr. Chen, the artist, never joined me and his wife on our outings because of his poor health. Mrs. Chen explained that he had developed his crippling illness during the Cultural Revolution when he and millions of other intellectuals were forced to spend ten years laboring in the countryside. This had been Mao's idea of teaching his people humility while leveling class distinction, but it resulted in grave disillusionment and disaster. Throughout that time, Mrs. Chen was sure her husband would either kill himself or die from the poor diet the government fed him. But he survived. "And now," Mrs.

Chen added, "he only wants to paint. It is the present and future that are important. We must forget about past errors and misguided men."

My first dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Chen made American Chinese food an affront to good taste. We had stir fried slightly bitter lotus blossoms, rich fatty roast duck, two leafy green vegetable dishes, and rice. Throughout the meal Mrs. Chen kept an eye on my bowl of rice making sure I never emptied it. I copied their manner of eating and balanced, with my chop sticks, a load of food from one dish to my rice bowl. Then I held the bowl up to my mouth and shoveled in the food. Mrs. Chen suggested I was very clever to use chop sticks and eat the Chinese way.

About eight o'clock every morning, Mrs. Chen gently tapped on my door and invited me to breakfast. Her formal regard for my privacy differed sharply from my Indian friends in Arni who had continually invaded my room without knocking. Generally, Mrs. Chen ate leftover dinner for breakfast, but with me as her guest we went to her favorite outdoor restaurant and ate broad rice noodles fried in oil and soy sauce.

The morning streets of Guangzhou scrambled with noisy venders, shoppers, and people walking, riding bicycles, and taking buses to work. Old trucks, gray Warsaw cars, and one or two Japanese sedans hurried along the center of the main road while bicyclists, continually clanging their bells, scampered up and down side lanes. Almost everyone wore drab navy blue or olive green, a stark contrast to the colorful clothing of India.

After breakfast we went to an open market where Mrs. Chen bought vegetables and a live goose, duck, or chicken. The birds were miserably cramped together in crates stacked on top of one another, a sight that sickened me.

The small kitchen at the Chen's had two coal burners on a ceramic counter, and pots, woks, and pans hanging on the walls. One evening I stood at the kitchen door to watch how Mrs. Chen killed the goose that had been tied up to a counter leg all day. When she noticed me, she set down her cleaver and said, "My son tells me Americans don't eat fresh meat. Everything in the Chinese kitchen is fresh." I agreed, and politely left her alone, sensing her discomfort. Perhaps she saw me as viewing her ways, namely the killing of the goose, as barbaric, but this was not the case. I was merely curious.

By the time I was ready to depart for Wuhan, I wasn't sure whether Mrs. Chen had enjoyed my visit. She was much more formal and reserved than my Indian friends. While Kumala would directly tell me what she liked or disliked, Mrs. Chen would never tell me anything less than flattering. "You are very clever," she would say when I was quietly reading. I also felt less willing to argue, disagree, or pry very far into her life. Maybe the communist state made Mrs. Chen, and even me, cautious about sharing ideas, goals, and beliefs. And although China was the birthplace of Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism, it now seemed like the flip side of India -- a nation sapped of buoyant emotion and passionate spirituality. But this didn't bother me too much. I had abandoned my spiritual quest in Calcutta and restored my drive for adventure. China presented an opportunity to explore landscapes of unmatched beauty, a "world-class" culture equalled only by India's, and a political realm of unfamiliar yet fascinating contradictions.

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Wuhan is actually three cities nestled around the Yangtze River -- Wu Chang, Han Ko, and Han Yang. It has a population of about four million and is the second largest steel and iron

producer in China. However, Wuhan is not much of a tourist stop and in late February, when I arrived, the climate is fiercely cold.

Mr. Liu, the director of the university's Office of Foreign Affairs (the OFA) met me at the airport and set me up in a fourth floor apartment in the campus guest house. When I entered my new apartment I dismissed all rumors I had heard about the terrible living conditions for teachers in China. My new apartment was carpeted, air-conditioned, and more attractive and comfortable than any I had ever had. The living room had two armchairs with white slip covers and doilies, two coffee tables, a hard wood bookcase, a curio cabinet, a color television set, and a desk topped with a sheet of glass. The bedroom had two cedar wardrobes, night stands, and beds with plush comforters. Best of all, my apartment had a balcony overlooking the front garden pond of the guest house.

To my surprise classes weren't scheduled to begin for several weeks and all the other Western teachers, or "foreign experts" as the Chinese called us, were traveling around China for the semester break. This news left me feeling isolated, especially after Mr. Liu advised me not to leave the campus grounds on my own. But he quickly added that another new teacher from Seattle, a Mrs. Crimmins, was due to arrive any day and when she did she and I could explore the sights of Wuhan together.

While I awaited this other teacher, I spent most of my time in the guest house visiting with the kitchen help and the housekeeping staff, the *fu wu yuan*. Everyday a fu wu yuan cleaned my apartment and left me with fresh towels, an apple green floral thermos filled with hot water, and a *China Daily*. This English language newspaper offered several amusing blurbs between feature articles. One was about a bridegroom who, in jest at his wedding, got a spittoon stuck on his head and then had to go to the hospital to have it removed. At six o'clock I generally watched

the popular BBC English language program, *Follow Me* on the television. I viewed the skits during the show as culturally tied to England, rather than to China, which made the content useless except for those Chinese traveling to England. Nevertheless, this was the only program I could understand.

Beside the front gate of the guest house stood a one room "friendship store" exclusively for foreigners and high ranking Chinese officials known as cadres. The store sold combs, toothbrushes, toothpaste, bars of soap, boxes of cookies and tea bags, candies, packs of Chinese cigarettes, and bottles of vodka. Here, I bought jars of Sunflower instant coffee, the only coffee available. Unfortunately, it tasted like pencil shavings brewed in dish water, but I was enough of a coffee drinker to endure.

A few days after my arrival, on a briskly cold afternoon, I ventured outside the guest house. Everywhere, Chinese walked along the sycamore lined paths throughout the campus, and they seemed awed by the sight of me. The staring didn't bother me since it was a novelty along with everything else.

When I came across the university's library, I entered the open doors and a man guided me to the English language section on the third floor. It was a pleasant retreat from the seclusion of my apartment. I returned the following day and a man claiming to be the librarian cadre said the library was officially closed and I could not use it until spring semester. "But the front doors are wide open," I protested, "and I was here yesterday." The cadre apologized and repeated that the library was closed. The incident left me feeling forlorn and anxious for the new teacher to arrive.

The next morning, I entered the large dining hall on the main floor of the guest house and saw, sitting at my table, a tall thin Western woman in her fifties with short brown hair. I quickly

decided it was Mrs. Crimmins, the new teacher from Seattle. I eagerly greeted her and sat at the table. She didn't look up. Because her head was bowed it seemed she was praying so I kept quiet until discomfort forced me to say, "I don't want to disturb you but -- Good morning!" She didn't respond. Well, I thought, she's either painfully shy or deeply religious and she'll talk to me after she finishes her prayer.

To my relief the fu wu yuan appeared from the kitchen and brought us each a plate of sponge cakes, the typical breakfast at the guest house. I greeted the fu wu yuan in Chinese, and then said to Mrs. Crimmins, "How do you like the rooms?" Mrs. Crimmins remained silent, but I continued to talk because it seemed too absurd not to. "They're pretty comfortable, aren't they? Especially the furniture. And the balcony...."

Suddenly, Mrs. Crimmins jumped up, grabbed her cakes, and rushed out of the dining room. What a rude old bitch! I thought to myself. Nobody can be that shy.

The incident bothered me so much that I spent the rest of the morning thinking up ways to retaliate. At lunch I planned to enter the dinning hall saying, "Well, I suggest you arrive half an hour later if you want to avoid me. I'm certainly not going out of my way to accommodate you!" Fortunately, the strange woman never showed up for lunch.

Later that afternoon Mr. Liu came to my room to tell me the vice president of the university was holding a banquet that evening to welcome Mrs. Crimmins and me. I was greatly impressed. This was the first time I would be honored with a banquet.

At seven o'clock that evening, I went downstairs to the reception room to receive my guests -- the vice president, Mr. Liu, and six other men who were teachers and administrators. When I arrived I saw Mrs. Crimmins chatting quite normally with one of the Chinese teachers.

This surprised and insulted me because I had expected her to ignore everyone. Apparently, she so rudely disliked only me.

After drinking tea, according to Chinese custom, Mrs. Crimmins and I and our guests went to the banquet room, an adjunct off the dining hall next to the kitchen. Because my intention was to ignore Mrs. Crimmins, I made sure she entered first to avoid sitting next to her. But the Chinese had organized the seating so that Mrs. Crimmins and I sat on opposite sides of the vice president and Mr. Liu sat to my left.

The room barely contained the round dining table with a starched linen tablecloth and a lazy Susan. Each setting had a linen napkin, chopsticks, and glasses for beer, soda, wine and the colorless 140 proof Chinese liquor called *mao tai*.

The banquet began when the vice president stood up, raised his glass of mao tai and said, "We welcome our new teacher and hope they find comfort, health, and happiness." After he sat down, someone else made a toast, and more toasts followed. At each toast, everyone lifted a glass of alcohol except Mrs. Crimmins, who claimed she didn't drink alcohol. This made me guess she was an abstaining alcoholic which helped explain her personality disorder.

During the meal two fu wu yuan continually came out the swinging kitchen doors carrying plates and bowls of cold asparagus spears, tender sweet pineapple chunks, pungent quail eggs and salty cucumbers, rich turtle soup, sweet lotus seed soup, moist roast chicken, stir fried pork with tart onions, and bitter green leafy vegetables. Mr. Liu served me spoonfuls of the food as the dishes swiveled around. The vice president did the same for Mrs. Crimmins, who sat quietly with her head slightly bowed during the toasting, until after I made my toast. When I sat back down, she stood up, raised her glass of orange soda, and said, "I would like to propose a

toast to all you wise gentlemen." She paused. "I know I have embarrassed you. I don't belong here. You are all so wise and I don't deserve your kindness."

"But you are more than welcome, Mrs. Crimmins," said one of the men while the others nodded to reassure her. I suddenly felt sorry for the poor woman who was losing all of her composure.

"I'm ashamed," she continued. "I don't know your customs, your manners. I need to go home. I'm sorry, I must leave now." She set her glass down and walked toward the door. Mr. Liu jumped up and said that she need only be herself. As the vice president repeated, "You are welcome, you are welcome," the fu wu yuan brought her a fork and spoon. The other men remained silent until after she sat back down. Then they began laughing, although with uncertainty. At the same time, Mr. Liu sat back down, pulled me aside, and said, "Very interesting woman, wa?"

For the rest of the banquet Mrs. Crimmins became the center of attention and the Chinese practically hand fed her. Perhaps this was all she really wanted for now she seemed to thoroughly enjoy herself.

At breakfast the next morning, Mrs. Crimmins sat at a table across the dining hall from mine. I had decided she was mentally ill and planned to ignore her. Soon, the silence and isolation drove me to stare at the wall while saying aloud, "I can't take this anymore. There's nobody to talk to. The library's closed." From the corner of my eye I noticed Mrs. Crimmins eating her cakes and paying no attention. "I can go crazy too, you know. Peaceful minds don't create trouble. Silence is not polite." I stood up, took my remaining cakes and left the dining hall.

Feeling depressed, I skipped lunch, but went to dinner that evening, all too glad that the mad woman from Seattle wasn't around. However, while the fu wu yuan was serving my meal, Mrs. Crimmins entered the room, smiled, looked straight at me, and said fawningly, "Good evening Teresa."

Astonished, I greeted her in reflex. Then, as if nothing had ever been otherwise, she proceeded to speak to me after sitting at her own table. "I see you're practicing Chinese," she said because my phrase book lay opened before me. "*Ni hao ma?* Perhaps we can practice together." Her sudden friendliness overwhelmed me, so I quickly ate and left. "*Zai jian*," she said as I headed out the doors.

Later that evening she came to my apartment for a visit. I invited her in and she behaved as if we were good friends. She asked me about my travels, my family and even my childhood in Portland. When I asked her how long she had lived in Seattle, she said, "Oh, let's not talk about me. Let's talk about you."

After about twenty minutes, Mrs. Crimmins suddenly stood up and said, "I must go now but we'll get together soon."

Throughout that night, the absurd situation kept me awake. I felt trapped on a campus where everyone stared at me, the freak, and the only one I had to talk to was the looniest person I'd ever met.

The following morning when I entered the dining room, a tall balding American man wearing a Chinese army jacket, stood up and extended his hand. He introduced the woman with him as his wife Linda, then himself as Jeff Adams. They were the first of five other teachers to return from their vacation.

Over breakfast I learned that Linda, a pretty woman with curly brown hair and green eyes, had degree in sociology, and Jeff had a masters in English and a minor in Chinese studies. He spoke Chinese fluently and seemed to know a lot about the country. "Do you plan on becoming a Sinologist?" I asked.

Jeff smiled, seemingly flattered by my remark. "I'd say I'm mostly interested in comparative religion."

"Really? So am I. But China's a fine place for comparing religions! There doesn't seem to be anything here except socialist thought."

He winked as he said, "You'd be surprised what lurks in dark corners and behind closed doors."

I asked if they'd met Mrs. Crimmins. From the look on their faces they apparently had and in the same way as I. Linda explained that Mrs. Crimmins had entered the dining hall, but froze at the door when she saw them, then ran away.

I told the couple about my experiences with the strange woman and they sympathized with my predicament. But they sympathized even more with Mrs. Crimmins, feeling that the poor woman must be tormented over something terrible.

During the next three or four days, Linda and Jeff tried to meet Mrs. Crimmins, but all the while she refused to answer her door. The fu wu yuan resorted to unlocking her apartment with a master key and placing meals in her room. They told Jeff that whenever they entered, Mrs. Crimmins hid under the covers of her bed. It seemed that all we could do was leave her welfare to the discretion of our Chinese hosts.

In the mean time, Jeff, Linda, and I explored parts of Wuhan. Sometimes we took the public bus, but often the university provided us with a car and driver. In Han Ko we went to the

large Friendship Store to buy Chinese souvenirs, film, and snacks. The neighboring area also had a camera shop, a plant store, a Chinese opera shop, a large state run department store, and a book store where I bought a copy of every English book they had: *Mao Zedong Poems*; three Chinese-English phrase booklets, *The Arabian Nights*, *Call to Arms* by Lu Xun (one of China's most esteemed authors), *A Great Trial in Chinese History* (about the Gang of Four), *Toward a People's Anthropology,* and *A Concise History of China* (Chinese history written according to Marxist theory of feudalism progressing toward the blissful state of communism). Everywhere we walked, hordes of mesmerized Chinese followed us into shops, along streets, and down open markets. To amuse myself I often held up my purchases to make the crowd laugh, or I bent down to tie my shoe just to see how many people would gather around. Usually the crowd grew so large I'd lose count.

On one occasion, Jeff and Linda took me to the three hundred year old Guiyan Temple in Han Yang. Scattered among Chinese tourists in the compound loitered a few monks who seemed strangely out of place in the atheistic society. I wondered if the Party had deliberately placed them at the temple to enhance the tourist attraction.

Inside the main temple a narrow corridor housed tiered ledges with 500 life-size Buddhist statues. Each statue had a distinctive expression. "Are all these of the Buddha?" I asked as we stood at the main entrance.

"No," Jeff said. "They're what Chinese call *Luo-hans* or arhats."

"Really? I've never of heard arhats," I admitted.

"Just remember -- those are their hats, and these are arhats!"

"Very funny," Linda said, affectionately slapping her husband's arm.

I found everything about the couple enchanting, especially their charming sense of humor. It was almost like a miracle they had returned to Wuhan when they did and rescued me from solitude with Mrs. Crimmins. "But really," I said, "what are arhats?"

"Buddhist saints." Jeff motioned us to the first Luo-han beside the temple entrance. "Begin here and count Luo-hans to your age. That Luo-han will be your guide for this year."

I did so and stopped at the twenty-seventh Luo-han which had a scowling face. "Look at mine," I said to Jeff and Linda who had both stopped two Luo-hans ahead of me. "I don't think I'll let this guy lead me through the year."

"No," Jeff said. "I don't think you'd better."

Jeff and Linda were great company during our evening meals in the dining hall. Linda generally sat back quietly as I popped questions and her husband discussed intriguing points about Chinese history -- from pre-Confucianism to post-Maoism. Mao and the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution were always popular topics. During the Cultural Revolution, Jeff explained, the Party had smeared the president of HUST as an "absolutely unrepentant capitalist roader" because he had promoted scientific research. After the fall of Mao, the Party rehabilitated and reinstated him, and then blamed his ordeal on the Gang of Four whose ring leader was Mao's wife, Jiang Qing.

We discussed Mao's 1956 campaign entitled "Let One Hundred Flowers Blossom and One Hundred Schools of Thought Contend." Mao invited his people to criticize Party errors so China could correct its mistakes and progress. At first, intellectuals hesitated to voice their oppositions to the government, believing the campaign was a trap. In time the campaign took off and increased momentum until Mao became so shocked by the surmounting criticism that he

stopped the campaign and sent those who spoke out into the countryside to "observe and learn from real life." It *had* been a trap all along. Mao himself eventually admitted that the Hundred Flowers Campaign conspired to "lure the snake out of the hole to beat it."

One evening I asked Jeff how communism in China differed from that in the Soviet Union. "Mao Zedong made Marxism Chinese," he said. "Not that this sort of thing is new to China. Practically everything that touches China becomes Chinese."

"I think you're rather fond of this culture." I touched his Chinese army jacket, which he almost always wore.

Linda grinned. "Yeah. You'd think he was Chinese, wouldn't you?"

"Well," Jeff said, "you have to admit China's pretty special. Just think how magnificent this country is historically!"

"Like India," I suggested and momentarily asked, "Why do you think Mao was first considered the greatest helmsman that ever lived, and now even his name is avoided?"

"It's just their way," Jeff said. "The Chinese smooth over blunders rather than acknowledge them. I think it was Hegel who said that contradiction makes us creative, insightful, and progressive."

"That might be true, but did he say contradiction makes us forgetful?" Jeff laughed at my remark and I added, "Anyway, where do you think Mao went wrong?"

"Well, as the Chinese proverb goes, the man who can lead his horse into battle can't always lead a nation into prosperity...."

"Besides," Linda added, "one man can't reshape humanity. Only God can do that."

Now the truth came out and Jeff and Linda transformed from ordinary teachers into Christian missionaries. They were actually in China to clandestinely spread the "good news

about Jesus Christ." They hadn't told me this until we became better acquainted because they worried about being discovered by Chinese officials, who refused to allow missionary practice. When they first revealed they were missionaries, I worried our friendship would change and they'd try to convert me. But they didn't. It seems they reserved this mission for the Chinese.

"Are you here on your own efforts," I asked, "or do you have the support of a church?"

"No. We're alone," Linda explained. "The Chinese government doesn't allow missionaries in China. By making friends we believe we can introduce Christ to the people."

"The Chinese don't seem very receptive to religion, at least not from what I've observed." I told them about an incident that occurred when Mrs. Chen took me to a Buddhist temple in Guangzhou. Inside the temple Mrs. Chen had pulled me aside to point out an old woman kowtowing before the main altar. "She is worshiping her God," Mrs. Chen had said then laughed about the old woman's belief in the supernatural. "The incident made me feel locked inside a country drained of spirituality."

"That may be true," Linda said. "But you know, deep inside people are aching for salvation. And, well, no government can replace God."

"The thing I don't understand is how China could suddenly turn against its own religions -- Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism."

"For one thing," Jeff said in response to my remark, "the communists view religion as harmful to their cause. And for another thing, Confucianism is not really a religion. It's more of a social ordering -- a ranking of relationships... The king is at the top, of course, then comes the father, sons, and lastly, sorry to say, women."

"No wonder the Chinese threw Confucius out of favor!"

"Actually, he lost favor because they associated him with feudalism. Although recently he's been rehabilitated to a certain extent. But this is nothing new. Confucius has been purged and rehabilitated before, and I'm sure he'll be purged and rehabilitated again. It's the Chinese way."

I asked about Taoism and Jeff replied, "Taoism is more of a philosophy. As a matter of fact, Maoist thought is similar to the Taoist idea of continual change. And I believe China accepted Marxism because dialectics are a lot like the yin and yang opposites of Taoism."

When I asked Jeff what he meant by dialectics, he said, "Well... I mean Hegelian dialectics which consists of the thesis and its opposing antithesis. The clash between these two viewpoints results in a synthesis. For example, I say something, Linda disagrees, and then we argue until we reach a consensus. Because of conflict, you see, a broader perception arises when it forms a synthesis."

"Sometimes," Linda teased. "Not always."

"But we try, don't we?" Jeff winked at me. "Anyway, in dialectics the synthesis becomes a new thesis and the process continues, producing constant change in a spiraling process."

"But what's the point? I mean, is it a never ending argument? Or is it like reincarnation which supposedly ends in nirvana?"

Jeff listened with interested to my comparison, thought a moment, and said, "The ultimate aim of dialectics is self-knowledge through this union of conflicting opposites."

"Self-realization is the ultimate aim of Hinduism too, as I understand it. Is this the gist of Marxism?"

"Not exactly. Marx placed Hegelian dialectics on an economic level called dialectical materialism. Through struggles between classes of people, such as slaves against masters,

workers against capitalists, Marx predicted societies would progress until they reached the state of communism -- where there are no class distinctions. In theory, struggle creates progress."

"Which seems opposite to the Hindu concept of moksa -- the end to all struggle and conflict..."

"True. In communist theory a society needs conflict in order to progress from a slave society, to feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and at last communism -- a society of equality."

Recalling the slums of Calcutta, I mentioned the terrible poverty I had seen in India, adding, "I haven't seen anything like it here. China seems poor overall, but not desperately impoverished. This makes me wonder if socialism isn't more beneficial in an overpopulated nation. Besides, at least in theory, communism seems reasonable if it strives for equality."

"You're right," Jeff said. "Equality and even distribution of wealth isn't a bad idea. One problem is, as with any system, those in power become corrupt. But the main problem is that Marxism has nothing to do with God. As Marx said, 'People should rely on people, not on God.' This is why communism fails."

"That's right," Linda added. "People are fallible. God isn't."

Though my conclusions about communism weren't the same as Jeff and Linda's, I didn't tell them. When it came to disagreeing with someone's religious beliefs or anyone's God or Goddess, I usually kept my thoughts to myself. Linda had asked if I was Christian and I wimpishly replied that I had grown up in a Christian family. Then I tried to weasel out of the conversation by asking about their lives. Linda's question left me feeling vulnerable, since she and her husband were my only friends at the time. I feared losing their company if I admitted Christianity wasn't a part of my life. Even my fling with spirituality had been a fleeting whim created by the mystique of India. My present attitude was more like the post-Mao atheistic

Chinese who aimed to expunge religion, at least the kind that straps people to antiquated sexist tradition and non-scientific pursuit. At the same time, I viewed communism as a faulty system because of its intolerance for individual expression. Without this expression, people lack motivation in their work, which sabotages the economic system. Not many people can willing work strictly for the love and benefit of a government. In many ways communism reminded me of karma yoga, except instead of working with your mind set on God, you work for the other big G -- Government. No, I couldn't imagine dedicating my life to either system of belief. Both had too many flaws and neither seemed right for me.

When Mrs. Crimmins finally came out of hiding she harshly ignored Jeff, Linda, and me. And she equally snubbed the other Western teachers when they returned to the guest house. In the dining hall, the eight of us arranged four tables together so we could chat while eating our meals. Mrs. Crimmins sat alone at a small table in the far corner of the large room. Naturally, we talked about her. How could we not? She blatantly ignored us while graciously interacting with the Chinese. In fact, the Chinese seemed to like her, probably finding her no more strange than the rest of us capitalist foreigners.

Spring came early to Wuhan and brought sparrows and skylarks to my balcony. Fragrant white magnolias blossomed on trees by the library courtyard and forsythias burst out in yellow across campus. On weekends I rode a bicycle provided by the guest house out the back campus gates into the countryside. Here spring rolled out carpets of purple clover and yellow rape seed, and hillsides blossomed with wild lilac sprigs. Chickens, geese, cats, and dogs wandered about the dirt roads where peasants pulled long wooden vegetable carts or carried shoulder yokes balancing buckets of pungent smelling night soil (human excrement) used for fertilizer. I once

encountered a young man napping at the edge of a duck pond. His head rested on a stone, the brim of his triangular hat shaded his eyes, and a long bamboo pole, used to control the ducks, lay across his chest. Another time I spotted an old man riding a water buffalo and I set out to capture his picture, but the old man jumped off the animal and waved his arms at me. Perhaps the farmers were superstitious, or maybe they just didn't appreciate an outsider invading their world with a camera.

I began teaching toward the end of March. My class was not a part of the regular English classes in the English department, where the other Westerners and Chinese English professors taught. Mine was a class specially held for English and science teachers who wanted to improve their already fluent speaking skills. At 8:30 AM, when I entered the classroom, a student poured me a cup of tea. The thermos, cup, and canister of tea were kept inside the front podium and seemed as much a part of the Chinese classroom as the blackboard and chalk. I looked forward to the attention and felt neglected when nobody served me any tea. At ten o'clock the loud speakers around campus announced the mid-morning break. As the music played, students from the regular English classes ran outside to touch toes, twist at the waist, run in place, and do jumping jacks. I once asked my students, who generally remained in the room during the break to smoke, why they weren't outside exercising. They laughed and explained that the call for this daily routine was heeded only by young naive students and was part of the communist program. At 12:30 everyone headed home to eat lunch and take a daily nap. At precisely two o'clock, the loud speakers aired organ music that began like the song *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*, changed into skating rink music, and ended with belabored announcements.

My students were bright, mature, and the most interesting I have ever had or ever could have. From the first day they made it clear they wanted to be called Mr., Miss, or Mrs. plus the

last name. In China, the surname precedes the given name, so I was Allen Teresa, and my students called me Miss Allen. The class consisted of three women -- a graduate student and two teachers from the department of Management English; and six men -- an English teacher, a linguist, a teacher from the Department of Physics; two from the Mathematics Department; and Mr. Hu from the Department of Mechanical Engineering. Mr. Hu, a middle aged man with a wide gap between his front teeth, was one of my favorite students. In addition to always smiling and pouring my tea more often than the others, he tended to be the first one to answer my questions in class. In retrospect, I think Mr. *Hu* was politely responding to: "*Who* would like to read now? *Who* has the answer? *Who* can help me with this?"

Mr. Zhi-Tang Wong was the class monitor, a Party representative overseeing the content discussed during the lessons. Everyone's class had one. Mr. Wong, a slightly built man in his thirties, wore black rimmed thick glasses and spoke English with a heavy Cantonese accent. He had a peculiar grin that, along with his accent, made whatever he said sound funny to me and to the other students. Often, he told the class jokes that lost something in the translation. One was of an airplane pilot who says to his passengers as the plane takes off, "I hope you have already written your wills for a landing may never take place." Another joke concerned parents who leave their baby with a monkey babysitter, and returned to find that the monkey has washed the baby in boiling water. Ironically, Mr. Wong was a cadre from the Linguistics Institute and specialized in rural phonology. On the second day of class he volunteered to teach me Chinese at my apartment once a week. I thanked him and he said, "Is my dute," (meaning, "It's my duty"). I wondered if the Party had secretly assigned Mr. Wong to spy on me, but he never made me feel uneasy or concerned that he was monitoring me in class or during the private lessons. Besides, I couldn't imagine why the Chinese would spy on me. I had nothing top secret to hide and I wasn't

any stranger than Mrs. Crimmins, who they seemed to like once she settled into teaching her classes (while continuing to ignore her fellow Westerners).

There was, however, certain behavior the Chinese did not want from their Western guests. Not long into the semester, the OFA informed Jeff and Linda that they couldn't renew their contract for the following semester, as they intended to. The officials never gave an explanation for this, but Jeff suspected that he and Linda had shared their faith with a student who had purposely spied on them. Additionally, Jeff and Linda couldn't find another teaching position in China. Evidently, they had been black listed. This unwelcome news was a blow to them, but Jeff felt positive that one day the Chinese would invite them to return and to even evangelize. I felt sorry for them, but, at the same time, I wasn't that supportive of proselytizing any faith. Besides, we were invited to China to teach English, and not to convert our students to a foreign religion.

As the semester progressed, my teaching style and the lesson content shaped itself according to the interests of my students. For at least part of each session, they encouraged me to lecture about America, anthropology, or my travels in India. I tried to avoid politics, but it inevitably came up, especially from the *China Daily* articles I often brought to class. Two notable figures, Lei Feng and Lin Biao, appeared in the newspaper. Lei Feng, the exemplary good soldier, was supposedly a real person who devoted his life to the betterment of his country and the proletariat. His premature death made him even more of a hero. "Learn from Lei Feng," the motto ran. The antithesis of Lei Feng was Lin Biao, the focus of dutiful hatred. He exemplified a man using deception for personal gain at the expense of others. Although it is questionable whether Lei Feng existed, Lin Biao's existence is well documented. Mao had been

grooming him as his successor, but Lin Biao could not wait and he plotted to assassinate Mao. The attempt failed, and when Lin Biao and his family fled the country, their airplane crashed. But he left China with the immortal motto, "Don't be a Lin Biao."

I once performed an experiment by having Mr. Wong translate into Chinese a poem I'd written during a bicycle trip into the countryside. Then I had another student translate it back into English.

The original poem read:

This country road is growing small,
If not, by nature's will.
And as I hear two sparrows call,
I see tombstones on the hill.

People are forgotten here --
Among the lilac sprigs --
Where the gentle slope provides,
A view of autumn fishing rigs.

The lake is called,
These Eastern Shores --
An old man once told me.
And what I know, he knows no more.
Here rests eternity.

The version translated from Chinese back into English read:

The road is growing small and narrow.

"It's the nature that arranges it," says the voice of a sparrow.

Oh, no, it's not true,

For I've seen a tomb on the side of the road.

The man is here under the flowers.

Anything about him no one can remember.

The Autumn has already come and gone,

Covering the hill with a sad atmosphere.

By an old man I am told,

"Here's the place called East Shore Road."

But what I see he no more knows

In silence and tranquility, there rests an illusive soul.

I asked the students if the poems had different meanings. One suggested, "Yes. The Chinese poem is more natural, I suppose."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because Chinese people have known nature for thousands of years and your country is very young. We are trained from childhood to write more natural poems. I think it is not the same for you."

On Monday afternoons, I took my class to the language lab so they could study for the TOEFL examination (Test of English as a Foreign Language, an examination that foreign students take before enrolling in American universities). Most of my students hoped to eventually earn a Ph.D. in America or Britain. During these sessions, I read passages from a Chinese book entitled, *TOEFL Examination Successful Guide*. The students sat in cubicles and listened and repeated the phrases or answered comprehension questions at the end of the passage. Useless cliches infiltrated the book. One day, because of my failure to read ahead of time, I stumbled over the phrase, "I'm not too fagged." The cliche struck me as so funny that I burst into laughter, then quickly noticed that the students were staring at me, completely serious. I explained that the expression was outdated and sounded unnatural to me, but a student argued that the language could not be outdated if it was in the *TOEFL Examination Successful Guide*.

Inside and outside the classroom I kept hearing cliches that often got twisted around, such as "I want to chew a bone with you," "Don't be a joykill," or "I live where a crow flies." Part of the blame went to an enormously popular Voice of America (VOA) radio program, *Words and Their Stories*. The program specialized in bombarding the Chinese with such hackneyed expressions as "talking through your hat," "settle your hash," "cracker-barrel philosopher," and "it's time to face the music." The students believed in these cliches more than they believed in my efforts to refute them. It was, after all, my word against that of a radio program. Besides, maxims and slogans follow an ancient Chinese tradition, from pre-Confucianism to post-Maoism. The most popular Chinese maxim is the numbered list, such as: The Four Harmfuls --

flies, cockroaches, mosquitoes, and rats; the Three Things That Go Round -- sewing machine, bicycle, and watch; the Four Modernizations -- industry, agriculture, defense, and science; and the Three Mountains (hurdles to climb) -- imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic bourgeoisie capitalism.

One day I wore my *churidar kameez* (tunic dress and pants) to class and the students said I looked "very lovely" and correctly assumed the dress came from India. This led to an enlightening discussion about Chinese clothing. Previously, I assumed that China had only one style, at least for men -- the Mao suit, worn to ensure equality in appearance and prevent bourgeois fashion. But my students assured me that men wore at least two jacket styles, the most popular being the navy blue Sun Yat-sen style (which Westerners mistakenly called the Mao suit). Mr. Jin, the most neatly dressed member of my class, stood up to model his Sun Yat-sen jacket while Mr. Zhang stood up to model his national defense style suit.

"How," I asked, "do you tell the two apart? They look identical to me." The students laughed and explained that the national defense style had waist pockets on the inside and flaps outside while the Sun Yat-sen style had waist pockets on the outside and two breast pockets with outside buttons.

The women in my class wore what they called the spring style -- pastel floral blouses, and blue or brown polyester slacks. I asked them if they ever wore traditional clothing, but nobody knew what I was referring to and suggested I draw a picture on the blackboard. What I had in mind was the tightly cut silk gown a hostess wears in American Chinese restaurants. It was the one souvenir I hoped to buy while in China.

On the blackboard I drew the Mandarin collar, the looped frogs (buttons) and breast flap, the hour glass waist, and the slits along each side. "I want one like this," I said. "A red one. Do you know where I can have one made?"

The students said my drawing was a *qi pau.* Then someone added, "But nobody can make this dress any more. It is a forgotten tradition of the old regime."

I was disappointed, having had my heart set on the dress. Then Mr. Jin chuckled and said, "I'll help you find a master tailor old enough to recall making qi paus." My hopes renewed, I thanked Mr. Jin, wondering if he ever suspected I was secretly attracted to him.

Mr. Jin was the best looking Chinese I had ever met. He was 22 years old, had a sprite carefree sense of humor and cheerful dimples when he smiled, which he did quite often. I saw Mr. Jin both inside and outside the classroom because he worked as a translator for the Office of Foreign Affairs. This meant he helped out the foreign experts or escorted us on outings to town or to cultural programs.

Since the beginning of the semester, Mr. Jin had walked me back to the guest house after class in order to practice his English. Along the way, he helped me find books at the library or write in Chinese on my letters and packages at the campus post office. At the campus department store he gave me some of his ration coupons so I could buy bread without paying the two extra fen (less than a penny) for not having coupons. Whenever I encountered a problem, such as needing a copy machine, or university addresses, I first told Mr. Jin. He seemed to know more than anybody else about what was available at HUST or in Wuhan.

Throughout the semester, my infatuation with Mr. Jin steadily increased along with my doubt that he and I could ever have a serious romance. How could I get close to a Chinese? They

were too cautious about friendships with Westerners. And besides, Mr. Jin was my student and this created an ethical barrier between us.

I often wondered what Mr. Jin felt about me and if the special attention he paid me outside of class was personal. He seemed to enjoy my company as much as I enjoyed his. We often joked with each other in broken French, a second language we shared with equal ineptitude. I suspected his favors weren't personal when a colleague said Mr. Jin had shown as much attention to a British woman teaching the previous semester. Regardless of his true feelings for me, Mr. Jin played a major part in my social life.

One of the nicest things Mr. Jin did for me, in addition to finding me a master tailor who made me two qi paus, was to introduce me to three Chinese artists. During class, I expressed an interest in Chinese calligraphy and traditional water color painting and within a week Mr. Jin arranged to take me to the Hubei College of Fine Arts. In a classroom studio, I met Teacher Chen, an old painter with a gray bristly beard. After drinking tea with Mr. Jin and me, the old man unrolled some of his painting scrolls across a large table. The most impressive and largest scroll (about 2 by 6 feet) portrayed an old man wearing a voluminous robe with triangular sleeves.

"Confucius?" I asked.

Mr. Jin laughed. "No, he is Ch'u Yuan, China's earliest famous poet from two thousand two hundred years ago. In the Warring State Period, Ch'u Yuan was a royal counsellor to the Ch'u court, but he made a wrong judgement and his rivals had him sent from court. During his wanderings, Ch'u Yuan wrote his famous poems. He became a wandering poet in the area of Hunan province, until despair drove him to drown himself in the river. This old teacher paints

Ch'u Yuan for the Dragon Boat Festival next month, on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. The festival commemorates looking for Ch'u Yuan's body in the river."

"What's he contemplating?" I asked about the painting which portrayed Ch'u Yuan in deep thought.

"He is thinking 'shall I drown myself in the Mi Lo River? Is my life or my country more important?'"

Teacher Chen spoke, and Mr. Jin said, "OK. Now, he will paint for you." I was surprised and thrilled by this unexpected gift.

Mr. Jin carefully rolled up the scroll of Ch'u Yuan, and Teacher Chen laid a thin sheet of rice paper on the table. "Now he will paint a traditional expression of spring." The artist took a wide brush and stroked pale green banana leaves down the left side of the paper. With a smaller brush, he painted three gray chicks at the bottom corner and added a sprig of orange apricot blossoms above and partly overlapping the chicks.

"The flowers and the chicks represent new growth because this painting is about change. In China we say -- change, contrast, and unity are the Three Truths about nature. As you can see, contrast gives balance and harmony... The yin and the yang of nature. Change occurs in the ink traveling from dark to light. See," he pointed to the chicks, "Change is also in the brush stroke from banana leaves to chicks."

Teacher Chen stood back and looked satisfied with the various colors, shapes, and empty space in his painting. Taking another brush along with a vessel of black ink, he drew Chinese characters on the white space in the upper right hand corner to finish the balance in his composition. "Calligraphy is important in Chinese painting. Now this old teacher writes, 'Under the Shade of Spring,' dedicated to Miss Allen."

From a lacquer ware box, the painter took out four stone chops (stampers) and a ceramic dish of red ink. He carefully integrated three red stamps into the composition. "These stamps have his personal insignia and are in different styles of calligraphy." Teacher Chen placed a fourth stamp just below the dedication to me. He stood back and suddenly his face turned pale. He exclaimed something, and Mr. Jin remarked, "Oh. No! This is terrible. He has put his name upside down. I'm afraid the painting is no good."

"What? Well... Tell Teacher Chen I don't mind -- I'll never know the difference."

"I'm sorry, Miss Allen. But Teacher Chen will have to make you another painting."

I could hardly believe they would discard the painting over an error I would never know existed. "Look, Mr. Jin. Why can't he cut out the stamp and paste it right side up?"

Mr. Jin thought a moment, discussed this with his teacher, and said, "You have a very good suggestion. We shall mount Teacher Chen's painting for you and correct this unfortunate mistake."

Shortly following my visit with Teacher Chen, Mr. Jin took me to meet another painting teacher. The front room of his two room apartment served as his studio. After a brief and formal visit, the artist, a middle-aged man, laid three unmounted landscape paintings on the double bed that took up most of the front room. "You can select one," Mr. Jin told me.

I had difficulty deciding which one to choose. Each had beautiful towering mountains behind a soft blue waterway, and red village roofs peering above soft green tree tops. While I looked them over, Mr. Jin asked, "Do you know which is the host?"

"The host? No, Mr. Jin, which one is it?" I assumed he was teasing me, as he enjoyed doing, by saying that one of the paintings hosted the others.

"Guess." Mr. Jin grinned, taunting me with his dimples.

"Come on, Mr. Jin. I don't know what you're talking about."

"OK. I will tell you. This tall dark one." He pointed to a mountain in one of the paintings. "My teacher paints a host mountain first. And these," he indicated the other mountains fading into the background, "are the guests. Host and guests. This is a Chinese painting technique."

I asked Mr. Jin to explain some of the other techniques his teacher used. "In traditional Chinese landscape painting," he replied, "we have The Six Principles. First is the *ch'i* energy of nature, from my teacher's breath. You know, the force of his life breathing into his art. Second, he must use color according to the season and nature, like Teacher Chen painted for you. Remember, Under the Shade of Spring? The third principle is to remember the past, or you can say, tradition that comes from our ancestors.... And let's see... Fourth principle is the empty space in a painting to create balance and harmony... Yin and yang.... Fifth, the artist must know the true shapes of nature."

"What's the sixth principle?"

"Technique, as I have mentioned. But Chinese painting is not too scientific, Miss Allen. Remember my teacher must first paint from his breath with each stroke. Without his breath the painting is not alive."

In the end, I selected the painting with the most prominent host and guest mountains and took it with me when we left artist's home. I decided to put this painting behind glass in a regular silver frame, instead of having it mounted on a scroll.

The third artist I met was an eighty-five year old calligrapher, Teacher Jo, whose calligraphy inscribed monuments throughout Wuhan. Mr. Jin actually brought this teacher to my

apartment, and I helped Mr. Jin guide the feeble old man, step by step, up the four flights of stairs to my room.

In the armchair of my living room, Teacher Jo quietly rested and slurped his tea, while Mr. Jin talked about his teacher's calligraphy. The old man's mystique left me feeling humble and in the presence of honor and distinction.

When the old calligrapher was ready to begin, he abruptly interrupted Mr. Jin in mid-sentence and we went into my kitchen. Here, Teacher Jo stood at the sink and ground an ink stick around an ink stone, occasionally adding drops of tap water to create the right consistency. "Grinding the stone empties the old teacher's mind for his work," Mr. Jin said, as he placed newspapers on the kitchen table to absorb the ink and back the rice paper. He opened Teacher Jo's supply case and said, "We say The Four Treasures of Calligraphy are brushes, ink stick, ink stone, and rice paper...."

Teacher Jo interrupted Mr. Jin, who in turn exclaimed, "Oh no. This is terrible!"

"What is?" By now I was used to Mr. Jin's theatrics.

"He must use the toilet. Is there one on this floor?"

I told Mr. Jin that my bathroom stood a few feet away. "I am afraid it is not suitable for my teacher to use your private toilet. The only solution is to escort him back downstairs to the toilet on the first floor."

"That's ridiculous, Mr. Jin. I'll leave my apartment so he can use my toilet."

"He won't do it because your personal toilet is meant for you alone. Believe me, it is better we take him down stars."

Half an hour later we were back in my kitchen and the old man stood over a long and narrow sheet of paper. He dipped his brush into the ink stone and dabbed it on a scrap of rice paper. "Before he can begin, the old master must check for proper flowing ink."

Without warning and in one rapid succession, the calligrapher's hand glided down the paper, trailing thin and thick black lines. In a moment, he created two rows of Chinese characters. "How can he work so fast?" I asked.

"Chinese people call calligraphy, dancing on paper. It is one of the Three Perfects -- painting, calligraphy, and poetry. You have now seen all three because this is a famous poem by Tu Fu of the Tang dynasty, over a thousand years ago. This poem says, 'A pair of yellow orioles sing in the emerald willow tree. And soaring up the blue sky is a flock of white herons. From my window I see green mountains capped with endless winter snow. Boats are now moored before my gate, although they have sailed ten thousand voyages.'"

"Is Tu Fu as famous a poet as Ch'u Yuan?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Allen. He is the greatest poet of China. Like Ch'u Yuan, and of course, like Li Po, the other great Tang dynasty poet... Tu Fu and Li Po are the two famous poets of the Tang dynasty. We call them, 'The Two Famous Tang Dynasty Poets.'"

After Teacher Jo added two red stamps to the calligraphy composition -- one with negative lines, the other positive lines -- everyone stood back from the table to look over the finished piece. I marveled at the exquisite black strokes in a sea of white, the very yin and yang of nature -- opposites changing from form to form. The calligraphy was movement on a frozen sheet of paper, and in many ways I felt lucky not to understand the Chinese characters. This allowed me to look beyond mere words and into the essence of art and the very soul of the artist.

Even more than the water color paintings, Chinese calligraphy tapped into the spirit of China and rekindled my longing to know my own spiritual nature.

Chapter Seven: Wudang Mountain

Occasionally, the Hubei Province Educational Department and the OFA from each university in Wuhan arranged outings for the expatriated community of Westerners. We went to a medicine factory, a music academy, a Chinese acrobatic troupe, and a string orchestra concert where I learned to appreciate the penetrating sound of the *er hu* -- the two string Chinese fiddle. The musicians sat center stage in a semi circle and played such pieces as River Waters, Wishes of the Heart, Spring is Coming, Purple Bamboo, The Moon is in the Stream, and, my favorite, The Moon Reflected in the Second Spring.

In celebration of the May Day holiday weekend (China's Labor Day), the Provincial Government arranged a four day excursion to Wudang Mountain in the Northeast corner of Hubei. On the train to Xiangfan, the first stop on the excursion, I sat by Mr. Jin who was serving as the HUST escort for the trip.

We spent our first day viewing the sights in the town of Longzhong, home of Chu-ko Liang, sage and statesman during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265 BC). Of course I didn't find this remote sage of antiquity as alluring as Mr. Jin, who paid special attention to me throughout the day. We joked around in playful French and he often wanted to take pictures of me with his Chinese 35 mm camera. In front of almost every monument or garden setting, he had me pose to add sentimentality to his composition -- such as having me cusp a flower in tender appreciation, or gaze heavenward with a contemplative expression. Whether or not he was merely toying with me, the exotic foreign woman, I relished every bit of his attention.

Outside the Three Calls Hall, a classical tile roof building in Longzhong, I asked Mr. Jin if the number three had any significance in China.

"Oh my, yes," Mr. Jin replied. "This hall, in fact, commemorates the story called, The Three Replies at Longzhong. Have you read the Chinese classical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*?" I told him no and he explained that the novel was written in the thirteen hundreds by Lo Kuan-chung and I gathered it was like the Mahabharata of China. The classical story depicts the political struggle following the collapse of the Han dynasty in the third century AD.

"In the story," Mr. Jin continued, "the famous war hero Liu Pei sought Chu-ko Liang's strategic advice for preventing the Han dynasty from crumbling into many kingdoms. Chu-ko Liang, whose name means sleeping dragon, remained at his window but did not answer the door until the third time. He wanted to know how sincerely Liu Pei needed his advice. We say, wait three times to know sincerity and think three times before speaking."

"Does the number three mean anything else, Mr. Jin? Is there a Chinese Trinity like in Hinduism or Christianity?"

“Allen... I don’t know about religion... However, we say the number three is the balance of yin and yang opposites. The balance between heaven and Earth. Ancient Chinese people believed this balance is the dragon who flies to heaven in spring and makes the first rain feed the land. So we say the rain dragon links heaven and Earth....”

“The rain dragon soaring to heaven. Is that what I see in a lot of Chinese art?”

“Sometimes. But the dragon has many meanings in Chinese folklore. Like most things.”

“Are there any other meanings for the number three?”

“Many. There are the three teachings of China -- Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. We say the three are one teaching.”

“And now communism is the fourth, right?”

Mr. Jin chuckled and said, “Allen, you are too inquisitive.”

That night we stayed at a guest house in Danjiang, a small town at the foothills of Wudang Mountain. After settling into our rooms, Mr. Jin, Maryanne -- a British teacher from Wuhan University, and I walked around town. A pleasant floral scent wafted through the cool night air. Mr. Jin suggested the fragrance came from peach blossoms.

Along the neighborhood streets, almost every door to the brick and tile roof houses stood wide open. It seemed there existed no private places in Danjiang. At my request, we entered a tea shop crowded with old men smoking, drinking tea, and intently playing *mah jong* (a four person board game using 144 small black tiles), or a card game by briskly slapping cards onto rough wooden tables. Shortly, the many Chinese walking past the front door entered to see the Maryanne and me. This disturbed the old men at the tables and one embarrassed Mr. Jin by asking him to escort us outside.

On the way back to our hotel we heard the high pitched shrieks and clangs of a Chinese opera. We followed the noise to a roped off field where an attendant allowed us to enter, free of charge. Inside, spectators crowded on the rows of rough wooden benches, while eating, laughing, and talking. “This is a country opera troupe that comes to town each year,” Mr. Jin explained as we sat amid the peasants.

Facing us, four feet off the ground, stood a wooden stage. To its right, a small group of musicians played drums, er hus, cymbals, a flute, clackers, a lute, and a small brass gong. A table and two chairs made up the stage setting and each actor had his or her face painted white, and wore platform shoes and gleaming embroidered silk costumes with long triangular sleeves. “They are called ‘rippling water sleeves,’ because they express meaning,” Mr. Jin explained.

“What meaning?” I asked.

He thought a moment and said, “Anger if held up, fear if held low... or, for example, a sleeve over the face means shyness.”

Not long into the high pitched and colorful drama, Mr. Jin remarked that the performance could last for hours. Since Maryanne wanted to return to the guest house, Mr. Jin said he had to escort her back and that I should not stay alone. So we left.

Later that evening, I sat on a stone bench beside the courtyard pond of the guest house. In the daylight, I imagined, the pond had been colored with floating lotus blossoms and squiggly orange carp. Now, the blossoms had closed and the fish slept, but stars twinkled and a gibbous moon glistened on the dark water. While gazing at the moon’s reflection, I recalled some of the many poems my students had given me. A few they had written themselves, but most were by Li Po, Tu Fu, and many other great Chinese poets. But all Chinese poetry, whether crude or well crafted, possessed the earthy romance of the Chinese spirit, the Taoist sense of a simple, selfless,

omnipresent nature. Like painting and calligraphy, Chinese poetry captured the poet's soul, his life's breath as steadily flowing from the very heart of nature. I recalled one poem:

In the Spring the rain sounds sha sha sha sha; All the green shoots are pushing up in silence; Don't complain about the cold in Winter and that Spring comes late; Collect the drops of rain to water the shoots in your field; In the spring the rain sounds sha sha sha sha sha.

The most relished image among the poems was the moon. Titles included New Moon Peak, Moonlight upon my Bed, Mid-Autumn Moon, Anchored by the Setting Moon, A Walk up Moon Mountain:

Hiking to the top of New Moon Peak; I enjoy the brightness of the setting sun; My viewfinder fills with the best scenery; From a far away place all mountains become small; Come with me and mountain climb; In the evening caves of Seven Stars you can find your heart and soul.

And Mid-evening Moon:

In the middle of Autumn the moon shines on everyone except me; The insects sing among the grass for everyone -- but not for me; My love lives on the moon; I call for her but she does not answer.

As the spirit of India had enlivened my senses, now China did the same but in her own more passive, yet equally touching way. While in the mountains, I wanted to understand Taoism, like a poet, and perhaps discover romance in the cheery days of spring.

"Hello Miss Allen!" Mr. Jin approached, startling me from my thoughts. But I was delighted to see him and glad he was alone.

"What are you doing, Miss Allen?" he asked as he sat on a nearby rock.

"It's a wonderful sight, isn't it? The stars and moon on the pond."

“You are a romantic person.” He chuckled and lit a cigarette.

“Well, the moon *is* very romantic....”

“In China we say the moon is about loneliness and longing. What are you longing for, Miss Allen?” Mr. Jin teased.

“I long for many carp on my dinner plate.” This amused him.

Silence fell until Mr. Jin remarked, “We say there is a toad on the moon.”

“A toad?” I was sure he was teasing.

“Yes a toad... or a rabbit. See the blue marks?” He pointed up at the moon. “Chinese say this looks like a toad.” He laughed once more in his typically delightful way.

“Oh, I see. What else do the Chinese say about the moon?”

He shallowly inhaled his cigarette, blew the smoke upward, and said, “Because the moon is darkness and light, we say it is the perfect cycle of nature. The new moon is all dark, all yin... Then light grows on the moon until it is full. This is yang. You understand?”

“The full moon is yang, the new moon is yin?”

“No. Light is yang, dark is yin. Moon is yin. Sun is yang.”

“So the phases of the moon are like the yin yang symbol?”

“What symbol?”

“The black and the white tadpoles embraced in a circle.” I drew it in the dirt.

“Ah!” he said. “The *tai ji.* From the circle comes the yin and yang... The yin with a speck of yang, and the yang with a speck of yin.”

I looked up at the moon and said, “I don’t know of any story about the moon... Although, I’ve heard it’s made of green cheese.”

“That’s strange.” Mr. Jin threw his cigarette into the pond, rippling the moon’s reflection.

“Mr. Jin! Won’t that kill the fish?”

“Oh no. The fu wu yuan keep it clean.”

For a moment I quietly thought about the young good-humored man beside me under the moon and stars. The resonant er hu rang through my mind filling me with poetic visions of romance. “Mr. Jin,” I said, and he looked up from his own quiet musings. “Why are there so many Chinese poems and songs about the moon? I mean it’s in practically every one I’ve read.”

“Ah yes. In fact, the most famous Chinese poem is about the moon. It’s by Li Po and we call it, ‘Night Thoughts of the Moon.’ It says, ‘Moonbeams as cold as frost fall upon my bed. I lift my head to view the moon, then bow down to dream about my far away home.’ You see, in ancient times the people of China are often separated from loved ones. Because the moon is the only sight in common for separated people, poets like to recall its image. When you look at the moon, Miss Allen, your family can also look at it and think about you.”

“Or when I leave China I’ll look at the moon and think you’re looking at it, too.”

Mr. Jin chuckled, perhaps out of embarrassment. He cleared his throat and said, “Even Mao wrote a famous poem about the moon goddess. It goes, “Moon goddess spreads her rippling water sleeves to dance for the patriotic souls of endless space. The tiger is subdued, while joyful tears pour from heaven like the mighty rain.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“It’s really political.”

“So you have a moon goddess in China?”

“She is Ch’ang-o, muse of Chinese poetry. In legend, she stole from her husband the elixir of immortality, then fled to live on the moon in the Palace of Far Reaching Cold. In Chinese legend the moon is cold and frosty, not green cheese.” He grinned. “In story, they say

that during the harvest moon, Ch'ang-o returns to the Earth in moonbeams and grants wishes to mortal men."

"What'll you wish for, Mr. Jin?"

Before he could answer a group of the other HUST foreigners entered the courtyard, drawing away his attention. "Sorry," he turned back to me, "what did you say?"

"Oh nothing, Mr. Jin, nothing at all."

Mr. Jin left me at the pond and joined the others, perhaps feeling he had paid me too much attention since his task was to be with all the HUST foreigners.

I didn't leave immediately, but gazed upon the heavenly reflections, understanding how such a setting inspired Chinese poetry. My feelings seemed so unlike those that I had in India, where spiritual emotions were openly boisterous. In China, the spirit lays well hidden from view, beneath the facade of communist maxims and social regimentation. But it is still ever present. The first glimpse of it may be through the art and poems -- a Millennium of Moonbeams. Then, in the mountains, the spirit will call out its effervescent existence and fill your mind with verse.... *The waning moon reflects in the courtyard pond. Frost from the Far Reaching Palace invigorates my heart with desire to know and to be. Alone, I call to the moon, asking for her fruitful guidance. But Ch'ang-o will not spread her rippling sleeves until next year's harvest far far away.*

The following day we boarded a rickety windowless bus that sped up the narrow road winding along the steep cliffs of Wudang Mountain. On this same road hundreds of buses and trucks loaded with Chinese had also come to the mountain for the annual May Day trip. The

warm morning air grew cooler the further we climbed and by the time our bus stopped at a Taoist monastery, the Purple Cloud Temple, it was briskly cold.

Bundled in a wool sweater, I wandered off from the other foreigners and happened upon a small courtyard where a *wudang* movie was being filmed. Wudang is a type of Taoist martial art, like the kung fu of the Shaolin Temple. I sat on a step near the movie set and watched the actors, both men and women dressed in Ming costumes, jump up and down with swords. The film editors would, of course, create supernatural fighting scenes with people jumping backward on walls or springing high into the air. But I saw: *swords flash through the air -- action stops. Actor climbs onto a wall -- action starts -- actor jumps off the wall -- action stops. Actor climbs on actor's shoulders -- action starts. Actor's foot carefully knocks sword out of opponent's hand....*

Shortly after leaving the movie set, I found Mr. Jin taking pictures near the stairs leading to the main temple. We took some pictures of each other and set out to explore the Purple Cloud Temple. Outside the temple doors stood a Taoist priest, an old man with a thin white chin beard. He wore blue trousers, a blue Mandarin shirt, and white leg wraps up to his knees. A square black hat framed his forehead.

Mr. Jin greeted the priest while I mused over questions to ask. I wondered how the old man would respond to such Taoist terms as *ch'i* -- the energy of nature, or *wu wei* -- non-action or letting nature run its course. The concept of wu wei struck me as similar to following dharma by cooperating with the natural forces of the outer world and your own inner being. In many ways these Asian notions opposed the American attitude of dominating nature. Most Americans believe there are no limitations to what a person can do, if they put their mind to it. "Go West young man. Grab for the gusto. Climb every mountain. Be all that you can be." This attitude was

also true for me. I pursued my desires, believing that only I could prevent the accomplishment of my goals. But where was this harmonious nature that wove its course through the world and within myself? I barely knew it, though its presence was becoming clear to me, more and more. And this is what I sought in the mountains.

"Wu wei," I said to the priest. He grinned, bearing no teeth, but he made no reply. "Wu wei," I repeated, louder and slower.

"He doesn't understand you," Mr. Jin remarked. "He thinks you're speaking English."

"Ask him the meaning of Taoism."

Mr. Jin asked the old man, who in turn grinned and spoke. Mr. Jin translated, "follow the water carving the mountain."

A good answer I thought to myself, wondering if it was designed to please the inquisitive foreigner. "Ask him if I'm supposed to take a boat down the river to understand Taoism."

Mr. Jin did so and translated the priest's response, "He says, 'truly, you do nothing other than what you already do.'"

The priest said something else to Mr. Jin. "He wants to know how old you are."

I told him my age in Chinese, and the priest told us with pride that he was eighty-five.

With a handshake, Mr. Jin and I left the old priest standing at his post, and entered the strongly scented temple where a red fabric draped altar with three Buddha-like Gods ornamented the back wall. Mr. Jin explained that the statues were three of the eight Taoist Immortals, or saints.

"Do you mean Taoist Gods?" I asked.

"Not really. The Immortals were legendary people who never died. Of course, this is a disappearing belief of the countryside people."

“Isn’t Taoism more of a philosophy than a religion? What about the *Tao Te Ching*?” I recalled my recent perusal of this ancient Taoist book by the legendary sage, Lao-Tze. The inspirational verses were thought provoking and tantalizingly mystical, but not religious in the sense of singing to the One Almighty God -- like the Psalms, the Sufi poems, or the Bhagavad-Gita. The Taoist verses were more like the poems by Li Po and To Fu that made you want to hear a flowing stream, inhale the dew of early spring, and soar high with the swirling clouds.

In response to my question Mr. Jin said, “I suppose Taoism is a philosophy among scholars, and a religion among the peasants. Do you want to be a Taoist, Miss Allen? We can ask that old priest to make you a nun.” He laughed at his teasing remark and I wandered over to the small altar near the temple entrance.

Before long, one of the OFA representatives shouted across the central courtyard that it was time to leave. The Chinese in charge had tightly organized our trip and kept us to their schedule. More often than not, this meant we rarely had enough time to see the sights they took us to.

As our bus continued up mountain, the road became so inundated with other vehicles that inevitably, at a curve edging a cliff, we confronted a bus coming down the mountain. Most of the foreigners shouted to be let off the bus before our driver attempted to maneuver around the oncoming bus. Only one foreigner courageously, or perhaps foolishly, remained seated, that is, until the back of the bus hung over the cliff, then he jumped out the front door and joined the rest of us. We all stood waiting, watching, and doubting the success of the maneuver, but in the end the driver accomplished the feat.

We eventually pulled in at the trail head for the Golden Hall Temple on top of Heavenly Pillar Peak, the tallest of the seventy-two peaks on Wudang Mountain. Our Chinese escorts

viewed this climb as the main focus of our May Day excursion. Unfortunately, everyone else on the mountain had the same idea and a dense ripple of Chinese flowed up and down the entire five mile trail. I had never seen anything like it, except in science fiction movies. I felt like an ant stuck in a procession of ants brushing against another one moving in the opposite direction. To manage, I stayed at the outer edge of the trail and stopped for a soda at every trail side kiosk.

Among the massive flow of trekkers were old women hobbling along in their tiny feet with the help of canes. These women were at least eighty because foot binding had been outlawed with the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911. An article in the *China Daily* explained that the custom of foot binding began in the seventh century Tang dynasty court and flourished by the fourteenth century Ming dynasty. During this time, and up until the twentieth century, a mother incrementally squeezed and bound all but the big toe against the soles of her daughter's feet. The bone at the instep eventually shattered and the girl's feet were forever deformed in the shape of crescents.

I presumed the old women on the trail were devout Taoists determined to make another annual climb up the sacred mountain, but Mr. Jin, who walked with me most of the way, said they were observing years of habit. Whatever their intent, these stoic old hikers were remnants of a millennium of women forced to suffer because of inhumane cultural ideals about feminine beauty and subjugation. I hated the reign of cultures that, like religions, condemned such women to a life of torment and pain. At the same time, I admired them in their effort to make another trek up the mountain. Why were they so determined? What promising reward lay on top of Heavenly Pillar Peak? Did they expected to meet an immortal mountain spirit? Or to feel freedom among the clouds?

Most of the Westerners in my group made it no further than halfway up the mountain. On more than one occasion I wanted to turn around, but Mr. Jin encouraged me to continue struggling up the ant hill. Maintaining my visions of a spiritual experience with Taoism, I continued climbing. At last Mr. Jin and I reached the bottom of a series of steep narrow steps about ninety yards from the summit. Here, the moving trail stopped. Then there came a sudden commotion and Mr. Jin heard that someone had fallen down the bank. This frightened me and I turned to head back down.

"Come on, Miss Allen. Chinese say it is good luck to reach a mountain peak. If you do, you can meet a mountain spirit and gain immortality. Like the tortoise."

"Really?"

"No, not really. I'm just kidding." Mr. Jin laughed teasingly. "But come on, it's not that much further."

"And at the top... Will we meet a Taoist god?"

"Sure. In the Golden Hall Temple there is the Taoist immortal Zhen Wu."

"Is he the turtle god?"

"No." Mr. Jin smiled, burgeoning his dimples. "But truly, Zhen Wu has the snake coiled around the tortoise symbol. This represents the dark north, the yin principle. In Chinese folklore the tortoise is only female so she can only reproduce with snakes."

"Very funny Mr. Jin."

"No... this one is a true Chinese idea."

I did make it to the top of Heavenly Pillar Peak, but saw little more than thousands of heads billowing toward the roof of the Golden Hall Temple. So I quickly left the holy summit, feeling disappointed, as if I had been cheated from my promise of a spiritual encounter.

The following day, after spending a cold foggy night at a rustic hillside inn, we went to another Taoist temple which, fortunately, had very few people around. The Nanyan Temple Monastery stood embedded in a rock-cliff mountain side and had been built in the fourteenth century during the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty. Inside the temple a narrow outer corridor with a stone balustrade rimmed the cliff. Etched into the stone wall across from the balustrade were four Chinese words. Mr. Jin said the words represented tranquility, long life, prosperity, and good health but he would not tell me which was which because he wanted me to choose one to stand beside, without knowing what it meant, and he would take my picture. After he did so, he refused to identify the character I had stood before. I asked an OFA representative standing nearby but he chose to go along with Mr. Jin's joke.

Impatient with Mr. Jin's silly game, I left the corridor, headed out the cliff hewn temple, and sauntered along the trail toward our bus parked at the top of the plateau. Not far from the cliff temple I approached a trail branching into the hillside. I decided to follow it and search for a serene place to sit and contemplate the mountains, like a Taoist priest. If I cannot experience Taoism at the top of a crowded mountain, I thought, then perhaps I'll find it when I'm alone.

As I headed down this trail Mr. Jin called from behind, "Prosperity, Miss Allen... You were standing before prosperity." He quickly caught up with me and said, "Don't be angry. We are just having fun."

I assured him I wasn't angry but wanted to wander off alone, to experience Taoism in the mountains.

"You are romantic," he said, charming me with his dimpled smile. "But I cannot let you go alone because you might fall down the mountain."

"You can join me if you like." I was hoping he would, and pleased when he agreed to.

Eventually, the trail wound through an area of boulders. At one enormous rock, Mr. Jin extended his hand to help me climb it. This flattered me and, as he took my hand, I watched his dark almond eyes sparkle. I felt a flicker of emotion and Mr. Jin looked away. Too much eye contact. I've gone too far.

After climbing the rock, Mr. Jin released my hand and said nothing as we furthered down the trail. Soon, we happened upon Darrell, one of the HUST foreigners, sitting on a large boulder overlooking the valley. Mr. Jin joined him while advising me to return to the bus. Instead, I left him and Darrell and continued along the trail, feeling disappointed that Mr. Jin stayed behind. This didn't, however, discourage me from seeking my own rock from which to gaze into the valley. In fact, I felt a new surge of inspiration and was determined to meet the spirit of Wudang mountain.

Down the trail I came to a narrow path branching off into a thicket. Perhaps this is the path of an old Taoist priest, I thought as I pushed the brush aside and followed it. At the end of the thicket, the path continued on about fifty feet, hugging a steep rocky slope and ending at a natural recess in the cliff. It was the perfect setting!

I carefully inched along the path and sat crosslegged on the gravelly ground. Then, while deeply inhaling the cool fresh air, I gazed across the valley at the green slopes speckled with rocks and lavender and crimson azaleas. Wisps of scattered clouds touched the highest mountain peaks across the valley. Host and guest mountains, I recalled my landscape painting as I heard the faint gurgle of a distant brook. A flock of magpies appeared and soared into the dense valley, their call echoing from mountain to mountain. I closed my eyes and recalled verses from the *Tao*

Te Ching. “There is a valley spirit that never dies. It is the primal mother. Her gateway lies at the base of heaven and Earth. It is faintly visible but always open, if you are receptive....”

I deeply inhaled the warmth of a hidden sun. Breathing is yin flowing into yang, yang into yin... *Words cannot express the Tao, says the Tao Te Ching. To approach it, be desireless, selfless, silent. Listen to the spontaneity of nature.*

Deeply inhale, exhale... I feel cool, because I remember warmth; I am hungry because I have known fullness. A poem enters my thoughts. I open my eyes and scribble it on paper. But it is not right so I toss it down the mountain slope. Another poem returns, like an echo. This one I keep.

How dwarfed the mountains make me feel, as small as an insect on a blade of grass. Insignificant. Now I understand the little man contemplating in Chinese landscape paintings. Before me stretches the world of opposites -- shadows on the mountain where light creates darkness, darkness light, and the mountains create the surrounding space. Here lies the yin and yang forces of nature. Yin changes into yang, yang into yin... Change is incremental, like the withering mountain, or all at once, like a violent storm....

Deeply inhale, exhale, and inhale the sunlight of yang, the moonlight of yin. I say aloud, “Open mysterious gateway to heaven and Earth.... I have come alone to partake in the vital breath of life. My quest to know you, Primal Mother, has not ended. Please, help me touch my soul....”

I see nothing but hear a voice calling... “Reach low into the valley, climb high, scale the mountain, embrace a cloud. Rain falls through misty heaven. I am the rainbow dragon.”

Chapter Eight: Travels in China

When the semester ended, I took a passenger boat down the Yangtze River from Chon to Nanjing. The voyage began a lazy four months of travel before my next job at a university in southern Thailand. Since I still hadn't received an offer from the Middle East, I took this job believing a year in the tropics would greatly appeal to me. But now the tropics lay far from my thoughts because I first planned to cover much of China's vast and variegated landscape, culture, and religion.

Chinese call the Yangtze the *Changjiang*, the Long River. Six hundred miles from the source of the Ganges, the Yangtze springs from the Tibetan Plateau and meanders four thousand miles through middle China to the Yellow Sea. "Names arrive when the whole is divided," says the Tao Te Ching. "Already, there are too many names. People should learn to stop naming. The world of Tao is like the river flowing toward the sea."

Traveling down the Long River was a journey through the fireworks of nature and legendary places of humankind. The heat of summer burdened most of my river journey, except when a cooling wind swept through the valleys as our boat ventured past the steep mountains of the Three Gorges. During the journey, passenger liners swept up river, sampans with long bamboo fishing poles drifted downstream, tug boats puffed either way, and junks with patched sails glided elegantly through the water. I often sat outside my second class cabin at the bow to read *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* The epic novel seemed to journey with me down the river, and unfold the adventures of heroic warriors seeking a place in history along the river of fortune and fame.

In the cabin next door roomed an old man on his way to visit a friend he hadn't seen for fifty years. Much history was stored behind his weathered old face. He must have suffered enormous change, yet he had a sense of serenity and calmness about him, as if he had survived a

treacherous journey and could rest now. He spoke English quite well because he had spent his childhood in an English speaking mission school. When I asked if he was Christian, he laughed and said, “I am an old man who has traveled on this river for seventy years.” I felt fortunate to be traveling with the old man. He knew a lot of Chinese poems and at nearly every bend in the river, he related a legend or geological fact.

On the afternoon of our first day past Chon, our boat came to the first major attraction, the red pagoda *Shibaozhai*. It stood upon the face of a rectangular rock mountain amid trees and buildings edged by a flat and rocky shoreline. “Have you heard the folklore about Shibaozhai?” the old man asked, joining me at the rail. I told him I hadn’t.

“Once there was a foolish man name of Gung Gung. He usurped the goddess Nu-gua from her throne and occupied the Yangtze River lands. But Nu-gua is a great goddess and she defeated Gung Gung. This made the foolish man so angry he hit his head on the mountain and disturbed the sky. When Nu-gua fixed the sky, she made this rock with the pagoda, Shibaozhai.”

“Is Nu-gua a Taoist goddess?”

The old man laughed at my question and said, “Nu-gua is a folklore creator goddess... She became lonely one day, so from clay she made the people. But she died long ago. Like all gods and legends that once lived and have since died.”

We stopped overnight in Wanxian where a bustling night market offered bamboo furniture, mats, and baskets from Sichuan. Early the next morning, the boat set off again and soon passed steep sloping banks terraced with patches of farmland. In places, people had cultivated every piece of land, as they had for centuries. Occasionally we passed villages nestled into cliffs, or a solitary brick farm house affixed to a mountain slope. I stood at the rail to watch

the thin chimney smoke swirl and spread above the tile roof of a farm house, like a fairy poised to face the river with her arms reaching high and her expansive white hair mingling with the sky.

Further downstream, rocks along the banks had tumbled down green crevices, forming disheveled stairwells to the murky river. In places, sunlight glistened on the water and created shadowy faces with long noses on the hills. There were eddies in some of the rocks -- winding, turning, and folding stones enmeshed with clumps of grass. Mountains faded behind the boat as we traveled forward. Ahead, ridges faintly appear. Hosts and guests arriving and departing like fading memories of the past, and faint visions of the future.

While gazing over the rail at the boat's progress through the swirling river, the words of the old Taoist priest came to mind. "Follow the water carving the mountain..." The hard yielding to the soft... Yin to yang. The soft yielding to hard... Yang to yin. Shapes ever in the Now, yielding, changing, uniting in nature's course. I feel small within this process, and sometimes uncertain. Am I not the seeker? Is this my nature? My life's breath? Am I not weaving a course through hard towering mountains while carving, shaping, unfolding the spirit of my very being? My nature is Nature herself, both hard and soft, subtle and poignant, serene and troubled.... And as the river finds its Way by ceaseless toil, so do I.

"Look," the old man called, joining me at the rail. "Now we come to Baidi city." The town appeared on top of a green mountain beside a northern estuary of the Yangtze. "The town's name during the Han dynasty was Purple Sun. In legend, white fog shaped like a dragon rose from a well in the city, so the ruler called himself Baidi, the White Emperor, and changed the name of his city. Baidi is the poetic city, and during the Tang Dynasty there lived many great poets..."

"Li Po and Tu Fu. " I told him about my calligraphy piece by Teacher Jo.

He grinned and said, “Tu Fu traveled many times to Baidi and wrote hundreds of poems about this city. Li Po also wrote a famous poem about Baidi: ‘In early morning I leave the misty White Emperor City and travel down river four hundred miles. Monkey screeches echo from bank to bank. Behind my boat are a thousand folded mountains’ Tu Fu also wrote a famous poem, ‘The clouds climb above Baidi and the rain pours as thunder moves quickly between high river and sharp gorge. The sun and the moon are gloomy among those ancient trees and withered ivies.’”

“In Baidi is the famous farewell. Have you read about it in your book?” the old man asked, referring to my Chinese novel. I wasn’t sure which part he meant, and he explained, “After his political failure because of a rash act, Lui Pei withdrew his troops to Baidi so he could die of shame. But before he died, he called for the great wise Chu-ko Liang and asked him to help with national affairs. Never before or since has there been such a moving farewell between king and minister.”

The old man gazed solemnly at the passing city. I wondered what memories he had, and whether they held pain or happiness. China appeared to me as a great expanse of history and wisdom that offered simplicity and serenity while disruptively lashing out harshness and cruelty. How could people live with such extreme contrasts and change? It seemed I made my own changes by pursuing what I liked, and often I purposely sought contrast to prevent boredom. I wondered how much I had changed since coming to Asia. Already I felt less wrapped up in thoughts about my future and more settled and content in my daily life, perhaps somewhat like the old man.

“Parting is a very moving theme in Chinese poetry.” The old man interrupted my musings. “Li Po wrote a farewell song to his childhood friend. ‘Long ago we played under

willow trees. Our only light came from dim candles and the crescent moon. Loud in those days were our drinking songs of merriment, so loud they frightened away the nesting swallows. Today, my friend, you have parted from me like those swallows -- And only heaven can tell if we shall ever meet again.'" The old man looked back toward the city of Baidi, proudly smiled and said, "Tomorrow I shall meet an old friend I have not seen for fifty years."

At the "Door of K'uei," we entered Qutang, the first and shortest of the Three Gorges. Tu Fu wrote, "Qutang is more dangerous than a hundred doors to hell." Here, the swift narrow river passed steep folded cliffs where a gang of trackers inched along a stone cut path, while pulling a junk with ragged ribbed sails. As I watched them struggle against the current, I imagined them chanting, *"Ho heave ho, ho heave ho... We are but burdened slaves. Sore, hungry and tired... But we have no place to go... Ho heave ho. Heave ho."*

The second gorge, Witches Gorge, extended through a gallery of landscape paintings, shrinking me beneath lofty host and guest mountains. Witches Gorge is known for its twelve mountain peaks which include, along the northern bank, Dragon's Home, Holy Stream, Morning Clouds, Goddess Mountain, Pine Mountain, and Immortals Gathered. Only three mountains could be seen on the southern bank -- Dancing Cranes, Misty Green Screen, and Flying Phoenix Peak.

"Tu Fu wrote a famous poem about this gorge," the old man said as we walked to the bow of the boat for a full view of the mountains on both sides of the river. After we sat on two deck chairs, he recited, "Before Autumn, jade dew rests upon maple trees. Then leaves wither and fall off. On Goddess Mountain in Witches Gorge the mist is dark and the wind wails a dying man's song. Waves from the mighty river rise high and storm the sky. Snow clouds cast shadows that mingle with the Earth's darkness. Chrysanthemums have already bloomed twice and

tomorrow the petals will blow away. I think about my home and know I must sail there, alone..." He paused and added, "Actually, this is a poem about growing old and preparing to die."

Goddess Mountain, or *Shen-nu feng,* loomed above the Yangtze. "A stone column standing at its summit is really a delicate and healthy girl," the old man said. "Ancient people imagine that she was once a fairy who had power to control the clouds and rain. Her name is Yao-ji, and she is the youngest daughter of the great goddess, Queen of the West. She came to earth on a cloud to kill the dragons that destroyed the harmony of the local people. After her conquest, Yao-ji ordered construction of the Three Gorges and changed herself into Goddess Mountain so she could guide the boats safely along the river. Day and night she looks down the river. She is the first one to greet the pink morning clouds and the last one to see the sun fade away. This story is a legend that reflects the desire of ancient labor people to control nature."

Forty five miles past *Shen-nu feng* the old man pointed out another village. "This is called Zigui. Here is the home town of Ch'u Yuan the famous old poet. Do you know the story of the great fish?" I told him no. "After Ch'u Yuan drowned, a great fish swallowed him to bring him back to Zigui. But the fish swims too far and goes to Yufu village. Yufu means Village of 'Fish Turns Back.'" The old man laughed delightfully at his story.

Xiling, the most treacherous of the Three Gorges, began at Fragrant Stream (or Smell Stream, according to the old man), the famous home of Wang Zhaojun, a legendary Han dynasty heroine. The Han court required beautiful maidens to have their portraits painted and presented to the emperor so he could select a new concubine. Zhaojun refused to bribe her painter, as maidens customarily did, to portray her as especially beautiful. In revenge the painter made Zhaojun look ugly. But the emperor eventually discovered Zhaojun and fell in love with her beauty. "Local people say Zhaojun returned to Fragrant Stream before she married the king," the

old man said. “She washed her face in the cool water and cried drops of pearls. This caused the stream to become fragrant and as clear as glass.”

In the western portion of Xiling Gorge stretched a smaller gorge named Cattle Mountain because a summit rock stood like a boy leading his cow by the nose. “In folklore,” the old man remarked, “a traveler upstream should start in the morning from cattle mountain, sleep at night by cattle mountain and let three mornings and nights pass with cattle mountain still in sight. This teaches people to work arduously and to travel carefully with patience. In other words, after three days -- or a lifetime -- you should remember your beginning.”

Past Moon Gorge the river gradually narrowed and we reached Three Travelers Cave and Southern Crossing Pass. “Now,” the old man said, “the gate closes behind the Three Gorges and tired water gets a short relax because dangers are reshaped into tranquility.” The river now became flat, monotonous, and devoid of legends -- a remarkable contrast from gorge after beautiful gorge embracing turbulent waters and innumerable stories.

At the locks of Yichang, I regretted parting company with the old man and I wished him a pleasant visit with his friend. “Thank you,” he replied. “I have not seen this old friend of mine for fifty years.”

***

From Nanjing, I traveled to the lake side city of Wu Xi and saw it through a screen of relentless rain. I then went to the garden city of Suzhou. “In heaven there is paradise, on earth there is Suzhou,” my students had told me. And they were right. Suzhou had elegant and charming pavilions, parks, and stately Ming and Qing dynasty manors with courtyards, corridors, moongates and garden ponds filled with orange carp and bright round lotus flowers. From Shanghai I traveled up the Yellow Sea to the beach side town of Qingdao (home of Qingdao

beer). Naturally I spent a few days in Beijing from where I journeyed by train across northern China in order to see the Buddhist cave art near the town of Dunhuang.

The long train journey began on the day I turned twenty-eight, and for the first time in my life my birthday passed by unacknowledged. This didn't bother me. In fact, traveling through incredible landscape and left alone with my thoughts seemed an ideal way to celebrate becoming a year older. Throughout this day, the train passed by green hills and entered innumerable tunnels. Occasionally the Great Wall appeared clutching the contours of the land. By afternoon, the scenery changed to hot and dry flat yellow plains with corn and wheat fields delineated by murky irrigation canals.

On the morning of the second day the train paralleled or crossed over the Yellow River, which is also called "the sorrow of China" because of the historical famines and floods in the region. The river cut through the plateau of pulverized sand blown in from the Gobi desert and far western mountains. Within reach of the river, dabbled among green fields or gatherings of willows and elms, stood tramped earth hovels with tile or straw roofs. Except for the television antennas towering above almost every dwelling, life in this region looked as if it hadn't changed since the dawn of Chinese society.

The following day the impassable Qilian Mountains appeared to the South, edging the great Tibetan Plateau. Dark rain clouds loomed above these gray barren mountains that looked as though God had arbitrarily set them on the flat land. Each mountain stood stoically with deep crevices running from its summit to the red and gray pebbles dispersed across the plains. Here and there wild horses galloped across the land, or flocks of goats or sheep, or herds of thick wool Bactrian camels passively grazed in an oasis below the mountains.

Our train passed the remote desert town of Jiayuguan, which means “Pleasant Valley Pass.” Jiayuguan was once a major resting stop along the Silk Road, the road of antiquity where thirteen centuries of traders and explorers traveled from the Holy Lands to as far as Xi’an. Among these early travelers was Marco Polo, who journeyed from Venice to Beijing and met the Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan. At Jiayuguan, the Great Wall ended as a crumbling clay mound in an empty dry region. It was nothing like the most famous portion near Beijing, in Bada Ling, where thousands of tourists walk along the tall broad stone wall and take pictures. The Great Wall, I had read, traces its origin to the Warring States Period when the Chinese constructed pieces of the wall to keep out the northern barbarians. During the Ch’in dynasty (China’s namesake), the first and greatest of all Chinese emperors, Ch’in Shih Huang Ti, forced hundreds of thousands of men to build most of the wall, and connect the existing segments. Both the Jiayuguan and the famous Bada Ling sections date from the more recent Ming dynasty.

Beyond Jiayuguan the flat and sandy desert unfolded in browns, reds, and grays. In some places, not a single clump of grass existed -- the Gobi had triumphed. During the afternoon, temperatures reached 115 degrees and I had no choice but to keep the window open, even though the silt off the plains blew in and made breathing difficult and thirst a continual problem. But after sunset the desert cooled remarkably and by midnight my compartment became cold. On this night, I bundled up in a blanket, sat on the fold down chair in the aisle, and gazed at the sky above the Gobi. Over the flat landscape, an amazing shower of stars, unopposed by any other source of light, radiated like white crystals on black velvet. It seemed as though I was seeing stars for the first time in my life. Each was distinct, and yet together, they clustered into one intelligible form -- an arm of our own Milky Way Galaxy. Awestruck, I stayed up all night to watch a bright red star, or a planet, or an entire constellation burst into the sky. By the time the

sun spread a crimson sheen over the rugged land, I concluded that there was nothing quite as beautiful as a stark, barren, uninhabitable desert.

Late in the afternoon the train pulled into the station at Liuyuan, Gansu province. Liuyuan was a hot, humid, and desolate village, where dust blew around adobe block hovels edging unpaved roads. I quickly caught the local bus to Dunhuang. Historically, Dunhuang had been an oasis between the Gobi and the Taklimakan deserts, and like Jiayuguan, was formerly a frontier stop along the Silk Road. In fact, the northern and southern routes of the Silk Road merged in Dunhuang, or diverged, depending on the wayfarer's direction. Entering China the traveler came to the Gansu Corridor, and leaving it he encountered the Taklimakan desert -- one of the most desolate regions in the world.

After a night in the Dunhuang Guest House, I caught a tour bus to the nearby Maogao Caves, also known as The Cave of a Thousand Buddhas. For a thousand years, Buddhist monks had dug the caves into the eastern slope of Mingsha Mountain. At the center of the grottoes towered a nine story pagoda that housed a 100 foot standing Buddha. Five levels of stairwells and walkways led to the cave entrances.

When I arrived, dozens of Chinese, English, and French speaking tour groups had already assembled at the bottom of the mountain. I joined an English group with about fifteen Westerners. Our guide spoke loud and concise English and continuously smiled, as if his duty was to spread good cheer among us. "We welcome you, friends, to the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas," he said, as the group gathered at the bottom of the first stairwell. Numerous groups lingered ahead of us, so we had to wait before entering each corridor, cave, or anteroom.

“We can say,” the guide remarked after our group entered the first cave, “here was the gateway of Buddhism into China, from about two hundred to twelve hundred AD. One thousand years of one thousand Buddhas.” The guide chuckled. “After Yuan dynasty, these grottoes fell into disrepair until the Peoples Republic of China restored them to their ancient splendor.”

In the large rectangular rooms of the earliest caves, terra cotta Buddhas sat in alcoves amid bulging eyed warriors, saints with hair, disciples without hair, and murals with angelic flying figures. Many wall murals seemed like wallpaper designed with row after row of small Buddhas seated in lotus posture. The guide pointed out that the early grottoes contained Buddhas called Shakyamuni. Many other Buddhas, including the 100 foot standing statue, were called Maitreya, the Buddha-to-come. Like Jesus and Kalki, the last avatar of Vishnu, Maitreya would come to earth one day and restore Truth in a chaotic and decadent world. Evidently, a main thrust of world religions is to believe that someday there will be salvation on earth.

In the later Tang dynasty caves most of the Buddhas were called Amitabha, the Buddha of Endless Light. On these cave murals, haloed Buddhas flanked by attendants in varying sizes sat in colorful palatial scenes with elaborate waterside pavilions, bridges over pools, orchestras, and lithe dancers.

Many of the cave paintings were actually parables from Buddhist scriptures. The most impressive story the guide had to share, and perhaps the most noble religious teaching I had ever heard, was called the Consolation of the Invalid Vimala. One mural of this parable (there were many) portrayed the old householder Vimala, dressed in colorful robes while sitting on his bed. Across the room from Vimala stood a slender angelic figure called Manjusri, the Saint of Wisdom. Because I was so intrigued by the moral of this parable, I lagged behind my tour group to stare at the mural and recount the story, so I might never forget its meaning....

Manjusri has come to the home of Vimala to inquire about his illness. Astonished, Manjusri finds an empty house, except for Vimala on his sick bed. "What is this, Vimala, wisest of householders? There is nothing in your room! Nothing at all."

Vimala replies with amusement, "How true, Manjusri. But don't you see? I have prepared my home for your visit."

"How so?"

"My house is empty because all ways we construct, all possessions we gain, are meaningless. Therefore, I have prepared my home for you by clearing my mind of meaningless notions."

"And what is it that ails you, O Vimala?"

"Great Saint of Wisdom. I am sick because other beings in the world are sick. And I will forever remain sick as long as there is one other who is sick. How could I seek joy and pleasure when others suffer. I tell you, great Manjusri, when there is no more pain or sorrow, then shall I think about my own prosperity and health."

"So wise, old man, so wise you are. And now I shall leave, assured that your condition is well and good."

The most recent cave, from the Yuan dynasty, contained the Thousand-armed Thousand-eyed Buddha, the most spectacular mural in the caves. Bronze intricately outlined the image and it wore a garment of green, red, and white sashes braided and flowing down its waist. A central eye beamed from its forehead. At each side of its main head peered two profiles, and on top, stacking up like a pyramid, sat six smaller heads. It had two hands folded in *namaste* at front, two hands resting at its groin, and two holding a Buddha in lotus posture above its pyramid of

heads. The rest of its 994 arms unfolded like a chrysanthemum into a grand circle of hands in seven rings. Each palm of the one thousand hands held an eye.

Transfixed by this image, I though about how Buddhism was so much like Hinduism. They both exploded the universe into a billion aspects, a Buddha, maybe an arhat, or a Vishnu, Shiva, or Kali. And now this wonderful image of a thousand arms and eyes. What did they all mean? Was there more to this mural than someone's creative imagination? Was an aspect like this fantastic image, as close as we could come to understanding the nature of God? God -- such a fantastic notion. Not male or female but simply God. I felt almost blind when it came to realizing such spiritual ideals. At the same time, such an image inspired my thoughts about God. If I had the time to gaze on it indefinitely, would I gain a spiritual nature and reach the blissful state of nirvana? But how could I enter nirvana if I esteemed the moral of Vimala? Nirvana was selfish because it's entered alone, and if I followed Vimala's teachings, I could never enter nirvana unless everyone else in the world already had.

When the tour was over, the guide thanked us for being such a friendly group. "Don't forget to return to your favorite exhibit... And remember, friends, to see the 100 foot Future Buddha from each level of the grotto."

I first headed up a stairwell to see the face of the enormous Maitreya Buddha, but before getting far, I found myself stuck in an enclosed corridor with a ceiling very near my head. It seems that all the other tour groups had finished at the same time, and everyone eagerly scrambled to see the face of the Future Buddha.

While people pushed me from behind and in front, I sweated from claustrophobia, feeling entombed with wall to wall people. I concentrated on seeing the Buddha's face, but it didn't

help. So I squeezed through the crowd back down the steps until panic overwhelmed me. “I’ve got to get out! Please, get out of my way, move, move...” I closed my eyes and edged my way to an open gallery where I clasped the railing and crept to the next stairwell filled with people. Finally, I hastened down the last flight of steps and ran to a fence near a grove of poplar and willow trees.

“Ca va pas?” I heard a voice say. I looked up and saw a woman with thick graying hair piled on top of her head peering at me over half glasses. She was sitting under a tree at a table covered with books.

“Oh, I’m not French.”

“Are you all right dear?”

“Yeah. I’m just no good in crowds.”

“Have a seat.” She indicated the bench opposite her at the table.

Once seated, I caught my breath, and asked the woman, “What brings you here? The caves are interesting, but I mean, what an ordeal to get here! Not to mention the crowds.”

“Didn’t you fly in?”

“No. I came by train from Beijing to see the desert landscape.”

“Have you been traveling long?” She continued to peer at me over her glasses. I told her about my job in Wuhan and my plans to work in Thailand. “That’ll be an interesting change,” she said, while writing on a clip board.

I glanced over the books on the table noticing one opened to pictures of the cave murals. “You’re studying the caves?”

She explained she was a UCLA professor on sabbatical to study the Buddhist art in China. “I’ve been coming to the caves every day for a week now.”

Impressed by her credentials, I quickly thought to ask her the differences between Hinayana and Mahayana, the lesser and greater vehicles of Buddhism. She looked up from her writing and said, “What you mean, dear, is Theravada. Hinayana, the so called lesser vehicle, is a pejorative coined by the Mahayana Buddhists. Now, to answer your question, the main difference between the two, at least in the world of art, is the Theravada ideal of the arhat and the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva.”

“Arhats are saints, right? Chinese Luo-hans?”

“Both arhats and bodhisattvas are Buddhist saints, but more precisely, arhats have attained nirvana and bodhisattvas have postponed enlightenment in order to help others move along the path toward nirvana.”

“So a bodhisattva is an unselfish saint. I was wondering about this.” I told her my thoughts on how Vimala’s teachings contradicted the selfish pursuit of entering nirvana. I also mentioned my encounter with the nuns in Bangkok, adding that in Theravada Buddhism women weren’t even a part of the Sangha order of monks.

“Mahayana Buddhism offers salvation to every being, women and lay people alike, and not just to monks. The Mahayana bodhisattva is a great teacher of compassion.”

She opened one of her books and showed me a picture of a bodhisattva and of an arhat. As she did so, I mentioned my confusion over whether there was one Buddha or many. “I always thought there was just the one who lived near Patna. Siddhartha Gautama.”

“The many different Buddhas in the caves, Shakyamuni, Amitabha, Maitreya, and so on, are all manifestations of the one eternal Buddha.”

“Like the Hindu Brahman.”

“In a way.”

“And who is Shakyamuni?” I continued. “Isn’t the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama?”

The woman smiled for the first time, took off her glasses and held them aside. “Shakyamuni and Gautama Siddhartha are indeed one in the same. Siddhartha was sage of the Shakya tribe which is why he’s called Shakyamuni.”

After a moment’s thought, I asked the professor, “Is there a specific Mahayana text you could recommend?”

“Sutra, dear. You mean sutra, not text. I’d begin with the *Perfect Wisdom Sutra*.”

“Sounds like an ideal beginning. But is there perfect wisdom?”

“Well... The Perfect Wisdom Sutra is about awakening into emptiness -- into freedom from conditioning. I also recommend that you read the *Heart Sutra*. It’s a summary of perfect wisdom and explains the meaning of emptiness.”

I wrote down what the professor said, and paged through one of her books on the caves. I found a portrait of Pure Land Buddhism, where Buddha was *Amitabha*. “There are a lot of Tang murals about Pure Land Buddhism. Is that another Sutra?”

“*The Pure Land Sutra*. You see, after entering China, Buddhism was influenced by Taoism and Confucianism. In time, Chinese monks developed the Chinese schools of Mahayana Buddhism. One such school was the Pure Land school, another was Zen Buddhism.”

“I know a little about Zen from reading Alan Watts. Is the Pure Land similar to Zen?”

“Not really. And by the way, Zen is Japanese. The Chinese call it Ch’an Buddhism -- the meditative path to nirvana. In the Pure Land School, well, just by repeating the name, ‘Amitabha,’ believers enter the Pure Land after death.”

“You mean just by saying Buddha’s name they think they’ll go heaven?”

“Not exactly. They must believe in what they’re saying.”

“So in other words, the Pure Land is like a Buddhist heaven.”

“That’s too easy. Believers want to go to the Pure Land so they can more easily reach nirvana by living in paradise with Amitabha.”

“But why aim for nirvana when you’re in paradise?”

The professor set her glasses on the table and rubbed her eyes. “That’s a good question. And I’ll respond by asking you the meaning of nirvana.”

“Enlightenment... Salvation... Liberation from the cycles of rebirth.”

“In a way you’re right. But nirvana actually means extinction of the ego -- of all attachments, desires... Of everything until all that’s left is a mind emptied of previous assumptions and beliefs. Nirvana is the supreme goal of a Buddhist, and since the Pure Land is a desired place, it is not nirvana. The Pure Land Paradise is a transitory place, an improvement over life in this world.”

I continued paging through the book and came to the Thousand-eyed, Thousand-hand Bodhisattva. I asked the woman what she knew about the image and she said, while glancing at the picture, “This is Avalokitesvara, the compassionate one. He’s the most popular bodhisattva in Buddhism.”

“You probably reach nirvana just by pronouncing his name.”

“That, dear, is not exactly correct. You receive help by repeating his name, not necessarily enlightenment. Lord Avalokita has many forms, including the Dalai Lama of Tibet. Now... This particular one,” she examined the picture more closely, “is a Tibetan Tantric image. It symbolizes the bodhisattva watching over the world -- between the time of Shakyamuni and the appearance of Maitreya. He has a thousand helping hands each holding an eye to symbolize

that he takes action when he sees the need. Unlike people who see a problem but never act upon it."

"Are bodhisattvas and Buddhas always men?"

"No. Not at all. In fact, the Perfect Wisdom Buddha, or Prajnaparamita, is a goddess -- Mother of the eternal Buddha. The Heart Sutra ends with a famous mantra asking her to awaken and empty our conditioned minds. It goes, 'Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O, what an awakening! All hail.'"

"Meaning, emptiness lies beyond the awakening?"

"That is, a mind empty of conditioning and free from dogma. Gone, gone, gone beyond -- into emptiness where there are no desires or doctrines to cling to. Now, as I was saying, Avalokitesvara has many forms and many of them are female. In China Avalokitesvara is the goddess Kuan Yin, the most popular image in Chinese Buddhism. You must have heard of her?"

"Kuan Yin? No, not that I can remember."

"Well, I'm sure you've seen her porcelain statue in Chinese restaurants."

"So Kuan Yin is also Lord of Compassion...."

"Absolutely, and in many respects, she's like the Virgin Mary who listens to prayers and stands by her devotee at death. But Kuan Yin goes even further and carries her devotees on a white lotus to the Pure Land of the West. Now," the professor grinned complaisantly, "isn't that an exquisite image?"

I returned the professors smile and she continued writing on her clip board. My mind was certainly not empty, for China had invigorated my imagination with its many exquisite songs, stories, poems, and art. I envisioned Ch'ang-o on a moonbeam bringing wishes to earth while her sister Kuan Yin carried children to heavenly paradise. My heart swelled with the exalting spirit

of China as I eagerly anticipated my new adventures ahead. In a few days I would fly to Thailand to stay on a tropical island and bask in glorious sunshine. Maybe in just such a place I would find paradise on earth, and not just in some immortal heaven.

Chapter Nine: Lamson, Found a Lost Paradai

From May through October the equatorial sun forces the air over Asia to expand and rise. The moist cooler air above the oceans quickly flows inland to replace the risen air. This creates a vast monsoon that sweeps from the Indian Ocean northward across Southeast Asia while bombarding western Thailand with torrential rains. It was during this period that I returned to the Land of Smiles and headed down the Malay peninsula to the warm, though damp, island of Phuket. I stayed on the west coast of the island at the Shangri-La Bungalows -- an open-sided restaurant villa surrounded by bungalows amid coconut palms.

My bungalow had a front veranda, a thatched roof, two side windows covered with crisscross bamboo shutters, and it stood on three foot stilts about 100 yards from the long porcelain beach. I had been hoping to find such a rustic tropical island hideaway in order to rest from traveling and to swim in the warm Andaman Sea. After a few days I sent Prince of Songkhla University a telegram asking them to notify me in care of the Shangri-La Bungalows if they wanted to meet with me before my contract began. Until then, I intended to remain on

Phuket because of the inexpensive food and rent, about $1.50 (30 baht) a night, and the inspiring and serene setting. Like an anthropologist, I wanted to learn about the island culture by observing life in the many villages near the Shangri-La. In addition to taking several walks to these villages, I spent many hours lounging on the beach or my veranda while drinking cooled coconut milk and brandy, reading novels, and writing silly poems and short stories. And I liked being alone. If someone were with me, my free flowing creativity would have been channeled into conversation, or suggestions for something interesting to do.

Even the monsoon rains couldn't spoil my contentment. In fact, the short lived storms, which occurred only three or four times a week, were exciting. On a typical monsoon day, I awoke early and opened my shutters to a bright cheery morning that invited me to lounge on my veranda, drink coffee, and listen to the surf and the breeze wisping through coconut palms. About mid-morning clouds drifted in from the sea and rain fell, drop by drop until it gathered force and a massive gray sky pelted water onto the earth. Howling winds whipped palm leaves around the bungalows and the roads became streams flowing into flooded paddies near the beach. On such occasions, I sometimes lay on my bed and watched geckos on the ceiling stalk and eat insects. Or I ran down the roads, splashing through mud puddles and feeling as free and wild as the monsoon itself.

Because of the monsoon season, only a few hardy travelers stayed at the villas along Kata beach. Those who did were often gay men and hippies who had been traveling for months, even years. During lunch one day, a friendly couple from England, a heavy set woman and a lanky man, sat at my corner table where I was eating "American" fried rice. Their joining me uninvited took me by surprise since I had been so isolated from the Western world. But I greatly enjoyed the company of this British couple who had been traveling through Southeast Asia for about a

month. They had fascinating stories about Burma and were interested in hearing about my own adventures in China and India.

At one point in our conversation, the husband, whose name was Pee Wee, mentioned that ganja was available merely by asking the waiters. I knew it was around because of its ever present aroma, but I had never found the nerve to buy any, fearing I'd end up on Thai death row for drug possession. Pee Wee assured me that bungalow owners continually bribed the local police to never arrest the tourists. He then made a purchase for me and for the next day or two, I did little more than lounge on my veranda, smoke ganja cigarettes, and write in my journal page after page of such drivel as, "We are not moving forward in time. Rather, we are all marching backward, following our ancestors one by one into the grave."

Not long into my stay on the island, a young rugged New Zealander with deep blue eyes, brownish-blond hair, and a full beard, nearly stole me away on his adventurous life as a "world traveler." For over a year, Graham Mahoney had been traveling from England across Asia. He calmly, almost passively, recounted his wanderings through Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Burma. He had carried a gun in Amritsar, trekked in the mountains of Nepal to spend a month at a monastery, and he had escaped death during a Sri Lankan civil riot. At present, he was on his way to Bali from where he planned to go to Australia and work on a ship so he could replenish his travel money and head for the wild jungles of New Guinea.

During the few days Graham stayed at the Shangri-La, we spent many marvelous hours together viewing spectacular sunsets off the beach while drinking beer and sharing our various adventures. Graham mesmerized me with his rugged individualism. He seemed so free, more free than anyone I'd ever known. He could simply take-off and go when and where he chose. It seemed he hadn't a concern other than where to travel and how to keep the money available for

this pursuit. His was a mind-set, a clear rationalization for his rather aimless wanderings. He had arrived far beyond my fear of having too much freedom and too many choices. Graham simply faced whatever whim or calamity he encountered. In many ways, I admired this stanch free-spirit, though it seemed a little too extreme -- too pointless and self serving.

Graham fascinated me with his descriptions of life as a "world traveler." He explained that a sort of network of perpetual travelers, Western hippies, roam across Asia, meeting one another and exchanging information about places to go, things to buy, the best black markets, what to take into a country, what to take out, and what to avoid. He said that some of the people he'd met had spent up to ten and twenty years doing nothing but traveling around the world. I asked how such people had the money to keep going and he claimed there were hundreds of money making schemes. "One way is to work a few months, illegally, at a hotel or a villa like the Shangri-La. Another is to report your travelers checks stolen, then you sell the old ones on the black market and keep the new ones. It's a cinch and I heard Penang's the place to do it." I said nothing judgmental about this, but it seemed Graham needed to justify this scheme when he added, "I don't feel like I'm ripping anyone off since it's a big company and all."

"Ah, the life of the perpetual tourist," I said in jest.

Graham looked at me seriously. "You know there's a big difference between tourists and travelers. Tourists take fleeting holidays then head back home. And traveling... Well, it's a way of life that gets in your blood. And you just keep going because there's always another country to explore."

On the night before he went to Malaysia, Graham and I sat alone on the beach smoking ganja. He gently kissed me for the first time and asked if I'd like to travel with him to Bali and

maybe even New Guinea. “I’d love to travel with a woman to New Guinea,” he said, “but she’d need to have the stamina and spirit to withstand the untamed outback.”

Visions of adventure sparked through my mind. I pictured Graham and I exploring the wild jungles that hid savage primitive tribes and ferocious beasts. Maybe New Guinea was too wild and primitive for me, I thought, but at least I could travel to Bali, since there was plenty of time before my job began. On the other hand, did I really want to run off with this man and live like a hippie? I doubted this. It seemed too flighty. Besides, I wanted to learn about Thai culture and not Western nomadism.

Clearly, traveling with Graham wasn’t right for me. I wasn’t rugged and free-spirited enough for him, and the ideals of perpetual travel, though exciting, seemed unstable, unanchored and this troubled me. I likened these ideals to those of a spiritual mystic, like the Hindu Sannyasin who severs all worldly relationships and responsibilities in order to freely wander in search of God, or adventure, in the case of the world traveler. In my life, I needed something more tangible than God or aimless travel.

Though satisfied with my decision not to flutter off with Graham, his sudden appearance and departure veered me into loneliness. The evening after he left, I went to the Shangri-La canteen for my typical fish and rice dinner during the video movie. VCRs flourished at every villa on Phuket. I never saw them as ruining the tranquil island setting. In fact, I looked forward to ending each day of leisure with such features as: *Heaven Can Wait, Apocalypse Now, Mad Max, Young Doctors in Love*, and *Deliverance*.

It was an unusually stormy night, and while waiting for my dinner, I watched the three waiters roll down and secure the outside awnings. About five minutes after my plate of fish and rice sat before me and another episode of *Mad Max* began to unwind, the electricity went out. I

wasn't too concerned since it had gone off before, but usually for only a few minutes. As I patiently waited for it to come back on, the three waiters quickly lighted lanterns and candles so the patrons could at least finish their meals.

One of the waiters, the tall, slender, and only reasonably attractive one, brought a candle to my table, slowly lit it, and paused to wink at me before he blew out the match. Since my arrival, all three waiters had flirted with me. I presumed they were gigolos because they often stayed overnight at the bungalow of a lone Westerner, male or female. I didn't feel like hiring a gigolo, and I hardly wanted to risk catching some deadly venereal disease, so I ignored theses men and they generally left me alone to eat, read, or write at a table in the canteen.

On this night, as the storm vigorously howled, the slender waiter placed a candle on my table. "Will the electricity come back on?" I asked.

The awnings flapped and a gust of wind blew out the candle. The waiter relighted it and smiled at me. "We sorry Miss. Maybe tonight no electricity. Storm very bad. You can see video movie tomorrow. OK?"

"Never mind," I said, and as he turned to walk away, I quickly added, "Leave the matches."

While I finished eating, the monsoon increasingly roared. Certainly, the electricity would not come back on that night. Not feeling tired, I contemplated ways to salvage the evening. Ganja, cigarettes, and beer came to mind so I went to the counter to make the purchases. When I did, the tall slim waiter came up to me and rested against the counter. The flickering light from the candle he held lengthened his dark lashes and deepened the contours of his lean face, especially his pointed lips. "How are you tonight?" he softly spoke.

“Oh, I’m just fine,” I replied as the woman clerk handed me a bottle of beer, bag of ganja, and pack of cigarettes.

Ah, a sign of weakness, the waiter must have thought as he glanced over at me. He whispered something to the clerk in Thai and she said, “He thinks you’re beautiful.”

I looked at him, unmoved by his attempt to flatter me, and gathered up my purchases. I was about to leave when he put his hand on my arm. “We bring for you beer to your bungalow later tonight?”

“I’ll have the beer right now, thank you.”

“OK. We bring candle to your room?” He gently pressed my arm.

“No, I already have a candle.”

“Oh,” he whispered, “you have everything. Tonight you need many candles. Monsoon is very bad. I can bring you more.”

“No!” I withdrew my arm, hastened out the canteen, and ripped through the stormy darkness to my bungalow. After catching my breath, I lit a candle and cigarette, then, while drinking the beer, I worked on a crossword puzzle. In no time, the turbulent winds penetrated the bamboo walls and the vibrant flames devoured all the candle wax. This left me with no choice but to return to the villa for more candles, and while I was at it, another beer.

When I entered the canteen, the slim waiter immediately approached me as if I had returned specifically for him. “How are you?” he asked, taking my hand and squeezing it. “We can come to your bungalow after finish work tonight, OK?”

I stood there a moment, staring at the candle flames burning in his dark almond eyes. “All right.” I pulled my hand from his grip. “I don’t mind -- if you bring me more beer.” I suddenly

didn't care about the waiter's intentions or whether or not he was a gigolo. Loneliness and the raging monsoon night made me desire his company.

The waiter showed up on my veranda at eleven o'clock, called my name, entered, and quickly took off his wet shirt and pants. Glistening in the candle light, his smooth dark body appeared as slender as a woman's. He crawled into bed beside me and behaved gently, no doubt used to conforming to a foreigner's wants. "You are so lovely," he said after delicately kissing me. "We make love?"

"Let's drink some beer instead." I felt too cautious to risk having a physical relationship with him. Besides, it was satisfying just to have his company. So while the storm continued to rage, the waiter and I sat up for hours drinking beer, smoking, and talking.

"We think you very beautiful," he said at one point. "And we very happy you like Nutta Wut."

"Nut a Wood? That's your name?"

"Yes, Miss Allen. But you can call me Wut." He lighted each of us a cigarette and said, "You is a lonely lady. We can help you, too."

"Who is we?"

"We is Wut."

"You mean 'I am Wut.'"

"Yes, we mean I am Wut."

"Who taught you English?"

"We learn English in secondary school. After, we teach myself more English so we can work in the tourist business. We work on Phuket about five years.... Are you lonely at the Shangri-La Bungalows?"

“No... I’m not lonely. Sometimes it’s nice to be alone. It gives me the time to... Meditate.”

“Sure. We watch you meditate. We think you is crazy, dance in the rain. Maybe, we think, you have baby he die or something?”

“No, of course not. That’s silly. What do you do -- watch everybody all the time? People don’t like being watched, you know.”

“Sure. We and other waiter peek through hole in bungalows watch tourists make love.”

“Oh? I suppose you’ve been watching me!”

“Sure. We think you beautiful.”

“Then leave!” I said, angered by the thought of these men peeking in at me. “Go on, get out!”

“No, Miss Allen. We just teasing. We don’t watch you. Really. We like you too much.” He reached over and kissed me. “Please you don’t be angry to Nutta Wut. We do anything for you.”

“Never mind.”

“We make love now?”

“Only if you have protective shields.”

“Yes, we have everything you like.” He didn’t get up to fetch them.

“Well, where are they?”

“Where what, Miss Allen?”

“The rubbers. Go get them.”

“Oh. Lubbers. We sorry. Don’t have lubbers. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Never mind. We can just talk.”

“Are you sure? We make good love.”

“I’m sure you do.”

While Wut and I shared another beer, he said, “Look Allen. We have something serious to tell you. About my island.”

“Your island?” This piqued my interest.

“We is from island south of Phuket, near Malaysia. On my island Lamson people are gentle, like my parents. They are farmers and have cows, goats, and sheep. My island is a lost paradai.”

“A lost paradise? Why?”

“Because it have no electricity.”

“No electricity? What do you do? How do people get around at night?”

“People on my island can walk in the night because the moon is our electricity!”

“If your island is such a paradise why are you here?”

“We leave Lamson for better life than a farmer. My mother and father are very poor. Work hard every day. We dream about tourist business on Lamson, to make better life for my parents.”

“Tourist business?”

“Like Shangri-La Bungalows. But we waiting long time for farang with plenty of money to help Nutta Wut make tourist business.”

“Farang? What’s a farang?”

“Like you. From America, Germany... A tourist... We make the brochure and say ‘Lamson, Found a Lost Paradai.’ We build ten bungalows, a villa canteen, and have guided tours

to one hundred and eight islands around Lamson. You like to see? We go tomorrow. Maybe you is right farang for to help Wut make bungalows on my island."

Wut seemed sincere and I felt sympathetic toward his plans for a better future. The prospect of visiting his island tempted me, but investing in his tourist business sounded like investing in Florida swamp land. "Wut, I'd love to see your island.... but you need someone else to help you with this business plan. Someone with more money than I have. I'm not rich, Wut... not in the least."

"Oh. We have many farang friends, but no one can come to my island. Maybe you can?"

"No, not me. I'm not here as a tourist... In October, I'm planning to go to the Prince of Songkhla University. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes we have. Across from my island. Why do you go there?"

"To teach and help supervise the English curriculum."

"Supervisor? You is supervisor? This is very good." He paused to think and in a moment said, "You very different, Miss Allen. You come to live in Thailand. We can take you to visit my island. You can stay until you go to supervisor in the Prince of Songkhla University. On Lamson, you can decide if you like making tourist business with Nutta Wut, yes or no."

Before falling asleep that night, I told Wut I'd consider his plan. An invitation to Wut's pristine tropical island home was like a huge new opportunity placed before me, rather like venturing to Nepal to ride elephants with Shekhar Shamar. By the time birds chirped in the bright blue morning, I felt almost certain about going, though I didn't want to rush into anything with an Asian man I hardly knew. In less than a week, when I felt more comfortable with Wut, he convinced me to go, especially after he promised to escort me to the Prince of Songkhla University in October. And though the idea of owning a bungalow business on a tropical island

greatly appealed to me, I told Wut I wasn't apt to invest in his business plan. "And," I said, "if I'm to even consider making this investment, you and I can only be friends." He quickly agreed to my suggestion and urged me not to make any decisions until after spending some time on his island.

Wut left his job at the Shangri-La and he and I traveled by bus down the narrow Malay Peninsula to Langu, a small hamlet near the border of Malaysia. In Langu we hired a motorcycle taxi which took us through the jungle, past rice fields, and bungalows, to Kota Baru -- a harbor consisting of an open bamboo and palm frond shelter at the dock and a large open-front wooden building where mangrove poles smoldered into charcoal, the major cooking fuel of the local villagers.

Wut and I climbed aboard a passenger sampan tied to the pier, and sat on one of its empty side benches beneath a canvas canopy. The driver revved up the motor which had a propeller at the end of a fifteen foot pipe extending from the stern down into the sea.

Sunset was approaching as our sampan headed toward Lamson, passing along the way islands outlined by dense thickets of mangroves with long tangled roots plunging into the water. Beyond the mangroves, on the larger islands, grew the tangled and massive canopy of a tropical rain forest. Everything fascinated me and I felt dazzled, wondering what new adventures awaited me in this primitive island culture.

By the time we reached Tu Tae Rum Harbor, the main hamlet on Lamson, only a hint of light remained. The bungalows near the dock shimmered from palm oil lamps burning on verandas where islanders sat talking. As Wut had promised, the island had no electricity.

We set off down a trail past the hamlet, with Wut carrying three of my five bags. Now and then he reminded me that I had too many things. At the same time, it puzzled me that Wut had brought nothing more than the clothes he wore, his comb, wallet and some tourist brochures of the villas on Phuket, all of which I had in my camera bag.

"How far is your parents' bungalow?" I asked as we headed along a causeway separating unplanted paddies near the beach.

"Maybe one hour. We can hurry. But you never mind."

Shortly, all sunlight disappeared and the passing clouds continually hid the moon and stars. Too thrilled by the prospect of new adventure to feel frightened by the darkness or any unknown circumstances that lay ahead, I followed closely behind Wut, able to see little more than the erratic sketches of fire flies at the side of the trail. As we walked along and I tried to keep up with Wut, who moved as if it were day time, the children's song *The Farmer in the Dell*, came to mind and I hummed it to myself, trying to remember the words. When reaching "hi ho the dairy oh" I whistled aloud.

Wut stopped and I ran into him. "Wut!" I shouted.

"Why you do that?!" he loudly whispered while grabbing my arm. "Don't you know about goats?"

"Goats? No. What about goats?" I replied, imagining goats that rammed into islanders walking around at night. The image made me laugh aloud.

"Ssshhh!" Wut released my arm, and continued down the trail.

In a while I mentioned needing to stop and go to the toilet. "Later!" Wut demanded. "Not here."

"Wut. I have to go now, not later."

“No. Not here. There.” He took my hand and led me up the path to the edge of a field.

“Go away!” I said and Wut walked back to the path.

Feeling uneasy about snakes, I looked around my feet for any sign of movement. While doing so, palm fronds swayed in the breeze and distant birds cooed. Then, all of a sudden, a whistle arose from the jungle across the path. This concerned me. Was I hearing the notorious Lamson billy goats? The whistle returned, distinctly, and my concern changed to fear. I imagined signals being passed between muggers or murders lurking about the island. “What’s that?” I loudly whispered to Wut.

“Ssshhh!” he said, coming over to where I stood and pulling me back on the trail. “Goats!”

“Do you mean...” it occurred to me, “ghosts?” The idea amused me so unexpectedly that I laughed away my fear.

This annoyed Wut and he grasped my shoulders, shook me, and said, “Allen, what do you think you do? Are you crazy? Come on, fickly.”

I quit laughing because the strange whistles returned and I couldn’t reason them away.

Further down the trail, the whistling stopped and curiosity replaced my fear. I asked Wut, “So you think we were hearing ghosts?”

“Why? You don’t believe in goats? You want to see?” He paused. “We is afraid for the God -- come on, fickly, fickly.”

“Wut, I really would like to see a ghost.”

“You is crazy lady!”

“Really Wut. I don’t believe in ghosts because I’ve never seen one. Now, if you can show me...”

“OK, Allen!” He stopped and I bumped into him. “We take you to old man, pray the ghost come in your head -- then you believe, if you not die.”

This was great. Wut was going to take me to a shaman. What an incredible opportunity. “Yes,” I said, “I’d like that!”

Wut probably thought I was being sarcastic. He stopped and said, carefully and slowly, “Ghost come inside you, Allen... You don’t know anything, you go crazy -- forget everything -- you like?” He turned and continued down the trail. “Come on. Can’t talk anymore, afraid for God.”

The last three or four hundred yards of our walk, I put my hand on Wut’s shoulder until we at last turned off the path to a ground level dwelling. When we entered the barn-like doors of the bungalow, Wut took my hand to help me step over the raised threshold. Two figures moved in the darkness. Wut said something, and a woman and man laughed. Wut had surprised but delighted his parents with his unexpected arrival.

Wut’s parents lighted oil lamps, and we sat on mats placed on the hard concrete floor. I listened to the family speak Thai, but soon grew uncomfortable. Nobody showed me where to clean up or to sleep and I felt hot, sweaty and tired. But I sat quietly, watching insects fly around the smoky oil lamp, like worshipers of God. Zap!, I thought, a worshiper enters nirvana....

“Wut,” I said. “I’m really tired. Where am I supposed to sleep?”

Wut said something and his mother got up and carried one of the oil lamps to a large platform against the left wall of the dwelling. She set the lamp on the platform, brushed off a mat, and turned to me, indicating that this was my bed. “Aren’t there any covers?” Although it was warm, I needed protection from the insects.

Wut said something and his mother went across the room to the smaller platform where she and her husband had been sleeping. She returned and handed me a filthy, stone hard pillow. “Wut. Um, tell your mother I have my own bedding!”

Exhausted and fully dressed, I lay down on the mat, using the rest of my clothes as a pillow and covers. In no time I fell asleep to the rustling of palms, the buzz of a mosquito, and the soft murmuring voices filling the bungalow.

The next morning I awoke to the sight of Wut’s mother standing over my bed. She was a stalky woman dressed in a sarong and a dirty white sleeveless bodice. She had a round face lightened from rice powder and oily black hair worn tightly back a bun. Her pleasant smile showed teeth stained from years of chewing betel nuts. The woman placed on the platform a bowl of rice topped with salt fish. She stared at me, concerned, it seemed, that I eat and feel comfortable in her house.

I sat up and nodded about the food, but didn’t touch it. Instead, I stretched and yawned, feeling stiff and sore from a night of sleeping on boards.

The doors and shutters of the one room bungalow stood wide open, letting in a refreshing breeze. The walls consisted of red brick and the high “A” frame roof had wooden rafters where sparrows chirped and flew about under the corrugated tin. The room’s furnishings included the two bed platforms and a wooden wardrobe straddling the far corner.

The planks squeaked as I crawled across the platform to sit at its edge. “Wut?” I yelled, feeling extremely awkward about the breakfast the woman had served me and about my inability to communicate with her.

“Yes, Allen?” Wut called from outside the front doors. He entered, dressed in nothing but a sarong, and in his arms he carried a two year old child wearing a T-shirt and plastic panties. Like Wut’s mother, the child had rice powder whitening her round face. Wut placed the child next to me and said, “She is my two year old granddaughter. Can you give her something?”

The baby began to cry and Wut’s mother picked her up while I looked through my camera bag and found a thimble and a key chain. I gave these to the child and she stopped crying. “Baby is afraid of farang,” Wut said. “She don’t understand, Allen, because you look funny.”

“Who is she Wut?” I asked. “She’s not your granddaughter.”

“Oh. She is my brother’s baby -- but she lives with my parents.”

In time I sorted out that Wut had one brother currently working as a Thai boxer in the town of Krapi. This brother’s girlfriend had dumped their baby on him, and in turn, the brother gave his baby to his parents to raise. “When we have tourist business my brother come to Lamson and help make bungalows.”

“Wut,” I said, remembering my discomfort, “where can I clean up? And by the way, can I get any coffee around here?”

From the wardrobe, Wut fetched two of his mother’s batik sarongs and told me to slip one on. At the same time, Wut’s father entered the bungalow. He wore nothing but a sarong from his waist to just above his knees. Unlike his son, the man was brawny, sturdy, nicely tanned, and he had large strong hands which could grasp heaps of soil or carry heavy loads of grain. He stood by the door staring at me with a friendly grin, as if my dressing in front of him didn’t matter. “Wut. I can’t change in front of your father.” Wut said something and both men stepped outside, laughing.

After the sarong was secured over my breasts, and I had my toiletry bag in hand, Wut led me to a well ten feet outside the back door of his bungalow. Here, beside the door, were rickety steps leading to the kitchen, a bamboo adjunct leaning against the back brick wall. The well stood at the edge of an unplanted paddy field before a grove of coconut palms. Toothbrushes and pieces of soap cluttered its ledge and an old rusty bucket attached to a rope lay beside it. Wut drew water from the well, poured it over his head, soaped up, rinsed off, and picked up an old toothbrush and brushed his teeth.

After I washed in the same manner but with my own soap and toothbrush, I slipped into the dry sarong and followed Wut five minutes up the path from his bungalow to an open-front coffee shop. The shop was made from coconut palm boards, a thatched roof, and a front awning supported by two coconut poles. On the trampled earth beneath the awning stood crates of bottled soda. Four scrawny black roosters scurried away when we approached.

Inside the shop, we sat at a table which had on it a basket of fry bread, a plate of betel nuts and pepper leaves, and a jar of Thai cigarettes. Bananas hung from the ceiling rafters, and against the wall opposite the table stood a dusty shelf stocked with candles, matches, needles and thread, stationery and pencils, pots and pans, jars of kerosene and coconut oil, cans of condensed milk and Ovalteen, and cakes of soap. A shelf that partitioned off the back of the shop held coconuts, bottles of fish sauce and shrimp paste, and platters of chillies, onions, garlic, and salt fish that pungently scented the room.

A frail old woman appeared from behind the back shelf and grinned when she saw me. It must have startled her to see me, the strange foreign woman sitting in her shop. “She live and work in here,” Wut explained. “Her husband died when she is young and she doesn’t have children.”

The old woman stood beside me at the table, ran her bony hand along my arm, and gathered up some of my arm hair. She told Wut she wanted me to bring her pills that could make her as fat and pale as I was. I laughed, feeling as amused by the frail old woman as she was by me.

Subsequently, I began each morning at her shop drinking a cup of strong bitter Thai coffee with sweet condensed milk and eating a greasy piece of fry bread. On nearly every visit the old woman reminded me about the pills and one day I gave her a handful of vitamins, explaining to take one a day. She seemed ecstatic by this, as though I'd given her a priceless treasure, but instead of taking the pills, she placed them in a jar to show the other islanders who entered her shop.

During my first dinner on the island, Wut, his family and I sat around a large pot of chicken curry made from a black rooster Wut caught and killed with a razor blade earlier that day. The meal began when Wut's mother reached into the large pot of rice and put a handful on my plate. Throughout the meal, everyone passed around a metal bowl of rain water. When I first drank from it I noticed white mosquito larva squirming in the bottom of the bowl. Once again, I faced the major dilemma of my travels, that of risking illness versus immersing myself in a culture. I marvelled at my opportunity to live on Lamson, so I would take these chances. Besides, what could I do? Insist that Wut have his mother boil the water for me? If I chose to be that intolerant and offensive, then I had no business being on the island.

Halfway through the meal on this night, an old man peered in the front doors, entered, and sat on the large platform. Wut's parents asked him several times, "*Kin kow* (eat rice)." The visitor refused each time, but chatted, off and on, while we continued to eat. Within the next half

hour more and more visitors appeared to see the farang staying at the red brick bungalow. By the time we finished eating, more than a dozen men sat on the platforms or reclined on the floor around the oil lamps. They wore nothing but checkered or plaid sarongs, though some of the younger men wore T-shirts.

I moved to the back of the large platform to observe my guests, since I couldn't speak with them. Wut passed around his brochures of tourist bungalows on Phuket. As he enthusiastically spoke, I heard the words, "supervisor," and "Lamson -- found a lost paradai." Other than me, and Wut's dream of establishing a tourist business on the island, I imagined the men discussed the upcoming planting of rice, island politics, or perhaps someone's recent visit to the mainland. Without televisions, telephones, radios, or books, spending time together became the major form of entertainment.

As the islanders talked they passed around the water bowl and a plastic tray containing betel nuts, pepper leaves, and lime paste -- for a betel nut chew; and tobacco and palm reeds to make cigarettes called *bajaks*. Everyone in the room was either smoking or making a bajak, chewing a betel nut, or drinking from the bowl of rain water. I chewed a betel nut and tried a bajak. To everybody's amusement, the harsh tobacco made me cough. Practically everything I did or said made the visitors laugh. At one point, I crawled across the platform to fetch a drink of water from the rain barrel -- with my own cup. As I did so, the room fell silent and everyone carefully watched me crawl along the platform over a pillow.

Wut jumped off the floor, came over to me and whispered, while holding up the pillow, "Allen. When you wrong, we want to tell you Thai custom. We move pillow when we want to go off the bed. Someone's head sleeping here. Feet is very bad, terrible to put in the same place as head."

"OK, OK," I said, embarrassed by Wut's reproach. It was frustrating to be the outsider unaware of the correct social behavior and manners.

With Wut still standing at the edge of the platform, I stepped off it and stood up. "Allen," he shouted, "is not polite to stand straight and walk past old men. You must go like this." He stooped low and walked across the room, making everyone roar with laughter and leaving me humiliated.

"I'd feel silly walking like that," I said defiantly, suspecting that the men toyed with me because I was a foreigner and a woman. How could I be sure of their sincerity when I had only been on the island a day? "Besides," I added, "I'm not Thai and I don't have to act like one."

"OK. We don't tell you Thai Customs anymore."

The room fell silent. All attention was on me. Now I felt like a baby learning to walk. My only choices were to try to walk or to give up and crawl away. "No. Never mind," I said to Wut. "I want you to tell me your customs, but it'll take months before I understand all your ways."

It was rice planting season during my stay on Lamson, and farmers were busy transplanting, into paddy fields, green blades of rice that they had grown in separate nursery beds. Four levees enclosed the paddies to maintain a foot high water level needed for the transplanted rice.

Dressed in a sarong bought from the coffee shop, I often helped Wut's mother transplant rice into the paddy outside the back of the red brick bungalow. When I waded into the paddy's warm ooze that squished between my toes, Wut's mother smiled and handed me the fresh green blades to add to her row. She probably wondered why I wanted to help since she spent hours

bending over in physically exhausting labor. But my help was never for very long, so I viewed the task as a playful opportunity to be a rice farmer.

Wut's mother worked in the paddy until noon, when it became too hot, then she returned to the bungalow to fix lunch. "*Rone* (very hot)," she would say to me.

After lunch, I rested by the open shutters at end of the large bed platform to feel the cooling breeze. Sparrows quarreled in the ceiling rafters and mosquitoes buzzed around my head. Beyond the open window, palm trees rustled while distant water buffalos deeply droned "maaaa--mooo." At this time, Wut's mother placed her granddaughter in a hammock she took down from the ceiling rafters. She sat on the concrete floor and swung the baby back and forth. The swinging alone, a hypnotic *swish swish swish*, could have put the child to sleep, but the grandmother also sang a lullaby with a voice so gentle and sweet that it often sent *me*, unexpectedly, to sleep. I asked Wut to translate the lullaby but he laughed and said they were meaningless words to make a baby sleep.

Throughout the day and evening, islanders dropped by Wut's bungalow to see the stranger among them. As far as I knew, there wasn't another farang on Lamson and few, if any, had ever ventured here. Children peered at me through the window and giggled and ran away if I said anything to them. Most visitors wanted to see my pictures from home, and some wanted to watch me write in my journal. They closely examined the writing, seeing it, I imagined, as strange squiggles that couldn't possibly make any sense. To my surprise, nobody showed much interest in my magazine picture of the space shuttle, but my credit card impressed everybody. Visitors passed it among themselves and probably marvelled at the farang's instant cash flow from the bank.

Wut often suggested I give money to my visitors. This bothered me because I didn't like him telling me how to distribute my money, nor did I want to hand it out to everyone that came around, as if the islanders were beggars or I was staying at a tourist resort. But I did give his parents five hundred baht, about $25.00, since I was eating their food and living in their home. "My people very poor," Wut continually reminded me. It seemed he took great pride in this fact. I told him his people weren't poor because they possessed a simple disposition rich with life. He told me I was crazy.

Wut's father, a carpenter, was presently building a fishing boat for a wealthy merchant on the other side of the island. I usually saw him late in the afternoon when he returned to the red brick bungalow. He always smiled at me and often said, teasingly, "*Pen cru bai Pattani* (She goes to teach in Pattani.)" I could not believe how the strength and simplicity of Wut's father captivated me. He seemed a paradigm of virility.

Wut spent much of the day helping his father while I enjoyed lounging around the bungalow reading, writing and relaxing. One morning Wut took me to the leeward side of the island to see the boat. When we arrived, Wut's father quickly set aside his hammer and climbed down the bamboo ladder leaning against the skeletal framework. While he spoke to Wut, I walked around admiring the red wood mahogany contours of the hull, a striking piece of craftsmanship and a magnificent credit to Wut's father.

"My father ask," Wut said, "do you like his boat?" I told him the boat was wonderful and he said, "He can make you another for the tourist business."

"Really? For how much?"

"Mahogany is expensive wood from jungle. Maybe you can pay one million baht. Special price."

“Keep dreaming Wut!” I said, while running my hand along a smooth cool mahogany plank. I pictured the craft finished and saw myself sailing across the aquamarine waters, venturing from island to tropical island paradise. How could I make such an appealing vision reality? It seemed an unlikely endeavor, but nothing is impossible, I kept thinking, if you really put your mind to it. Not even paradise on earth.

When he wasn’t helping his father work on the boat, Wut showed me around his island. Once or twice, we met someone peddling down the path on an old bicycle and only once did someone buzz by on a Honda, which seemed enormously out of place.

One morning, while Wut and I strolled down an inland trail, I heard a frantic shout, and saw, at the bend in the path ahead, a man running toward us. Before I realized what was happening, Wut grabbed my arm, hurled me into the gully next to the path, and jumped in beside me. I groveled up in time to see the yelling man run past us and ditch into the gully across the path to avoid being trampled by a cow charging after him. As soon as the cow passed by, the man jumped out of the gully and ran after it.

My hands and arms were dirty and scratched from bracing my fall and, feeling unnerved, I wanted to return to the safety of the red brick bungalow. “Wut!” I screamed after he stood back on the path, brushing off his arms. “Let’s go home.”

“No, Allen.” He offered his hand to help me out of the gully. “Is OK. Man can catch his cow. Cows run all the time on my island. You learn to watch the nature and be careful. That’s all.” I decided he was right. It was better to brush off and continue down the trail than to hide away in fear of the unexpected.

Many of the island trails crossed log bridges over marshy areas where thousands of male fiddler crabs proudly waved their blue claws. At one village we came to a group of women

sitting along the trail side and ripping the fibrous outer husks off coconuts to use for making rope. The islanders used all parts of the coconut palm -- the roots for brushes, the logs for building materials, the leaves for roofing, and the fruit for food, fuel, and animal feed. Most bungalows, made from bamboo and palm fronds, stood ten feet high on stilts for protection against the seasonal floods. Wut's was the only brick bungalow I'd seen on the island. His father had built their home the summer before, deciding brick was more sturdy and longer lasting than bamboo and coconut wood.

Each of the many hamlets on the island began at a covered platform beside the path where islanders gathered when the village headman paid his monthly visit. Every hamlet had a coffee shop and many had a small mosque for the island's predominantly Muslim population, including Wut and his family.

"Do you ever go to the mosque?" I asked Wut.

"No. Not anymore. We embarrassed to go in front of old men because we forget how to pray."

No matter where we went, Wut knew the people sitting on verandas, standing in the paddies, or walking along the paths. They always smiled and said, "*Pai nai* (Where are you going)?"

"*Pai tee-oh* (Going to travel)," Wut responded.

He introduced the young men we met as, "This my brother." After meeting his fourth brother I asked Wut to be more specific about the relationship, but I never really understood who was a cousin, friend, or uncle. One afternoon, Wut introduced a man and added, "His father went to Mecca." A family member having made the Hajj was an impressive status on Lamson.

Wut continually reminded me about investing in his business. When I'd tell him I hadn't decided yet, he'd anxiously reply, "When you decide, Miss Allen? We bored. We very tin (thin) waiting so long."

The beach he planned to use for his business lay about two hundred yards from the red brick bungalow and stretched between a flatly rolling surf and three frangipani trees with fragrant white flowers. The frangipanis stood at the edge of a paddy belonging to Wut's relatives. For the most part, the beach didn't seem ideal for tourists. Instead of clean porcelain sands, tiny sand beads from fiddler crabs and thousands of broken cowrie, conch, sundial, and spiral shells covered the damp gray beach.

Each time we visited this beach, Wut enthusiastically paced out where he planned to build his bungalows near the frangipani trees. "And here," he often said, as he took long steps, "we make the villa canteen. One room for you... if you make business with Nutta Wut. And there," he would point to the islands dotting the horizon, "We take tourists to the 'One hundred and eight islands off Lamson,' as we say on brochure. What do you think, Allen? Tourists like my island?"

Not wanting to discourage Wut, I told him that tourists would like the isolation and the exotic culture as much as I did. "But the beach isn't as nice as those on Phuket. Tourists liked to sunbathe on soft white sand or body surf in tall waves."

"Yes, but we have tours to the many islands that have beautiful beaches. Believe me. It is a good idea. You just wait and see. We think you is the right farang to make tourist business with Nutta Wut. You is supervisor and you has a good heart."

The idea of having my own business on a tropical island enticed me more and more, despite the mediocre beach. But I was cautious about making any quick decision. For one thing, I

worried that if I refused to invest, Wut would feel obligated to leave Lamson, along with me. And I wanted to remain on the island at least until my contract began.

Eventually, I asked Wut whether he could get me some ganja so I could smoke while sitting on the beach and watching the sunset behind the distant islands. Wut admitted that ganja existed on the island, but he was reluctant to get me any because the old people saw ganja as bad, and I was a good farang.

The matter was dropped until one evening, shortly after sunset, Wut said unexpectedly, "OK, we can go have a good time -- *sanouk*."

"What's *sanouk*?"

"Have a good time! This important to Thai people, Miss Allen. Tonight we go to the beach to smoke ganja with my brothers," Wut said, referring to the young men on the Lamson, who, as it turned out, smoked ganja on the beach nearly every evening.

"Do we have to smoke with them? Can't you just get a little for me? I won't smoke it around your mother."

"Forget it, Allen. Nobody can smoke alone."

I acquiesced to the plan and when we set out, the sun had set but the quarter moon made it fairly easy to see. On the beach, near the edge of a paddy, seven Thai men, Wut's "brothers," squatted in a circle. They all wore sarongs except for one who had on jeans and an unbuttoned shirt. While the men talked, giggled, and passed around ganja cigarettes, I sat quietly on the sand. Once or twice my eyes met with the man wearing jeans, but he shyly looked away. Even in the dim light I noticed his firm and muscular chest, a stark contrast to the other men who were thin like Wut.

To amuse myself I recited some Thai expressions -- “I don’t understand, Don’t like, No good, How much, What’s your name” -- I had memorized from my phrase book. The brothers laughed at my every utterance, but I ignored them, unbothered by their silliness. When the moon neared the sea, I interrupted Wut and asked, “How do you say ‘moon’ in Thai?”

He translated my question to the brothers and one of them said “*keedoh*.”

“Keedoh,” I repeated, and the men burst into laughter. “What’s so funny?”

“Allen,” Wut said, after he stopped laughing. “You say bad word for man’s cock.”

This thoroughly humiliated me so I repeated “keedoh, keedoh, keedoh...” until the laughter faded into silence, but quickly revived after one of the men farted. Wut turned to me and asked, “What you call this one in English?”

“We don’t do that one in English!” I snapped. What a crude bunch of farmers, I thought. Except maybe for the man in jeans. He seemed different not only in dress, but he was more reserved and didn’t laugh as much as the others. In fact, I hadn’t noticed him speak during the entire evening.

I went on reciting phrases while watching the moon sink into the dark sea. The men continued to laugh and chat until one said something to Wut. “My brother want to kiss you, Miss Allen. Is OK?”

Infuriated, I stood up to leave the beach on my own. But Wut pulled my arm and said, “Allen, be polite. My brother only want to know. Thai people like to have a good time. Remember -- *sanouk.*”

Reluctantly, I sat back down feeling insecure about leaving on my own. Before long one of the brothers sprang to his feet and shouted wildly, as if the earth had suddenly turned blistering hot. Everyone leaped up and went berserk. I remained seated, furious at this new joke

they were playing on me, until Wut suddenly yanked me up by the arm and yelled, “Are you crazy? This man see poison caterpillar can kill you.”

Everyone behaved too seriously for this to be a joke, which frightened me. “Wut, I’ve had enough of all this and I want to go home -- now!” The men were dispersing anyway, so Wut and I headed back up the beach.

While I slowly walked along, carefully watching my step, Wut moved hastily ahead of me with some of his brothers, stopping now and then to yell, “Fickly, Allen, fickly, fickly!”

At one point I said, “Why should I hurry? You slow down!”

“No! You walk fickly. You not used to the nature!”

“Yeah, that’s right, Wut! I’m not a fucking farmer!”

When I caught up to Wut, who was by now standing on the paddy levee, he grabbed my shoulders, shook me, and said, “We is nature! The moonbeam is our electricity!”

“Bastard!” I jerked free from his grasp. “Leave me alone!”

“OK... You know the nature -- you can walk back yourself!”

“Of course, I can! You make me feel stupid and awkward!” Wut took off and for a moment I stood motionless on the levee.

I knew the way back fairly well and wasn’t too concerned. That is, until I reached the trail that meandered from the levee through a marshy area in a grove of palms and brush. Step by step I continued through the dark thicket, past the familiar bungalow, and on to a part of the marsh that could only be crossed on a coconut log.

“Come on Allen. You can cross,” Wut said while waiting at the other side of the log. He hadn’t deserted me, as I knew he wouldn’t.

With determination I stepped on the log but stumbled off and fell onto the wet ground. I had difficulty crossing this bridge in the daylight and now, with my head swimming in ganja, the task was impossible. “I can’t cross this stupid bridge!” I yelled, almost in tears.

One of the brothers standing next to Wut crossed the log to where I sat. It was the quiet man in jeans. He helped me to my feet and onto the base of the log. Then he stood behind me, put his hands on my waist, and steadily guided me across to the other side. Without a word, he continued on his way leaving me and Wut at the edge of the grove.

“Who was that?” I asked, infatuated with the mere act of this man so gracefully helping me.

“He is my friend Jade.” Wut grabbed my hand and led me back to his bungalow.

Throughout the night, my encounter with Jade left me feeling enchanted and the possibility of living and working on Lamson seemed as real as Arya’s wedding, if I chose to make it possible. At the same time, my mind reeled with confusing recollections about my awkwardness in the island culture. Often, I felt like a clown or a small child, and when Wut explained the correct way to behave, I tended to feel anger toward him. I didn’t dislike Wut. He was like an older brother, or a good honest friend, who helped as well as annoyed me. I hoped that our conflicts would lessen as we grew to know each other and as I learned more about the island ways.

About a week after smoking ganja on the beach, a frail old woman with a toothless grin dropped by the red brick bungalow. Wut was away that morning, but Jade sat on the bench at the front stoop. He had been stopping by to visit me ever since he helped me cross the bridge. He didn’t speak English so we could do little more than smile at each other, although, he often

looked away as soon as I caught him staring at me. His presence flattered, even mystified me. Not only was he gracious, he was physically handsome, with curly black hair, broad shoulders and strong hands, like Wut's father. Sometimes I contemplated moving from Wut's bungalow to Jade's, but the possibility of actually doing so seemed remote. Jade and the other islanders viewed me as the foreigner staying with Wut's family, and I wasn't free to be with whomever I wanted. Besides, I respected my island hosts and had no intention of behaving insensitively.

When the frail toothless old woman wanted to leave, she squeezed my hand and asked me to return to her house, "*Pai baan ma ka*?"

Wut's mother shook her head and exclaimed, "*Yaak baan, yaak baan* (far away house)!"

Longing for a new adventure, I decided to go to the old woman's yaak baan, despite the protests of Wut's mother. When we set off, Wut's mother said something to Jade and pushed him up by the shoulder, sending him to look after me. What could be better, I thought, as Jade trailed silently behind the old woman and me.

As we walked slowly along the path, the old woman held my hand and showed me off to everyone we met along the way. We eventually turned onto an inland path that I had never explored. It wound around the edge of the jungle, past bungalows and over a bridge or two. In about an hour, we reached the end of the path at the old woman's yaak baan, probably the most inland house on the island. It stood under the jungle foliage high on stilts and had a bamboo ladder up to the entrance, rather than to a front veranda. Once inside, the old woman lighted an oil lamp and set it on the bare plank floor of the front room. Even the noon sun had difficulty reaching through the tangled canopy and penetrating the bamboo walls of the yaak baan.

The musty two room bungalow contained little other than floor mats, a wardrobe, and pots, pans, clay vats, and a yellow hen with her chicks in the kitchen. I guessed that the old

woman was widowed and had been living alone for years, but I couldn't be sure since I had no way to communicate with her or with Jade, other than through simple gestures.

Soon after we arrived, Jade and I sat on the bamboo floor of the kitchen while the old woman prepared some rice, salted fish, hard boiled eggs, and a huge green legume called *sa'tore*. While we ate, the bungalow grew darker as clouds drifted inland from the sea. I was by now used to these storms flashing across Lamson three or four times each week. Whenever they came, the islanders dropped whatever they were doing and hurried to the nearest bungalow. Once, after Wut and I had been trapped for hours in an uncle's bungalow, I asked him, "Don't people get tired of all this rain?" It was frustrating to be, in a moment, stranded in some strange house for an indefinite amount of time and without anything to do but nap. "My people like monsoon," Wut had replied, "because it feed the rice and they can get water to drink. People never unhappy on my island. They know the sun will always return after the rain."

Now that I was trapped inside the yaak baan with Jade, my imagination etched wild visions of a night filled with erotic fantasy.

The old woman, Jade, and I busily closed and secured the front door and shutters. Throughout the afternoon, while thunder cracked, wind whipped jungle foliage, and rain dripped through the trees and pelted the tin roof of the bungalow, we napped on the plank floor of the front room. When I awoke, day had turned to night but the storm continued to clash over the island. I groped toward the light coming from the kitchen and found the old woman sitting with Jade by an oil lamp.

"Rain," I said in Thai, while stretching and yawning. The old woman grinned. Obviously, Jade and I weren't leaving the yaak baan until after the storm, and most likely, not at all that night.

I joined them and we silently listened to the storm until the old woman got up and prepared us another meal. Soon after we ate, the old woman gestured us to follow her as she carried an oil lamp into the front room. She set the lamp on the floor and lay on a mat to sleep.

It was awkward sitting across from Jade, the oil lamp between us. I felt embarrassed and wondered what to do, other than lie down and fall asleep for the night. The bungalow was humid and warm, but Jade and the battling storm chilled me with exhilaration. I looked at Jade. His shirt hung unbuttoned and his muscular chest appeared smooth and firm. His dark eyes sparkled as he stared into the flame. Soon he looked up at me, smiled and blew out the lamp. I lay down to sleep while toying with notions about a future on the island, in my own beach side bungalow, or on my own mahogany boat, along with Jade....

When I awoke the next morning the storm had passed. Jade was sitting with the old woman at one corner of the room. When he saw me, he gestured we should leave.

Jade helped me down the front ladder of the yaak baan, and quietly led me through the jungle. Before we reached the main path, he stopped at a junction where a smaller path entered the woods. He pointed up the smaller trail, smiled and said in Thai, “Jade house. Drink cha?”

I followed close behind him, and we eventually reached a small clearing at the end of the path. Standing amid papaya and mango trees stood Jade’s house, one unlike any I’d ever seen on Lamson. It sat on a cement foundation and had a roof made of shingles instead of palm fronds or corrugated aluminum. On the veranda sat rattan chairs and, dangling from the ceiling, hung a light bulb. “Jade, your house has electricity! How is it possible?” Jade smiled at my surprise, then led me around to the back of the house and showed me a generator.

As I marvelled over this surprising discovery, closely examining its parts to learn how it operated, a voice called from behind, “Allen! Where have you been?” I turned and saw Wut approach from around the house. He said something to Jade, though nothing that sounded confrontational. Why should it? I had already established with Wut that we were nothing more than friends, especially if we were to ever go into business together.

“What do you want?” I yelled, angered that Wut had spoiled my time alone with Jade. “You know we got stuck in the storm last night.”

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand. “We go to my house. My mother cry and want to see you. She afraid you get sick.”

I looked at Jade, hoping for a sign that he wanted me to stay with him, but he only smiled and shyly looked away.

Wut’s mother was crying when we returned to the red brick bungalow. I didn’t know what to say or think. The situation reminded me of the Sharif women on the night I went out with Kali. It was frightening to realize how my association with others so easily upset my hosts. If I had actually caroused with Jade, I imagined, Wut’s mother would have a heart attack.

Wut reassured her of my well being, adding that I felt terrible about being caught in the storm. This seemed to cheer her up.

After dinner that evening, Wut wanted to go to the beach to smoke ganja. This surprised me because I had refused to ever again join his brothers on the beach. But this time, he assured me, we would smoke it alone on the beach he intended to build his tourist bungalows.

Although the sun had set when we arrived on the beach, a full moon showered Lamson with light. It was like silver dust illuminating everything from the green blades of freshly planted

rice to the stars clinging to the darkness of night. The humming sea on the moon lit beach invited me to run to the surf. I threw off my thongs and waded into the warm water, laughing and feeling as if I could splash my way to the islands glimmering on the horizon. “Everything is so incredibly beautiful,” I shouted, stretching out my arms and turning around in the shallow surf. “God! I’m in love with this island!”

“Yes, we know, Allen.” Wut was sitting on the shore smoking a cigarette. “And do you think tourist like my island, too?”

“Oh yes! Yes! Who wouldn’t love it here?”

“Come on!” Wut motioned me to shore. “You crazy.”

We walked to the edge of the paddy, by the frangipani trees, and Wut said, “Here we make villa canteen. If you make business with Nutta Wut you can sleep here and see the moon every time.”

“Perhaps, if I decide to...” My mind was consumed with Jade on my own veranda. We were watching the moon set behind the islands.

“When you decide, Miss Allen? We bored, we very tin. We want to work on bungalow now.”

“Why should I care if you’re bored and thin? I’ll decide when I decide. I’m in no hurry.”

Without responding to my remark, Wut sat on a log and lit up a ganja cigarette. After I joined him, he asked, “What do you do last night?”

“I didn’t do anything. Why, are you jealous?”

“No, we only thinking about you make tourist business with Nutta Wut.” He paused. “You love Jade?”

“Well, I think Jade’s the best brother you’ve got and maybe I do like him...”

“You like me, too?”

“Sometimes... I like you as a friend. But only when you’re nice to me.”

“We nice. But sometime you say bad thing to Wut, we remember.”

“What bad thing?”

“You say, we is ‘fucking farmer.’”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry about that. But you made me angry that night. Anyway, forget it.”

“OK, we forget.” He handed me the ganja cigarette. “We know Jade love you. He already ask me can he marry you.”

“Oh shut up, Wut! He did not.”

“Is OK. You can marry Jade and make tourist business also. If you honest, we don’t mind.”

“Maybe,” I said while my mind wandered back to visions of my own bungalow overlooking the sea. At the moment, anything seemed possible.

Shortly after we left the beach and headed down the main trail, we came to a bungalow standing amid coconut and betel palms that had deep green fronds alit by moonlight. Three men sat on the veranda and smoked bajak cigarettes that, in the darkness, reminded me of the ever present fireflies.

“Pai nai?” a man called.

Wut stopped. “Pai tee-oh!”

The man said something else and Wut walked up to the veranda to ask for a bajak. I told Wut he could stay with his friends but I wanted to return to his bungalow for the night. I didn’t feel like listening to cryptic island chatter. As usual, Wut insisted I stay and be polite.

After we joined the men on the veranda, I smoked a bajak, and listened to the men, understanding none of the conversation. “What are you talking about?”

“We talk about they never fly before.”

“Umhm... Never have, eh?” I stubbed out my bajak on the plank floor, in the typical fashion, and was about to fix a betel nut when “maaaooooo” drifted onto the veranda. I looked over to the paddy across the path and saw the silhouette of a water buffalo standing on the far levee. Beside the path leaned a tall coconut palm with broad outer fronds shimmering from the full moon. “Ah, this is incredible,” I said aloud and crawled over to the veranda ladder.

“What are you doing, Allen? You can wait five minute before we go to my bungalow.”

“Never mind, Wut,” I said, halfway down the ladder. “I’m just going over there!” I pointed to the coconut tree, but he was back talking with the men.

At the edge of the paddy, I inhaled and reached overhead, outstretching my fingers to catch the moonlight in my hands. I sat on the soft mound and leaned against the palm. “Maaoooo...” the water buffalo called as she stepped in the paddy and sauntered toward the main path. She caused ripples to bump against the blades of rice, and the moon’s reflection to waver. This created a curious illusion, as if I were languidly floating on a raft, feeling a deep sense of tranquility. The setting transfixed me more powerfully than had Wudang mountain, the veena music, or anything else in China and India. Why seek paradise in heaven when it exists on earth? I thought. Why bother reflecting on the soul when all I need do is sit and gaze at the moon reflecting on the paddy, while listening to frogs billow, crickets chirp, distant voices murmur, and the sea humming?

“Allen! Allen!” Wut yelled from the veranda tearing me from my thoughts. He had grown typically concerned about my being aloof. “Allen,” he yelled again. “What are you looking for?”

“Nothing,” I said at last. “Nothing at all... except, maybe moonbeams.”

Chapter Ten: Picture in a Storm

The excitement of the tourist business followed Wut and me to the hamlet of Langu on the mainland. We stayed with Wut’s cousin, Sanon, sleeping on the front room floor of his town house. Sanon offered us this front room as an office for the business. Tourists, as the plan went, would go to Sanon’s and make arrangements for traveling to Lamson or for taking the boat tours to the other islands. The vision was growing to astonishing proportions. It seemed that all of Wut’s relatives wanted to get involved in the business.

Wut was eager to start buying the building materials, but I told him that before I invested any money, I wanted a business contract. At Sanon’s suggestion, I drew up the terms for the contract, and Sanon sent it to his lawyer friend in the nearby town of Satun. Meanwhile, Wut ordered on credit teak wood from one shop; cement, pipes, and nails from another; and palm fronds and bamboo from a shop at the pier. I warned Wut not to extend his credit so hastily because I wasn’t investing any money until I had the contract. But he felt too anxious to wait. “We bored, we very tin not working for so long time.”

During our stay in Langu, Wut and I ate our meals at cafes along the main street. While doing so, we generally met one of Wut’s friends or relatives and Wut invited them to share our meal. Everyone assumed that I would pay the *checkbill*, because, as Wut explained, I was a rich farang. This annoyed me especially since I viewed myself as poor, by American standards. At

one time I refused to pay the bill and Wut exclaimed, “Allen, oldest people or richest people always pay. You is rich, you pay. You is polite. You is not a *farang keek-kock*.”

“What’s a Farang-keek-kock?” I asked.

Wut continued saying that a farang keek-kock was a bad, worthless foreigner without money, in other words, a hippie. “A good farang is rich and much better than poor Thai people. They are number one in world.”

“Never mind,” I said and paid for the meal.

Over breakfast one morning, Wut informed me that he no longer wanted to stay with Sanon. Astonished, I asked, “What brought this on all of a sudden?”

“Sanon’s wife don’t like me. I don’t sleep in their house anymore.”

“Don’t like you? What are you talking about? Maybe it’s me she doesn’t like.”

“Oh no!” he said emphatically. “Everybody like you very much. You can stay at my brother’s house, sure. No problem.”

“Wut, I’m not staying by myself at your cousin’s. Let’s go back to Lamson until the business contract is ready.”

“No. We bored go to my island and not work. We can stay...” he paused to think, “at my master’s house.”

This struck me as odd and I laughed aloud. “Master? Who’s your master?” As it turned out, his master was the head teacher of the Langu secondary school Wut had attended. Wut called the man his master because he had a masters degree. “Wut,” I said teasingly, “I have a masters degree so I think you should call me your master.” Wut was not amused.

We walked to the master’s house and met a small middle-aged man and his wife. They greeted us warmly and when Wut asked if we could stay with them, they welcomed us without

hesitation. They even asked Wut if he and I wanted to sleep together. This surprised me but I guessed that the master and his wife saw me more as a foreign Westerner than a woman and, in being polite, they discounted any Thai standards of morality. Wut explained that he and I were only friends and I slept alone in the guest bedroom while Wut slept on the floor of the front room.

We stayed with Wut's master until the day our business contract was ready, then Wut and I took a taxi to Satun. We arrived early so I could open an account at the Bangkok Bank. I then cabled my bank in Portland to transfer my savings to my new account.

At two o'clock we met Wut's cousin, Sanon, on the second floor gallery of an office building in the center of town. Sanon introduced us to his lawyer friend, a man who didn't speak English which meant I had to rely on Wut and Sanon's translation of what was being said. Once we were seated in the law office, the lawyer handed me a document, the top page being my own handwritten terms for the proposed contract I had designed. I thumbed through the other pages, expecting to find a typed version of the contract legally written. But the other pages were copies of my own handwritten proposal, followed by copies of a Thai translation.

"I'm not going to sign this," I said. "These are my own terms written in my words! I'm not a lawyer! I don't know about legal matters -- especially in your country!"

Wut assured me that the document was perfectly legal and had been verified. I still refused to sign it so the lawyer showed me his legal diplomas. In the end, I decided that my terms were probably clear enough and legally binding in Thailand and I signed each page of the document, beneath my carefully printed name and the names of Mr. Nutta Wut Sihmud, co-owner; Mr. Basoree Manakla, lawyer; and Mr. Sanon Suwanla-ong, witness. The lawyer stamped each page of the contract, took an English and a Thai copy, and handed the rest to me.

With this accomplished, I decided to head across the narrow Malay peninsula and see about my upcoming job at the Prince of Songkhla University in the remote hinterland town of Pattani. As promised, Wut escorted me to the university, but at the front campus gate I told him to wait with my bags while I located the English subdivision in the Arts Building. I didn't want him to leave before I knew whether or not I'd have a place to stay, nor did I care to be seen with Wut and begin my year at the university with an awkward first impression.

Prince of Songkhla University, namesake of King Bumipol's father, lay near a marshy shoreline along the Gulf of Thailand. The campus had a lovely park like setting with green lawns, palms, sea oaks, pink oleanders, lantanas, and hibiscus plants that scented the warm tropical air. Beside the main campus road stretched a series of ponds colored by magenta, yellow, and turquoise water lilies. Edging these ponds stood eucalyptus trees, where mynah birds called out to one another. The richly colorful setting convinced me, as I asked around for the Arts Building, that I was in for a fulfilling year.

In the Arts Building at the far end of campus, I met the director of the English department, a woman in her thirties who had a radiant smile. After a warm welcome, she asked me to call her by her nickname, Mu. Other than the two secretaries, Mu was the only one in the large department office because I had arrived at the beginning of a six week break between summer and winter semesters, and most Thai *acharns* (professors) were on vacation.

After spending an hour discussing the curriculum, Mu invited me to stay at the campus guest house until she could arrange for my apartment. When we left the Arts Building for the guest house, I silently hoped we would not encounter Wut. I feared he had grown restless waiting so long, and would be looking around campus for me. My worry changed to embarrassment when, on our way down the road beside the campus ponds, I spotted Wut approaching us.

“Allen!” he yelled after meeting up with us. “We bored waiting so long.” The look on Mu’s face revealed my terrible social gaff of waltzing into PSU with this crude, rustic, unshaven Thai man with untucked shirt tails and a cigarette dangling from his mouth. There wasn’t much I could do but introduce Wut as the guide I had hired in Phuket to take me to Pattani. Mu merely nodded, but her smile had changed and I felt foolish.

That night I settled into a room at the guest house and Wut returned to Lamson where I planned to meet him after the completion of my teaching contract and work permit. For the next few days I sorted through my upcoming classes and explored the campus setting. I rarely saw anyone other than Mu, who behaved cordially so I assumed she discounted my clumsy arrival with Wut. But then one evening Mu came to my room at the guest house with a telegram addressed to her. It read, “Tell Allen everything OK. We on my island waiting she come back. Wut.” I was speechless, unable to believe Wut had actually sent the cable to Mu instead of me.

When Mu handed me the telegram while giving me a distrustful look, I felt obliged to invite her in and explain what I was doing. Mu herself had claimed to own a small business in town and so, I reasoned, she shouldn’t care if I did also.

We sat on the sofa and I told her about Lamson. For a moment, she remained silent with a serious expression as if to say “who the hell are you to have a business in Thailand while working at the Prince of Songkhla?”

“I am afraid this man Wut is trying to swindle you,” she finally said while standing up to leave and giving me an intense and frightening look, almost one of hatred. “Listen Teresa,” she said, “I don’t care what you do as long as you don’t make me lose my credit!” She had been the one to hire me and if I turned out to be a flake, it would look bad for her.

When Mu left me with the telegram, my mind cluttered with conflicting thoughts. I began to hate Mu. She's high-strung, I thought. That's the problem. And she's wrong about Wut. He's not a swindler. She just doesn't understand the situation or my character well enough to trust me. What did it matter? I had lived on Lamson and knew the island was not an illusion. I believed in my decision to invest and would not let Mu or anything else stop me in my ambitions for a future in paradise.

The next morning, when I returned to the Arts building, I hardly knew what to expect, but Mu behaved pleasantly and never said anything about the matter. I was grateful and avoided her for the next few days while I finished preparing for my classes.

Within two weeks, my preparations were complete and I wanted to return to Lamson. But the department rector had taken my passport to process my teaching contract and work permit, and without it, I couldn't leave Pattani. I grew impatient sitting at my desk day after day wasting time that could be spent on my island. Finally, I asked Mu if she knew the status of my paperwork or if she could help speed it along. At first she politely told me to relax and enjoy my free time, but soon she became annoyed with my questions.

Feeling anxious to return to Lamson and not knowing what else to do, I pleaded with Mu to help me get back my passport so I could leave until classes began. After I did so, she stared at me coldly, stood up from her desk, and yelled, "Teresa, I have my own problems and can't always help you with yours! I suggest you leave me alone from now on."

Her anger stunned and enraged me, but I said nothing. Instead, I left her desk and returned to mine to think the situation over. What was I going to do about my altercation with Mu? Demand my passport and quit the job? I quickly dismissed the notion. I hadn't met any of the other acharns or my students and I looked forward to teaching the courses. And I needed the

money to invest in my business despite my terrible beginning with Mu. Besides, I hadn't done anything wrong except to be honest about my endeavors.

But, as I would subsequently learn over and over again, my American manner of directness conflicted with the Thai virtue of indirectness. Consequently, each time I made a direct request or statement, I generally offended some Thai. This caused a terrible dilemma for me and left me feeling insecure, as though I would snap someone's frayed nerves whenever I spoke. In addition to this, I had assumed that Mu, as the director of the department, was responsible for helping me. But my situation differed markedly from that of China where the university had an entire department devoted to the needs of foreigners. In China I didn't have to worry about adjusting to the Chinese ways because they kept the foreigners segregated. But in Thailand, it was up to me to understand the indirect ways of the Thai since I had chosen to live in their culture. I decided my best strategy would be careful observation of Thai behavior, slow assimilation into the culture, and depersonalization from each troublesome situation.

Later that same afternoon, the department rector, a middle aged man named Pai Tun, asked to see me in his office. I worried Mu had told him to get rid of me. I didn't want to lose my job, but if this were the case I would simply return to Lamson and work out new plans from there.

When I sat before Pai Tun's desk, he handed me my passport and said it expired in six months and that I had to get a new one at the American Embassy. He then added that I also needed to go to the Thai Consulate in Penang to get a non-immigrant visa. I was relieved to still have my job, but couldn't understand why Pai Tun had wasted my time by waiting so long before telling me about my passport and visa. I asked him whether I should go to the American Embassy in Bangkok or Singapore, since both cities were about the same distance from Pattani.

“That’s your affair,” he said, leaving me with yet another unforgettable message that melted the Land of Smiles into the Land of Indifference. I was beginning to realize that tourists see the glamorous surface of a foreign country -- such as the Land of Smiles -- while the expatriate penetrates the surface and experiences deeper, often rather unpleasant attitudes.

Early the next morning, I caught a taxi to the train station in Haad Yaai, the major city of south Thailand. My plan was to head for Singapore, but a train was departing for Bangkok when I arrived at the station, so I impulsively hopped aboard. There was little incident in getting my new passport, and by the following evening I was on my way to Penang, feeling relieved at how smoothly the process was going. Soon I’d be staying on Lamson, my island, until classes began. Pai Tun or Mu wouldn’t know how long it had taken me to get my passport and visa.

As soon as I got my non-immigrant visa in Penang, I caught the early morning taxi back to Thailand. It was about noon and starting to rain when I reached the taxi stand outside a cafe in Haad Yaai. I ate a bowl of noodle soup while anxiously waiting for the driver of the 1950’s Mercedes taxi to leave for Satun. He wanted to have at least three more passengers to make his trip worthwhile. Another passenger showed up. “Five,” the driver gestured with his right hand, meaning he needed only two more passengers before we could leave. Otherwise, I could pay the difference in fare, but I hardly wanted to squander my money.

The wait slowly dragged on as the rain fell harder and harder. I sat there, tormented over what I was doing, what I had done, and what was happening to me. My stomach felt queasy when I recalled how terribly disappointed Mu had been about me and how uncertain she felt about my character. I was not a flake. I had integrity, diligence. And so what if I wanted more than a mere university job? I just wasn’t any good at working for other people so I had to pursue my investment on Lamson. My relationship with Wut suddenly entered my thoughts. How could

we be business partners when he sometimes bothered me? What was I trying to do? Work at opposite ends of the Thai cultural spectrum -- Pattani and Lamson?

My situation began to look as hopeless as the taxi driver fulfilling his quota. But he did and I made it to Satun where, in the pouring rain, I ran across town and boarded an idling bus. "To Langu?" I asked, while standing drenched in the center aisle. The people on board stared at me but nobody answered. "Langu?" I repeated five times with each tone in the Thai language. Everyone shyly turned from my gaze, unwilling to understand me, the strange outsider. "Boy," I said aloud, "can't you dumb people respond!?"

Finally, I said slowly and loudly, "*Bai -- Lan -- Gu?"* and a tiny old woman looked up at me, nodded and said, "*Bai Langu*." I thanked her and sat behind her seat. During the ride to Langu, she continually looked back at me and said, with a toothless grin, *"Bai Langu*." She had helped a stranger when nobody else would.

By the time the bus reached Langu, the monsoon violently roared and flooded the streets, making it impossible to catch the motorcycle taxi to Kota Baru harbor. So I waited beneath the corrugated aluminum awning at a stationery shop along main street and watched sheets of water pour onto the muddy road. Shortly, I was startled by a tap on my shoulder. I turned and saw a woman gesturing that I follow her inside the shop, which also served as her home. She invited me to sit on a chair behind the back counter while she went to fetch me a cup of tea from the kitchen in the rear of the shop. Momentarily, she returned with the tea, and with her teenage daughter who was carrying a photo album.

After warming up with a sip of tea, I took hold of the album the mother and daughter eagerly wanted me to peruse. I set it on my lap, opened the cover, and saw, to my shock, a full-sized photograph of my face. The woman and her daughter burst into laughter at my reaction.

But it took me a moment or two before I recalled that the girl giggling beside me now had taken the picture when I walked along main street during my previous visit to Langu. I laughed along with the mother and daughter, while feeling somewhat like a celebrity. Or was it like a fool, a freak, or a clown? Just who was I, in this picture and in the minds of these people? I could only guess.

About an hour passed before the storm subsided and I left my new friends at the stationery shop. I flagged down a motorcycle taxi and said to the driver, "*Bai Kota Baru*.." He hesitated to take me to the harbor because of the muddy roads, but I offered him twenty extra baht, about a dollar, and he agreed to go.

Halfway to Kota Baru we came to the edge of a flooded dip in the road. The driver stopped and motioned that we must wade to the other side. I heaved my bag over my shoulder and followed the driver walking his motorcycle through the murky warm water that reached as high as my waist. We had to do this once again before we pulled up to the dock shelter in Kota Baru and I caught the last sampan to Lamson.

It was nearly dusk when I reached Tu Tae Rum Harbor. I decided the quickest route to Wut's bungalow would be along the beach, even though the recent downpour had made the sand soggy. To hurry along, I took off my sandals, but then had difficulty walking barefoot because of the broken shells scattered on the sand. I ended up walking along the edge of the surf.

After about ten minutes, the sun set behind the distant islands while clouds rolled inland from the sea. I started to run, concerned about getting caught in another monstrous storm. Within five minutes, the rain steadily poured. I covered my head with my bag and splashed along the surf down the beach.

Soon the sky completely darkened, the wind howled, thunder roared, and lightening flashed across the horizon, emblazing silhouettes of the distant islands. I shivered with visions of danger. Lightning would kill me on the spot, or a poisonous creature would crawl from the sea and bite me. Or worse, a mugger who whistles and lurks about the island at night would sneak up on me from behind. Panting heavily, I hastened through the surf, stumbling now and then but too frightened to let myself fall. Suddenly, out of the dark pelting rain, the shape of a man appeared. I stood frozen at the edge of the sea, watching as the figure drew nearer. There was no place to run or hide. I could only hope that whoever he was, he would not see me or if he did, he'd help me find shelter.

"Allen... Allen..." I heard my name swell through the storm. "Allen," the voice called. "What are you doing?" It was Wut.

When he reached me, he put his arms around me. "We fraid for you. Why you come so late? You crazy!"

I stood silently in his arms, shivering in the howling winds, and fierce downpour. Yes, I'm crazy, I thought, as Wut took my hand and hastily led me off the beach. We ran through a thicket to the first bungalow we came to. An old couple welcomed us inside where the man lighted an oil lamp and the woman brought us some towels. They left Wut and me alone in the front room and returned to their bedroom at the back of the bungalow.

After drying off and changing into my sarong, I thought to ask Wut how he knew where to find me, or that I was even on Lamson. From Wut's explanation I gathered that the moment my foot touched Tu Tae Rum harbor, news of my arrival shot like an arrow to where he was. "When we come to find you, we hear you go onto the beach."

I reached over and kissed Wut. “Thanks,” I said, admiring his ability to find me as he had. Fleetingly, I felt like a damsel from a fairy tale.

Late into the night, as the storm continued to clash and howl, I fell asleep in Wut’s arms and wondered if I could possibly be falling in love with him. But after I awoke to a clear and sunny morning, and the old woman gave Wut and me some rice for breakfast, I looked at Wut and no longer felt the same way. He tried to recapture the events of the night before, leading up to how he found me in the rain. But I only saw him sitting before me, eating with his dirty hand, and looking crude, unshaven, and entirely rustic.

“Oh Wut,” I suddenly remembered to ask, “Why on earth did you send that telegram to Mu and not to me? What’s the matter with you? You’re causing me nothing but trouble....”

“We send telegram to Mu because we remember she is your supervisor. And we want you to have no problems and not to worry about business.”

“Well, just never -- and I mean *never* -- do it again!”

Wut said nothing, perhaps feeling demure from my angry remarks, and we left the old couple’s bungalow to continue up the beach. When we neared the three frangipani trees, I saw four newly built bungalows facing the sea. The sight thrilled me. These were *my* bungalows. My vision *was* becoming a reality. I just knew my investment would be worthwhile, no matter what I had to go through.

Wut and I sat on the veranda floor of one of the bungalows and shared a cigarette. “Allen. You get money from your bank?” Wut deeply inhaled as though he was smoking ganja, then passed the cigarette to me. When I told him I hadn’t even checked the bank because of my haste to reach Lamson, he said, “But you have money with you. Right? Cash advance on your credit card?”

“Only a hundred baht.”

Wut became terribly upset. “OK, you don’t stay at my parent’s bungalow anymore.”

This made me furious. I flung the cigarette into the sand and stood up. “What do you mean? In that case -- Wut -- I’m taking my contract right to the police and report that you’re trying to cheat me.”

Wut immediately calmed down. “No, no, Allen. Believe me. We only teasing. We can’t cheating you. If we do we don’t come back to my island again because people talk and say we is bad man. We only acting impolite now, before we start business, to learn about your heart. After we start business, believe me, we always polite. Don’t go to police. My mother is sick ever since we make bungalow business with you. She worry we go to jail because you don’t like business. Please, Allen. We tell my mother you has a good heart and is a good farang.”

“Forget it Wut. I won’t go to the police... And never mind about the money. I’ll check on it on my way back to Pattani.”

Seeing I was no longer upset, Wut said, in a serious voice, “Allen. We need the money today. Believe me, my father goes to sell his cow to pay for materials. Shop men ask about my credit many time.”

“Not a bad idea,” I teased.

“What?”

“To sell your cow.”

“OK, then my father sell the only cow he has. He is a poor man but he sell to pay for credit. My father is good.”

When I assured Wut that his father wouldn't have to sell the cow, he looked relieved. "Allen," he said. "We know you has a kind heart. We tell my mother already. Now we go to see my father and tell him you can get the money soon."

We hurried from the beach and when we approached the red brick bungalow, Wut's mother ran out the door and up to us, without even greeting me. She spoke urgently to her son and he said, "Come on Allen. We go to find my father."

I ran behind Wut down the trail and, at a turn, spotted his father leading a cow by a rope around its neck. Wut shouted and his father turned and grinned when he saw me. He wouldn't have to sell the cow. The rich farang had returned.

Wut and I headed straight for Satun and by that evening, we were back on Lamson with five hundred dollars of my savings. In Wut's bungalow, I met his brother, who had returned to the island to help with the business, and I met two other men hired to help with the construction. The men hadn't been working for a couple of days because they were waiting to be paid. It was terribly unnerving to realize that these people were basing their hopes for an income on my flimsy savings.

Wut handed the two men their back pay and said to me, "We must give them money because they have babies to feed." He gave a portion of the money to his father who immediately set off to pay the creditors in Langu. His mother took what remained, and after everyone but me left the bungalow, hid it in a hole under a loose brick in the corner of the room.

I spent the following morning at the beach watching the men work on my rustic, but elegant bungalows. I felt ecstatic and my imagination soared once again. Wut's father, with his large strong hands, would build me a mahogany boat to sail around sandy coves and aquamarine coral reefs in the outlying islands. I would take pictures for a book, paint seascapes and sunsets,

write stories about the islanders.... The visions went on and on. I had found paradise on earth and nothing could stop me now

Chapter Eleven: Pattani

Once I began teaching, my life in Pattani became fairly settled and routine. From my new apartment, I enjoyed walking the mile to my office in the fresh early morning air. Along the way, I'd spot yellow breasted finches cajoling in weeping bottlebrush trees, a large monitor lizard diving into a pond, or a huge brownish green python crossing the road before me. At six o'clock most evenings, I went to the marshy seashore beside campus to watch fishing boats return to shore as the sun lit the sky ablaze with pinks, purples, yellows, and reds.

The town of Pattani was about two miles from my apartment. To get there, I hopped aboard one of the Toyota pickup taxis called *tuk tuks* that waited around the campus gates. "To the market," I said in Thai and even if the driver didn't understand me, I always ended up in town.

The Pattani River ran through town, passing under the Dejanuchit Bridge. Docked near the bridge were numerous large orange and blue wooden fishing boats belonging to local Chinese merchants, although the crew came from the poverty stricken wastelands of Northeast Thailand. The roads in town bustled with tuk tuks, motorcycles, bicycles, a couple of private cars, Mercedes-Benz or Ford taxis, and *samalars* -- pedicabs with the bicycle to the side of the

passenger seat. Along the main road, beyond a riverside park, stood garage-like open front shops with accordion doors that folded to the sides. Tattered awnings extended above most shops and separated the first from the second stories where the shopkeepers lived. Pattani had a camera shop, hardware store, pharmacy, dress maker store, newspaper shop (where I subscribed to the Bangkok Post), dentist office with a set of wooden teeth displayed in the front window, and two general stores stacked to the ceiling with dusty boxes of Jello, cake mixes, jars of Nestcafe, green canisters of Ovalteen, cans of Veleveta cheese, and tubes of Pringles potato chips. At the southeast edge of town stood a large mosque which served the Malay Muslim community, about seventy-five percent of Pattani's population.

Pattani's two movie theatres advertised via tuk tuks, flanked with garish panels of movie scenes, that drove around campus and town announcing the latest attraction over loud speakers. Before each film, slides of King Bumipol, Queen Surikit, and the royal family appeared on the screen and everybody in the theater stood up while the national anthem played. Never before had I experienced a country as nationalistic as Thailand. Daily, at eight AM and six PM, the anthem aired over loud speakers wherever electricity existed. When the anthem played, motorcycles, pedestrians, cars, and trucks stopped, even in the rain.

Shortly after the six o'clock anthem, the night market appeared on a large plaza off the main street in town. Food vendors rolled out kiosks, lighted charcoal burners, and set up folding chairs and tables with large umbrellas. The kiosks offered noodles, fried rice, Chinese dumplings, stir fried oysters, roast duck, pastries, and a variety of tropical fruit drinks or soybean milk mixed with raw quail eggs.

Pattani had two open markets -- the Malay market held only on Saturday morning, and the daily market held on the same plaza as the night market, although it spread into neighboring

alleys and inside a large warehouse. Stalls and vendors cluttered the markets selling meat, sarongs, trinket jewelry, plastic products, bins of grain, crates of chickens, baskets of eggs, watermelons, papayas, mangoes, grapefruit like pummelos, purple mangosteens, huge and pungent durian, sweet jackfruit, and about twenty varieties of bananas, each with a distinctive Thai name. In the fish section of the market, women stood behind crude wooden tables shaded by ragged parasols, or they squatted on the ground before pans of tuna, tiger toother croaker, or big eye scad. I went to the market at least twice a week to buy fresh fruit and orchids. But I seldom cooked because of the inexpensive cafes near my apartment that served delicious hot spicy lime and shrimp soup, green papaya and peanut salad, and a variety of curries made with chilies and sweet coconut milk. When it came to food, I felt right at home in Thailand.

My apartment was in a complex called the Townhouse Flats, two rows of concrete buildings that had small walled-in front yards for each apartment. My front room came with a desk, rattan chairs, a coffee table, book shelves, a bed with its necessary mosquito net, and a ceiling fan -- the only means of keeping cool in the year round heat. My kitchen in back included a gas burner, refrigerator, and a cabinet that stood in plates filled with insecticide to keep out the ever present ants. The bathroom, a walled off corner of the kitchen, had a squat toilet on a raised platform, and a waist level basin for bathing.

Mostly noisy but polite students who hadn't been able to get into the campus dormitories lived in the Townhouse Flats. They often asked me whether I was lonely living by myself. I told them that I liked the privacy, but they had difficulty understanding because privacy was not an important part of their culture. It seemed they valued constant companionship.

My next door neighbor was a policeman whose front yard contained seven bird cages -- three with doves, one with a kind of raven that made a wrenching call at sunrise, and three with

mynah birds that, in addition to speaking Thai, mimicked the raven, revving motor cycles, and the policeman's hawking and spitting sounds.

Practically every Malay bungalow and shop in southern Thailand possessed caged birds, especially doves. In fact, the major sport for the Thai Malays was the "dove cooing contest." The cooing event was held in fields where dove owners placed caged birds on fifteen foot bamboo poles. The judges walked among the poles as the owners coaxed their prized birds to coo. Champion cooers could earn their owners thousands of baht. I once asked a student how one coo could be distinguished from another and he explained that well trained judges easily differentiated cooing pitches, like musicians recognize tonality.

The less fortunate animals of the area were the stray cats and mangy dogs. Many lived around the Townhouse Flats, and occasionally I awoke to find an enormous cat lying at the foot of my bed. Evidently, it had entered through the open spaces in the block wall above my front door. One cat in particular, Noi, was a beautiful svelt Siamese. Noi roamed around the Townhouse like a queen that ruled over the other cats and even the dogs. Her noble and independent demeanor began my love affair with the feline.

On the other hand, the stray dogs in the area greatly disturbed me. They congregated in packs, continually fought, copulated, had unwanted puppies, and enacted the cold, cruel world of Darwin's survival of the fittest. There was a ruthless competitiveness among them that made the leader of each pack fight to keep its dominant position. From time to time, the city distributed notices warning pet owners that poison would be set out on certain a date. This was the town's only means of controlling the problem of unwanted pets. After a day or two beneath the tropical sun, the pungent smelling dead animal decomposed into bones. It was gruesome to watch, but less disturbing than seeing a mangy flea bitten dog that resembled a huge starving rat.

I once tried to save a tiny rust colored puppy I found snuggled into the corner of my front stoop. Its pathetic eyes looked up at me as if to say, “Can’t you help? I don’t feel well.” My heart opened to the little animal but my attempt to spoon feed it an egg and milk mixture failed. Too weak and starved to even eat, the puppy wobbled to its feet, clinging onto what life it had, then winced, collapsed, and died. I put the puppy in a box and placed it next to the midden pile at the end of the Townhouse complex, feeling sorry it had died but glad it no longer had to suffer.

Two other contract teachers worked at PSU, Bret from England and Jacques from France. They each lived at the Townhouse Flats and were both married to friendly Thai women. Next door to Jacques and his wife lived a blond, blue-eyed Dutch missionary in her mid-forties. Lotte Hovaan became my closest friend during my first semester in Pattani. I told her about my difficulties with Mu but avoided mentioning my business investment or my clumsy arrival at PSU with Wut. Lotte was a good listener, and she offered many suggestions on how to understand the Thai and their indirect ways. I appreciated this, but grew weary of her continual prayers that I would come to know the Lord. This meant very little to me. I didn’t need a savior in my life. I just needed a friend.

One weekend, Lotte invited me to the South Thailand Christian Conference held in the small hamlet of Saibury, a 45 minute taxi ride south of Pattani. She convinced me that the trip would be good for me since I could meet and talk to Western missionaries who had lived in Thailand for years and could empathize with my cross-cultural misunderstandings. Admittedly, I suspected the weekend might become too religious and devoted to the saving of my soul, but I reasoned that any excuse to meet other Westerners was worthwhile.

Saibury was a charming Malay Muslim community built around palm lined channels of water, a clear blue lagoon, and wide sandy beaches. Along its waterways rested Malay fishing

boats with large ornate bows colorfully detailed with scenes depicting something important in the fisherman's life: trucks, doves, motorcycles, waterside bungalows, monkeys picking coconuts, groves of napa palms, and fish drying on sunlit beaches.

Before going to the conference site, Lotte took me to the Saibury Mission Hospital near the lagoon. The two wing hospital had been established in 1960 by missionaries who had been expelled from Communist China in 1951.

It was mid-morning when Lotte and I arrived, and most of the nurses and doctors were at the conference site preparing for the evening's events. Lotte left me with the hospital's head nurse and set off to help with the preparations. The head nurse, Sarah, was an American woman in her seventies who had spent twenty-seven years in Saibury. Her colorful story telling, white hair, and warm smile made me feel I was with my own grandmother.

Sarah took me on a tour of the hospital, beginning in the leprosy ward. The patients were Thai Malays dressed in white shrouds and gauze around their hands and feet. Most were lounging on the veranda of the ward as Sarah and I walked by. Some patients had dark purplish skin from the chemotherapy treatment used at the hospital, a side effect that horrified the patients because they believed the darker their skin the lower their status, and as lepers they were already at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

I asked Sarah how people caught leprosy and she explained, as she affectionately held the bandaged hand of one of the patients, "Villagers contract leprosy after years of close physical contact with an infected person, usually during childhood... Such as a naked child crawling across the bungalow floor of an infected parent. It's caused by a strain of bacteria that destroys nerve tissue, so patients lose their ability to feel pain. Without pain, they don't notice sores. Infection sets in and eventually becomes so bad that fingers and toes rot off. So it's really the

secondary symptoms that cause the deformity. You see Teresa, pain is God's love in action. Through it, he reveals our wounds."

A young woman patient held out her bandaged hand to me while grinning as childishly as had Kumala's servant woman. I felt much sympathy for her, though I feared taking hold of her hand. I couldn't imagine catching such a disfiguring disease. To avoid the situation, I turned from the woman and asked Sarah, "Can't the lepers notice their sores?"

"You'd think so. But these people live in such poor conditions that they usually don't detect anything until it's too late. And what people don't feel doesn't bother them. Our biggest job is teaching the patient to carefully search for signs of cuts and abrasions." Sarah added that nurses went out into the villages to locate the lepers and bathe and disinfect their wounds. "We pray that the leper will come to the hospital for complete treatment. But many never do."

"Why?" I asked. "You'd think they'd want to be cured."

"Ah but the villagers are too ashamed of their condition, or they simply don't trust our medicine. They've all heard it darkens their skin. Often, it's a husband, father, or the village headman who forbids the villager from seeking our help. In one case, a local headman wouldn't permit his own pregnant daughter to come to the hospital... She died in childbirth."

Further down the ward I noticed a patient wearing a cross around her neck. I asked Sarah if the lepers were Christian. She said most were, adding, "We have difficulty winning the Malay Muslims over to Christ because of their strict religious community and family ties. Since lepers are outcasts anyway, they're more receptive to the teachings of our Lord."

We left the leprosy ward and walked across the hospital grounds to a barbed wire fence beside a Muslim cemetery. Sarah walked over to the fence and stared at two lonely crosses standing among the many stone markers on grassy knolls. "Our Minka and Margaret are resting

here," she said after I joined her. "Have you heard about them?" I told her no and she recounted their story. In 1974 Minka and Margaret had been working as nurses at the leprosy clinic in Pattani. One day three men came to the clinic in a pickup truck and abducted the two nurses. The men, who turned out to be Muslim insurgents, asked for ten million baht and demanded that the Christian world stop supporting Israel against the Palestinians.

"They thought the world would react as if our nurses were major political leaders," Sarah added while shaking her head. "We couldn't possibly answer their demands or pay the ransom. And even if we could... Well, you pay it once and every missionary has a price on his head." Sarah paused in reflection. "Oh, how we prayed and prayed for their safety. But their lives were in the hands of our Lord. Nine months after the abduction, their skeletons were found in the jungle with a bullet hole through the back of each skull."

Sarah bowed in prayer as I quietly gazed at the crosses. I felt deeply moved by the story of these two heroic women who had once lived a life designed by faith in an almighty God. They had bathed and treated the hideous scars of lepers in the same way Jesus had. Had they been afraid to die or had their faith carried them through the terror? I had always viewed missionaries as a group of self-righteous people forcing other cultures to adopt a new way of life. But the crosses and the mission hospital spoke of compassion -- of people helping even the most wretched social outcast in the face of tragedy. What other form of behavior could be more honorable? Could I ever have such faith and risk my life for a God I could not see? For a moment, I had fleeting thoughts of becoming converted -- *saved* -- on that very day. I saw myself as a missionary living a life of self-sacrifice, purposefulness, unquestioning faith... It seemed an ideal life, one with all the answers... That is, God would have the answers, but I would be sure of this.

The South Thailand Christian Conference was held at a riverside secondary school. Around the school grounds chatted crowds of enthusiastic Thai Christian youths and missionaries, both Asian and Western. When I arrived in the late afternoon, I met dozens of nice Christians who continually asked me if I had received Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. After the sixth time, the phrase sounded as trite and uninspiring as any communist maxim.

At dinner time, I sat with Lotte at a table under a canvas pavilion. Across from us sat two Asian ministers from Haad Yaai. The men asked me typical questions -- Are you a Christian? Where are you from? How long have you been in Asia? -- and I asked them about their work in Haad Yaai. The subject of astronomy came up after one of the men asked me if I had any hobbies. I admitted I had belonged to the Portland Astronomical Society, although I worried this wasn't a safe topic in the company of fundamental Christians.

"And what is your opinion of the big bang?" the larger of the two Asian ministers asked.

"What?" I innocently asked, sensing that his question was a trap.

"The origin of the universe."

"Well, I don't know." I hesitated, hoping they might answer their own question, which I suspected they planned to do anyway. "I suppose it's a likely enough theory...."

"Theory?" exclaimed the larger Asian. "The devil's trickery is what makes scientists think they understand the universe. Everything is clearly stated in the Bible."

This, I thought, has very little to do with logic. Sure, I could say, "the devil caused it" about anything. But why affix blame to an abstract concept. Besides, how does our present understanding of the universe make the ideal of a God any less magnificent? Why attribute to

Him or Her a mere hocus-pocus theory of creation? And what's wrong with the big bang? A perfectly good God could create a perfectly good big bang as well as anything else.

I tried to change the subject by asking the smaller Asian minister if he would be speaking during the conference. He said he was participating in the baptisms on Sunday, otherwise he was serving as a counselor for the Thai youth group. Momentarily he asked me, in a perky manner, about my undergraduate degree in college. It quickly became apparent that Lotte had mentioned my having a degree in anthropology. I assumed she had told all of her colleagues at the conference about me, the new contract teacher at PSU who had run into the usual cross-cultural difficulties and was in need of the Lord's salvation. I imagined they were all praying for me.

After explaining that I was in Asia because of my interest in anthropology, the larger Asian minister said, "Did you know Darwin went crazy at the end of his life? He denounced all of his theories, and received the Lord as his personal savior."

"Really?" I said, matter-of-factly. "I've never heard such a story." It had gone too far. Any religious fundamentalism, whether Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or Islamic, simply baffled me. Did these Christians really think such arguments would convert me to their faith? No, I thought, their claims are nothing but meaningless side issues, enormous obstacles to a great man's teachings. Perhaps if they discussed the teachings of Christ, they'd convince me they had something of value to offer.

I spent the night in a guest room at the mission hospital and on Sunday morning, before returning to Pattani, I went back to the conference center. I found Lotte among a crowd gathered along the banks of the river to witness the highlight of the conference -- the baptisms of new converts. A Thai evangelist stood in the river up to his waist as four lepers, in turn, walked into the flowing water.

The sight moved me as deeply as had the two crosses in the cemetery. I hoped that these people, burdened with disease and poverty, would find comfort and peace in their new faith. When a leper man struggled to reach the evangelist, like a child learning to walk, tears fell down my face. At first I thought my tears were for the poor leper, but soon I realized that I pitied my own sense of loneliness. Why couldn't I partake in the communal joy of receiving a savior when everyone surrounding me did? Maybe religion is the only thing that makes life fulfilling. The people who care for the poorest of society are real and admirable. And who am I, seeking my own little island hideaway so I can chase after selfish adventures? Will I ever find a way to live that embraces meaning beyond mere existence and the tantalizing pleasure of making visions reality? Will I ever touch my soul or that of God?

The minister took the frail leper in his arms and immersed him in the murky river. I imagined Jesus saying, "Come forth to the riverside. Come one and all. I shall bless you who are weak, filled with sorrow, pain, and hunger. I will anoint you with comfort, freedom, and hope... I will bathe your wounds, heal your sorrows.... And I will teach you about love...."

When the leper emerged from the water his expression radiated, "I have been relieved of my pain!!" There was beauty in his face and eyes, the glory of compassion, of being accepted and wanted. Could this be, I wondered, all that Jesus really meant to offer through his life? And if I accepted him, regardless of my doubts, would I discover peace and happiness? And was this what I really wanted out of life?

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I thought I had been hired to help supervise in the English department, but as the days passed the Thai acharns rarely asked me anything. I was left to design and teach my own courses. As I observed, each acharn aimed to create his or her own course material instead of

working as a team and building on prior work. This prevented organization and progression in the curriculum, but perfectly matched the Theravada ideal of making merit.

Most acharns pleasantly smiled and spoke with me, but within a month I notice that four acharns, the most ambitious merit making women in the department, completely ignored me. In fact, I shared an office with one, the director of the French subdivision. At first, I greeted her when entering the room, but after two or three instances of being ignored, I couldn't even look at her. Their attitude toward me seemed beyond indifference; it was a prejudice, an intense hatred of the outsider. Each episode of being ignored seemed as new and as potent as the last and always left me with stomach pangs.

What made this situation worse was that these four women were close friends of the Fulbright couple, a husband and wife team who worked in the Education Department. Besides Jacques, Bret, and I, the Fulbright couple, Connie and John, were the only other Westerners working at PSU. If I were in the presence of either Connie or John, the ambitious acharn would greet me and joke childishly with me as if I too, were her close friend. But the next time I saw this same ambitious acharn, she coldly ignored me. This made it impossible to share my situation with the Fulbright couple. How could they understand my point of view, when my enemies were their closest friends?

If it hadn't been for the other two contract teachers, I would have assumed that the unpleasant attitudes toward me came from my initial arrival with Wut. Bret and Jacques empathized with my unpleasant experiences because they also experienced the same negative attitudes from each of the four women, who we began calling the four witches. From Bret, I learned that our being *contract teachers* bothered these women. They envied the money we made because it was higher than their earnings. Status is an important feature of Thai culture, and

money is an important indicator of status. The ambitious acharns, the four witches, had worked hard to reach their prominent status in the department, but even so it took nearly thirty years before an acharn earned 10,000 baht a month, 500 baht less than what a contract teacher makes. So my showing up within their system and making 10,500 baht a month was understandably upsetting for the most merit conscious acharns.

With the passing of time, the behavior of the four witches continued to depress me, despite the explanation about salary. If it weren't for my investment on Lamson and the aspects of Pattani I liked -- my classes, the landscape, fresh air, sea, the markets, the tropical fruit, and the Thai food, I might have left PSU and Thailand all together.

I told Lotte about the witches and her best advice was to worry less about them and concentrate on my students. "They're the reason you're here," she said. "They need your kindness and guidance... Your influence will follow them into their future jobs and lives...."

My favorite times in Pattani were with my students. They called me "Acharn Teresa" and showed me great respect. In my six different classes I had over a hundred students between seventeen and twenty years old -- a few were boys and Muslims, but most were Buddhist girls of Chinese ancestry. They wore uniforms of white shirts and dark blue skirts or trousers, and with the exception of one or two outspoken girls, they were passive and often lazy, a tremendous change from my class of science teachers in China. The girls belonged to a "pop teen culture" that reminded me of my grade school days when I hung on my bedroom walls posters from Star Trek, the Monkeys, and the Supremes. The students collected posters of Brooke Shields and a French teen idol, along with Thai movie stars. They brought to class large pink floral and heart design pens, teddy bear erasers, and bright notebooks with movie star pictures. Throughout my stay, students sang two English songs at every assembly or musical event around campus:

Dream, Dream, Dream, and *Why do the Birds Keep on Singing*. Every student knew these two songs by heart, although they garbled the words into a sort of Thai mumbo-jumbo -- “Why do the birds keep on singing.... Don’t they know itsa -- n -- ada word... (it’s the end of the world).”

The students were astonishingly superstitious. One day, my second year writing class handed in stories about a vampire traveling through Pattani. The vampire rumors actually frightened the students and they took such precautions as wearing charms to ward off evil and not uttering the word “vampire.” One essay read:

“Yesterday, I cycled to my dorm and feared for the darkness of the empty path. Certainly, there has something wrong. While I am writing, my pale body is shuddered because I don’t want to go out of my room, even to the bathroom. I thought about the bad news which my friend had told me. It must be a make-up story, but I could not help thinking, maybe it is true. The story can be a magic deed or it can be about the mental disease. It makes me serious, confused, puzzled, and suspect everything surrounding me. I may become a nervous illness, even if I don’t really want this. The one thing which frightens me is the story about the uncremated ghost who sucks blood from woman. It has the rumor that it is near our university. I don’t really want to say this word [vampire] because I might die. I don’t know why I should be afraid of it. I think it must be my weak heart.

They said that this spirit was a Muslim woman, lived in Indonesia. She wanted to have a beautiful face and went to see a black magician. He made her a beautiful woman, but forbade her to look at a mirror for forty days. She didn’t obey because a lot of men told her she was beautiful, and she desired to know the truth so she looked in mirror. This made her face ugly and she had canine tooths. She was frightened and went to see black magician again. At this time, he

told her to kill and absorb blood from forty-two innocent girls (girls who don't marry) to cure her face. She was wanted by the Indonesian policemen so she migrated to Malay, then to Thailand. Now she is in Pattani. All of her body is covered with black cloth, except her eyes, because she wants to hypnotize the ones who look into her eyes.

When you see a woman in a black suit, don't look into her eyes. If you do, you'll be done for all of time."

My literature class consisted of fourth year students. Instead of lecturing and having the students passively depend on me for instruction, I used a student centered learning approach. My job was to present them with topics and tasks, initiate group discussion, then sit back and evaluate the sessions as an outside observer. It was an effective technique when the students were motivated because it forced them to think for themselves, and thus use the language. In two groups, each member eagerly participated because they had enthusiastic leaders. But the student who dominated the third group, viewed every task and topic as silly. Consequently, the entire group shared her negative attitude. To remedy this, I moved the domineering negative student into the group that had the most positive leadership and this group wasn't affected by her negativity. In the group without the negative leader, the students who previously had been quiet, actively participated. A lot of peer pressure had been lifted, and from the experience I learned how much the most forceful member of a group establishes its collective attitude.

My favorite class was Applied Linguistics because I could research interesting topics and offer my students substantive information instead of the basic structures of English (and the "Repeat after me," "Again please," phrases that go along with teaching English as a Second Language). My favorite lecture covered *iconic* and *arbitrary* language. "Words," I explained,

“are not in themselves the actual objects described. For example, the word *apple* is not the physical object we eat. Words are *arbitrary* names agreed upon by a culture, a linguistically bound group of people. The closest we come to representing our world in language is through *iconic* words, such as the onomatopoeic words that describe sounds, *bow-wow* or *cockadoodle doo*. Other examples of iconic language are images, symbols and pictures such as the cross for Christianity, a crescent for the moon, an image of flame for fire. But still, the symbol isn’t the actual phenomenon.”

After the lecture, one of the brighter students in the class asked me to explain the difference, again, between iconic and arbitrary language. I spent ten minutes answering the question, writing more examples on the blackboard. Then another student asked what I meant by iconic and arbitrary language. I ended up paraphrasing a lot, and I was never sure how much of what I said was understood.

Throughout my stay in Pattani, the changing seasons and a variety of holidays marked the passing time. The Holiday *Loy Krathong* fell on the eleventh full moon of the Thai lunar year (a calendar system based on the birth of Buddha, 563 BC). Loy Krathong celebrated the change from a dry to a wet season and for the occasion students decorated Styrofoam circles with folded banana leaves, flowers, joss sticks, and candles to make small floats called *krathongs*. When the full moon glowed high in the sky, students gathered at the campus ponds, set the krathongs afloat, and prayed for a promising year to come. Following Loy Krathong, the south Thailand seasonal floods of the winter monsoon arrived in Pattani and lasted until about mid-December. When the flooding subsided, enormous grasshoppers and black frogs the size of a small fingernail appeared like a plague.

At this time a group of Vietnamese refugees arrived by boat on the shores of Pattani. The police sheltered them at a grade school near the Townhouse and as soon as I learned of their arrival, I set off to meet them. Lotte had told me horror stories about the refugees from Vietnam landing in Pattani province. Once, a group of Christians on the beach in Saibury witnessed a Thai fisherman with a knife in his hand chasing some refugees. Other stories concerned ruthless Thai fishermen pillaging and sinking refugee boats, taking the women to rape and pass from boat to boat, and then throwing the women overboard before returning to shore.

Under the school ground pavilion, I found twenty-two adults and six children between one and five years old. Nobody spoke Thai, and only two members of the group spoke English -- a slender 26 year old Catholic woman with long black hair, Nguyen Ngoc Ly, and her 22 year old husky boyfriend, Nguyen Dinh Thien. We three sat on a blanket under the wooden pavilion and the couple told me their story.

"How were you able to leave Vietnam?" I asked.

"You see," Thien explained, "my family had a business before the fall of Saigon. We sold palm tree cargo along the river. From this business we saved much money, so we could make a boat to escape."

"How did you make the boat without the government becoming suspicious?"

"We told the government we were making the boat to buy and sell wood for support of communism," Ly said. "Government is stupid people."

"We set sail in middle of December at one o'clock in the morning," Thien added. "During the time the government sleeps. The journey took us four days and three nights before we land in Pattani."

"Why did you leave during the monsoon season?"

Thien replied, “Because otherwise, police can see and catch us, so we must leave Vietnam in the bad weather, although we hear many people drown during this time.”

Ly added, “We think maybe we die at sea, but it made no difference. We can fear nothing when life is already too bad because of the government. Because of no freedom. If we are captured by communists in Saigon, we will be more afraid. But we were lucky, it was sunny everyday. God navigated and blessed our tiny boat.” She rubbed the cross around her neck.

When I asked how they were able to traverse the gulf to Thailand, Thien, with a look of pride, responded, “We had no sea charts, no binoculars, and our watches soon became broken. But I was a boy scout so I could follow the stars at night. Stars were very clear at sea, we had no moon shine. In daytime, I well know the directions of the sun.”

“Where do you think you’ll go now?”

“In the future,” Ly said, “I want to go back to Vietnam, if it is not communist. But now, I hope to go to the USA and live with my young brother and cousin. I hope to study medicine and help my people.”

Thien explained his plans to go to Australia where his sister lived and where he hoped to study engineering.

“But aren’t you two going to go to the same place together?”

They both laughed and Thien said, “We are neighbors and old friends. We helped each other escape but our journey has past. Now we must seek a future that does not put us together. But we will always be old friends.”

Before I left the refugees at the shelter, Ly handed me letters to mail to Vietnam and I asked her if I could bring them anything the next morning. I felt willing to spend a great deal of

money on whatever they wanted, just to make them more comfortable after their harrowing escape. They made any problems or difficulties I had seem trivial and rather self-indulgent.

Ly suggested I bring them some tea, sugar, creamer, coffee, and cigarettes for the men, and canned milk for the children. The following morning when I returned with the purchases, the group had already left for a refugee camp somewhere in Thailand. I had given them my address so they could tell me how things turned out, but I never heard from them. Certainly, they had many more important things to do than write a letter to me.

In February, on the full moon of the third lunar month of the Thai calendar, about 40,000 Chinese tourists came to Pattani from as far away as Singapore and Bangkok to attend the festival commemorating a local Chinese Mahayana goddess, Lim Kor Niao. It surprised me to learn that Pattani even had a history, but it had a significant one. Through the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, Pattani was an Islamic kingdom and an important port of call for the first Portuguese merchants in Southeast Asia. A remarkable feature of the kingdom was its four women rulers called rajas. The legend of Lim Kor Niao takes place during the reign of the first woman raja in the early 1600's. Lim Kor Niao traveled from Ming China with the purpose of convincing her brother to leave the kingdom of Pattani. After learning that her brother had become a Muslim and refused to return to China, Lim Kor Niao hanged herself from a cashew tree. As a result, the people in the kingdom revered her as a heroic woman of self-sacrifice and "death before dishonor." The first woman raja ordered Lim Kor Niao's brother to build a mosque at the site of her suicide. On three separate occasions, lightning blocked the brother's attempt to build the mosque and he left it unfinished. But his sister Lim Kor Niao became a goddess to the Chinese Buddhists of Pattani.

The night before the Lim Kor Niao celebration, sixteen Chinese men chosen for the ceremonies stayed in the local Mahayana temple, beating on drums and gongs until they fell into trances. At seven o'clock in the morning, the sixteen men, in groups of four, left the temple carrying over their shoulders red sedans with idols of Lim Kor Niao. They carried the sedans to the Pattani River, plunged into the water and swam across and back to symbolize walking on water. After this, the procession returned to the temple grounds and walked barefoot over burning charcoal fires. The sight was spectacular and apparently none of the men burned the soles of his feet because of his hypnotic state of mind.

During the festival, I met a twenty-two year old Thai, Surlee, who worked as head pharmacist in the Pattani hospital. The evening after we met, Surlee dropped by my apartment on her motorcycle and invited me to dinner. Subsequently, she paid me a visit almost every Friday evening, walking in my front door and cheerfully yelling, "Teresa. What are you doing?" We then went to the night market, or to a favorite restaurant. It was a relief to have a friend other than the strongly religious missionaries.

Surlee lived with her parents in a large town house complex not far from the river. Her father was one of Pattani's wealthy Chinese merchants and he owned seven fishing boats docked near the Dejanuchit Bridge. Surlee's mother, a Thai woman, reminded me of Wut's mother. She was dark complexioned, sturdy, and could speak only Thai. Every time I went to their home, Surlee's parents gave me duck eggs that farmers had given them in trade for seafood. Instead of eating the strong tasting eggs, I tossed them to the stray animals around the Townhouse Flats.

Mid April marked the Thai lunar New Year called Songkran Day. At six o'clock in the morning Surlee picked me up on her motorcycle and escorted me to the first event of the day -- paying alms to the monks. Outside the main temple in town, people stood behind food covered

tables lining the street while monks and novices, clad in their saffron robes, walked single file, in order of importance, down the street passing the tables. Each monk held out a metal pot so the people could make merit by giving him cooked rice, orchids, canned food, or fresh tropical fruit. The women carefully avoided touching any part of the holy men because in Theravada Buddhism a woman's touch is considered defiling. And if besmeared by a woman, the monk must undergo a purification ritual. This sort of religious tradition insulted me personally and I felt tempted to purposely touch every goddamn monk that held out his metal pot to me. But only my thoughts held such revenge and my outward behavior remained respectful since my best friend, Surlee, dutifully praised these holy monks.

Throughout the rest of Songkran day, children stood along the roads spraying water at one another, or youths drove around in pickup trucks throwing buckets of water at anyone in sight. The tossing of water signified a promise for rain during the new year, but it also enacted sanouk, the "have a good time" philosophy so dear to Wut and his brothers.

The Thai new year brought with it golden stalks of rice ripening in the paddies around Pattani. Farmers busily tied the stalks into sheaves which they carried on poles to a sunlit area. When the grain dried, the farmers thrashed the rice sheaves against stones and dislodged the grains from the ears. Afterward, they scattered the threshed grain (called paddy) onto mats to dry once more under the sun. Next, the farmers winnowed the rice by bouncing the grain in large bamboo trays so the wind could blow away unwanted chaff. At this stage, farmers kept some of the grain to use as seeds for next season's crop, and took the rest to commercial mills where rusty machines spun the grain to remove the bran. Farmers used the bran, the thin layer surrounding the kernel, as animal feed, and mill owners used the husk, the thick layer surrounding the bran and kernel, as fuel for their machinery. Farmers sold only white polished

rice in the Pattani markets. The more nutritious brown rice was reserved for livestock and prisoners.

Soon after the harvest, Surlee and her younger brother, Charoon, dropped by my apartment in their father's pickup truck to take me to the Cave Front Temple outside of town. Charoon, an attractive, soft spoken man, slightly taller than his sister, had traveled to Pattani from Bangkok to stay with his family for a week. After spending two years as a monk, Charoon was presently studying computer science at Chulalongkorn University and he planned to attend the University of Hawaii the following year. According to Surlee, Charoon had been eager to meet me because he wanted to practice his English in preparation for going to America. I was flattered by this, and as we spent the day together, I was charmed by Charoon's politeness toward me. He differed remarkably from Suwat, the former monk I had met in Bangkok a year before. Charoon behaved reverently toward me, as if he were one of my students. He continually opened doors for me, helped me in and out of the truck, and carefully ordered my lunch, making sure I had plenty to eat.

To reach the Cave Front Temple, we had to climb two flights of narrow stone steps on a lushly jungled hillside. The three Buddhas inside the cool musty cave had been built around 750 AD, during the Indonesian Srivijaya Empire (a maritime Mahayana Buddhist civilization that swept over the Malay Archipelago between the 7th and 13th centuries). Two Buddha statues sat in lotus position, and a fifty-foot statue called *Phra Phutthasaiyat* (Buddha lying in nirvana) reclined against the back wall.

Surlee and her brother kowtowed before each Buddha. At the reclining Buddha, Surlee lighted candles on the altar, then held three lighted sticks of incense in *namaste* while chanting Pali scriptures in praise of the three gems -- Buddha, his teachings, and his order of monks. After

finishing her prayer, she pressed a square gold leaf onto the Buddha image, then turned to me and said, “Now you can pray for something special you want.”

Although I didn’t pray to any particular god, such as the Buddha before me, I silently prayed for guidance through the upcoming semester. My life in Thailand had become complicated and confusing. Lamson and Pattani had jostled me around, the attitudes of the four witches still depressed me, and the shock of living in a culture so radically different from mine left me feeling insecure, like an inept clod. Maybe my mental disorder was merely culture shock, a syndrome I had studied in college. But it seemed more like a personality disorder because I was confused about my beliefs and values more than ever before. And while living in Pattani, I felt the pull of religion from all around. My missionary friends represented most of my social life, until Surlee came along. But she was religious too and sensitive about negative remarks toward her religion. The missionaries had continually encouraged me to accept Jesus as my Lord, and while I pondered taking the leap of faith into Christianity, I considered spending a month in a Buddhist monastery as a nun. In the solitude of a monastery, I felt I could meditate on where I was headed, where I had been, and what was really important to me. And whether or not I needed religion in my life.

When I told Lotte my thoughts on becoming a nun, she naturally tried to argue me out of it. “Teresa,” she said, “You cannot be both Buddhist and Christian. The devil with tear you apart.”

But it was Surlee who finally dissuaded me from pursuing the idea when she said, “You don’t understand Teresa. You cannot be a Buddhist nun because they are women who don’t have a home -- orphans, maybe the raped woman, the former prostitute, or the very old woman without a family.” Her words further depressed me. They told of yet another sad, disturbing

inequality imposed on women of the Theravada tradition. While society held monks in highest esteem, it viewed the nun as a lowly unwanted leper.

During spring break, Pattani became excessively hot and humid. To keep cool, I sat under the fan in my front room while I read, wrote and prepared letters and résumés to send to well paying universities in the Middle East and Japan. I hadn't traveled to Lamson for weeks and since January, I hadn't sent Wut any more money. My hope for a future on the island had gradually lessened until I had little desire to pursue the business. I felt sick about the money already invested, regarding it as lost, but I also felt great relief when deciding to give up my investment. It was as though Lamson had possessed me like a ghost, and I had broken free from the spell.

My decision about Lamson had been traumatic and it left me so mentally exhausted that I decided to spend a weekend in Songkla, a major seaport town of southern Thailand about thirty miles north of Pattani. I stayed at the Salmiya Resort Hotel, the best accommodation in town, and after a very hot bath, I ate two lobsters and drank a bottle of white wine in the luxurious hotel lounge. Following dinner, I headed for the beach and sat on the damp sand near a mound of rocks that held a copper mermaid, like the one in Copenhagen. While the setting sun, at my back, cast softening hues through the atmosphere, I gazed across the sea at the two islands on the horizon. The ghosts of Lamson returned to mind, and so did the witches of Pattani. Where did I go wrong to feel so confused?

I heard no voice this time, as I had in the Taj Mahal, the Kali Temple and on Wudang Mountain. Just the humming of the infinite sea in its endless toil. Sea gulls "caawd" and soared high above the mermaid. Then, a remarkable full moon broke out from the horizon of the sea. My mind fell quiet as I watched the round frosty disk climb higher into the night sky. Soon it

was sending a rippling path of white toward the mermaid and me. The sight was like a miracle, because it held such beauty. But the miracle was only nature, the ever present ever changing nature revealing its splendor to me. I did not suddenly feel alit by mysticism but the moon invaded my very essence with tranquility. How long had it been since I saw the full moon on Lamson and made that decision. Several months had passed, months filled with change, contrast, and now unity, the Three Truths about Nature. And with all that had happened, the paradise I once longed for has blissfully faded away.

I remembered something Kumala had said to me, "*We become slaves to a pursuit that has no limit. A pursuit that leads us further and further from the wisdom we seek. Recognize, Teresa, that what we are really after is what we already have in the first place...*"

Nothing mattered anymore, not Wut, the witches, nor the money squandered on a dream. All that mattered was the sea breeze against my face, the fresh salty air, and the sight of the full moon rising from the sea while peering into my heart and soul. My mind emptied itself of past mistakes, ventures, and decisions that pained my present. Gone gone gone beyond. Altogether gone... slipped away...

After returning to Pattani, I received a cable from Wut asking for 10,000 baht, and I immediately wired back, telling him to visit me in Pattani. The following Friday he showed up at my Townhouse apartment.

I took him to dinner at the night market and explained I would no longer give him any money. He looked at me with disappointment, but I suspect he had anticipated this day would come. I just didn't care anymore about Lamson nor about all the hope and money I had invested there.

"Allen, we very sad for you and for my island the lost paradai."

"Look Wut," I said, "Paradise is not on Lamson. It's in your heart."

To this he replied, "You very strange."

I asked Wut whether he could give me at least some of my money back. He thought a while and said, "Maybe my father sell land give back to you money. We is very poor but we try."

I doubted I would ever get any money back and I didn't want to pursue the Thai legal bureaucracy. I didn't really blame Wut or consider that he had cheated me. How could I blame a poor man for trying to make a better future for himself and his family? I had been an opportunity for Wut, as he and his island had been for me, and I never regretted having known them both.

My last week in Pattani started out sadly enough in that I had surrendered Lamson and was leaving my friends, but then it ended in tragedy. On Saturday, I attended the funeral of Surlee's brother, Charoon. He had been killed by a hit and run truck in Bangkok. Though I had only spent one day with him, I felt battered with grief. It seemed so unfair that such a promising young man was snuffed out of existence.

The funeral occurred at a Buddhist monastery in town, and began inside the main temple where, on a stage to one side of the rectangular room, thirty monks and novices sat crosslegged and chanted verses from the Pali scriptures. After entering the temple, I carefully and respectfully bent down and walked past the guests sitting on the floor. I felt overwhelmed with sympathy when I saw Surlee's family, especially her mother. She had on a white dress, the mourning color of Thailand, and her eyes were darkened from shock and sorrow. "This week is plenty sad," Surlee remarked after sat to her side.

The monks chanted for over an hour, then the guests left the temple and sat on folding chairs on the lawn before the tall crematorium. As Surlee advised, I carefully tucked my feet under my chair so they wouldn't disrespectfully point toward the crematorium.

At the bottom of the crematorium steps, Surlee and one of her sisters stood behind a table covered with new orange robes for the monks. The ceremony began when a voice announced over a loudspeaker the name of an important community member who came forward to the table. Surlee handed him one of the robes and *namasted*, then the honored man climbed the steps to the receiving platform and placed the robe on a table beside the casket. The highest ranking monk immediately followed this man up the steps, namasted before the casket, and took the robe. Thirty more honored guests were called to do the same, and were followed, in turn and rank, by monks who collected their new robes.

At the end of this ceremony, I followed a procession of guests up the steps and placed a joss stick and flower on the casket. On the table stood a picture of Charoon, surrounded by yellow and purple orchids and sweetly scented jasmine flowers. Behind the casket stood a young Thai woman, the dead man's girlfriend. She was weeping quietly, politely, in the Thai manner, and she looked so frail I wondered how she could bear her pain.

A while later, I returned to the viewing platform with a crowd of people and watched two men remove the casket covering and heave the wooden coffin into the large furnace at the back of the platform. Instantly, the flames consumed the coffin and the men closed the furnace door.

A few minutes later, at the bottom of the stairs, people gathered to watch the black smoke pour from the chimney stack towering above the crematorium. For the Buddhist, the smoke represented the young man's spirit progressing to his next existence, or to nirvana, pure and blissful freedom.

But there is no freedom from death, I thought while watching the smoke swirl effortlessly in the bright blue sky. And to believe that beyond death lies another existence is merely wishful thinking. The drifting air slowly carried away the smoke reminding me of the Taoist patterns of nature -- the yin yang currents of life that bring inevitable and often sharp unexplainable change. It seemed to sum up the year I had just spent.

Chapter Twelve: Expatriated in Kuwait

daughters of woman I stayed with before leaving Kuwait

After leaving Pattani, I traveled from Singapore to Burma while applying for well-paying jobs in the Middle East and Japan. My hope was to replenish my savings before returning to America. I wasn't sure what I'd be doing back there, but perpetual overseas living didn't seem right for me. In mid-February, when I was just about ready to give up traveling and return to Portland, Kuwait University contacted me to fill a teaching position as soon as possible. Within two weeks, I was walking past customs at the Kuwait International Airport.

Outside the terminal doors waited a crowd of Arab men dressed in white dishdashas (ankle-length tunics) and kaffiyehs (head dresses) bound by black cords. Among them stood a large middle-aged man with a rugged leathery face holding a sign that read Kuwait University.

“Teresa Allen,” I said. The man grinned, took my bags, and led me to a Chevrolet double-parked near the entrance.

In the cool evening air we drove through the city while my driver, Bashim, marveled over Kuwait. “Kuwait very rich country. You like it here very much.” I had a feeling Kuwait would suit me nicely. My new job paid handsomely and the city would presumably have all the modern conveniences, unlike Pattani or China. But as far my first view of Kuwait, the night revealed little other than bright lights from passing buildings and oncoming cars rushing by while blaring horns.

After nearly an hour, we parked in front of a building on a Kuwait University campus. Bashim led me into the lobby where Arab men sat on cushioned sofas while sipping tea and eating cookies. Bashim gestured me to sit as he joined the other men in animated talk. Exhausted from the flight, I soon grew impatient from waiting and asked Bashim, assuming we were in the receiving room of a guest house, “Will I be staying here?”

Bashim translated my remark and everyone laughed. “OK,” he said in a sudden change to seriousness. “We go now.”

We drove around a while longer and ended up at the Holiday Inn where Bashim checked me into a room, curtsey of Kuwait University. Before leaving, he explained that the university would also pay for my meals in the restaurant, and that he would pick me up the following morning.

I could scarcely believe the luxury of my room, its furnishings, the basket of fruit, and the mints on the turned-down sheet. But I was in the prosperous Middle East -- where my salary would increase a whopping five hundred percent. Where I would receive a yearly round-trip ticket home, and where rent and income taxes wouldn’t concern me. It was thrilling to at last be

where I had wanted to be for years. And my spirit had been toughened by a tumultuous year in Thailand, so nothing could dampen my enthusiasm or deter me from my efforts now.

For the next week Bashim herded me through the university's orientation process. We drove from office to office at the five university campuses, to the central police department for finger printing, and to the main hospital for a chest x-ray and tuberculosis certificate.

During this time, Bashim went out of his way to proudly show off the sights of his country -- a nearly 8000 square mile desert that had cast from oil a metropolis of modern buildings and expensive cars. Everywhere, Kuwaiti men careened shiny new red or white Mercedes-Benz cars from lane to lane, unconcerned about their blind spots. Whenever a driver nearly bashed into our car, Bashim honked the horn and hollered Arabic obscenities. The Kuwaiti method of reckless driving didn't appear very successful. Numerous crashed vehicles lay at the road sides, along with an occasional blimp-like camel carcass bloated from the sun.

"Do people just abandoned their cars?" I asked Bashim.

"Why not? The man can buy a new car. Kuwait very rich country."

Off the Gulf road stood the three Kuwait Towers, landmarks of the small but proud nation. Further along the road stretched a large harbor containing square-sailed wooden *dhows* that bobbed up and down in the deep blue Persian Gulf. Fishermen and pearl divers, remnants of pre-oil Kuwait, lived in carnival like tents and cars near the pier. Most modern Kuwaitis lived in palatial houses built beside major roads in order to be viewed, instead of to have a view. "One house, one family," Bashim would say each time we passed one of these grand mansions.

At almost every intersection, a man or boy, usually Pakistanis, ran up to the drivers' windows to sell the daily *Kuwaiti Times* and *Arab Times*. Most of the headlines were about the

neighboring Iran-Iraq war. I never asked Bashim many political questions, so I was pleased when Bashim he voluntarily offered his opinion about the conflict. Several times he stated with anger, “Iran! He is a bad man!”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because Iran is against the Arab man.”

Other than through Bashim, I didn’t know what was taking place and I could not help but be a little apprehensive about his intentions. He liked to reach across my lap to lock the door or to get into the glove compartment. When he did so I snapped at him, but he only laughed. Otherwise, Bashim was actually quite helpful. He suggested what I should ask at every office we went to. “You say to man, ‘When I can get my money? I can’t speak Arabic! I have no car so what I am going to do about transportation?’“

One of our first stops was the Al-Ahmadi campus where the director of the English Language Unit (ELU) had her office. The director, Rasha Al-Sabah, was a princess of the royal Sabah family that had ruled Kuwait since 1751. Instead of meeting the princess, Bashim ushered me into the office of her assistant, Naiomi, a rather unfriendly Egyptian woman who behaved as though I had disturbed her otherwise peaceful afternoon. I sat before Naiomi’s desk while she sorted through my paperwork and eventually remarked, “I assume you’ve found your accommodations satisfactory.”

“Oh, yes! Especially the fruit basket and mints.”

Naiomi peered at me, as though I’d uttered something incomprehensible. She then looked at Bashim, who stood by the door, and spoke in Arabic. In turn, Bashim said “Holiday Inn,” and the woman angrily yelled for about ten minutes. I gathered that Bashim hadn’t known what to do

with me after picking me up at the airport. I wasn't surprised. This was my third job in Asia and my expectations for efficiency weren't very high.

Directly from Naiomi's office, Bashim drove me to the housing unit on another campus. After assigning me an apartment, the housing director handed me a pillow, sheets, two wool blankets, and a large box containing a sack of rice, a dozen eggs, cans of fava and garbanzo beans, boxes of sugar, salt, and pepper, and some paper towels, napkins, and toilet paper. It was as if I were joining the Army.

That afternoon Bashim helped me tote my luggage and supplies to my new apartment, which was on the fourth floor of building 111 in the town Salimiyah. It had a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and a long front room furnished with arm chairs, a sofa, coffee table, desk, book case, and dining table. Unfortunately, the living room's view was of the neighboring brick and windowless building, ten feet away. "Can't I have another apartment?" I asked Bashim when he first opened the curtains.

"Sorry Miss. This is the only apartment available today. Maybe tomorrow we can ask for another, *Inshalla*."

Inshalla, I thought. If God wills it. Throughout Kuwait I had heard this Arabic interjection used in reference to nearly everything -- "Will it be ready tomorrow?" "Inshalla." "I'll see you later. Inshalla." "Have a nice day. Inshalla." Clearly, the notion of an omnipresent God had permeated even the most casual level of Arab society.

On Wednesday, the last day of the Islamic work week, Bashim escorted me to my teaching assignment in the English Language Unit (ELU) at the College of Arts, Kaifan campus. Before entering the director's office, Bashim reminded me, once again, "You ask about my money. And you say, How can I get home today? No more driver. I don't have car."

When Bashim left for the last time, disconnecting me from his help, worry invaded my otherwise complacent mood. Who would help me get back to my apartment, which was about a dozen miles away? Although filled with uncertainty, I decided to patiently wait and see whether the ELU director would naturally arrange for my transportation home.

Fatima, the director, was a beautiful Kuwaiti woman fashionably dressed with lots of twenty-four carat gold jewelry. She explained that I would take over six classes that had been in session for five weeks while various teachers instructed them. The situation sounded cumbersome and chaotic, and this worried me. Was I expected to simply take over these classes without a clue as to what was going on? To my relief, Fatima suggested I observe the lessons for the first few days until I adjusted to the teaching methods. “It’s three weeks before mid-term week,” she added, “so you’ll have to work extra hard to catch up and prepare your students.”

This new job of mine did not sound inviting and it added to my anxiety about returning to my apartment. I wondered how these classes came into being without a regular teacher. Was I called in to replace some disgruntled person who had quit and left Kuwait before the semester began? I avoided asking Fatima unnecessary questions, fearing I would recreate my difficulties in Thailand. But when she suggested we go next door to meet the other teachers and to find me a desk, I found it essential to ask about getting home that day.

“You can ask one of the teachers for a ride,” she said as we headed for the office next door. Inside this large windowless room, the fifteen English teachers in the department had their desks. Fatima introduced me to the three teachers present, then returned to her office after I took a desk beside an American with shoulder length curly black hair and an untrimmed moustache. His name was Steve Rule and he had been in Kuwait a year, but was resigning this semester to

get married in his hometown of Chicago. I offered my congratulations and anxiously asked if he could help me get back to Salimiyah that afternoon. “I’ve sort of been dumped off here.”

With a smirk, Steve said, “Welcome to Kuwait, Teresa, where everyone’s dumped off after orientation week, then left to fend for themselves! But most of us arrive in packs at the beginning of the semester, so we help each other out. Must have been pretty weird for you arriving alone in the middle of the semester. But don’t worry. I live in Salimiyah and we can ride the bus together.”

To have met Steve comforted me enormously. And I quite liked his casual and direct personality -- a refreshing change from my Thai friends and associates. I could only hope that Steve and I would become friends while I floundered around at my new job.

That weekend, melancholy drifted over me as I lounged around my walled-in apartment concluding that the main problem with working in Kuwait was being stuck without a car miles away from work. At least in Thailand and China I lived near my job and could walk or ride my bicycle. I was also bothered by something Steve had told me during the bus ride to Salimiyah. “Teresa, if you stay for very long in Kuwait you’ll have to buy a car.” This meant I would have to spend much of my earnings on transportation to and from work. It just wasn’t fair and I would stubbornly save money by taking the bus, even though Kuwaiti buses were dusty, run-down, and crowded with smoking and coughing Third World men who ogled at me.

By Thursday afternoon (Saturday in Kuwait), I decided to leave the seclusion of my apartment for the first time and wander to the co-op plaza ten blocks away. Steve had warned me to call him if I wanted to go for a walk, but I felt compelled to venture outside on my own. Along the way, Arab men driving by honked their horns or flashed their lights at me, as if I were naked,

when in fact I wore pants, a long sleeve tunic shirt, and a scarf to cover my hair. I ignored them and hurried on, determined not to let this patriarchal culture imprison me in my apartment.

At the co-op supermarket I bought an iron and a short wave radio. On my way back to building 111, just when I thought the walk wasn't really so bad despite the harassment, a school bus swung by and rowdy boys flung eggs and oranges at me, hitting my head and face. Unbelievably humiliated, I wanted to shout, "I hate you goddamn Arabs!" But I didn't. After all, it had been my choice to live in Kuwait and I well knew the plight of a single Western woman in a non-Western land.

On Friday, I resolved not to let the previous day's incident defeat me, so I walked a half mile to the boardwalk edging the long sandy beach of Salimiyah. Beyond this beach stretched the blue Persian Gulf, known in the Arab world as the Arab Gulf. A lone dhow crossed the horizon and colorful umbrellas dotted the beach where Arab families with women dressed from head to foot played in the sand. I was astonished to encounter a group of Europeans women wearing bikinis which, in the setting, looked as unnatural as people fornicating in a public park. In fact, Arab men lined the banks to stare. But the women seemed unconcerned, perhaps because they were with Western men.

Just before I left the boardwalk to return to my apartment, two Arab boys followed me and started saying, at first quietly, then more loudly, "Hey lady, how much money for a fuck?" I ignored them but hastened to the adjoining road, and to my relief the boys didn't follow. Back in my apartment, I vowed never to walk alone in Kuwait unless it was absolutely necessary. It seemed I was held prisoner in my own walled-in apartment.

On Saturday morning I met Steve at the bus stop and recounted the events of my harrowing weekend. He reproached me for walking alone and encouraged me to invite him along

in the future. I agreed, but the idea of being so dependent on Steve left me feeling terribly distraught. How would I ever make it through a year in Kuwait?

During the next three afternoons, I observed that the teachers in the classes I was to take over followed the lessons straight from the books. This looked simple enough, but much less fulfilling than my job in Thailand, where I had been able to select my own materials and teach substantive matter (linguistics and literature) instead of language structure.

Soon after I started teaching I realized that my students, who called me "Miss Teresa," were restive, aggressive, and nothing like my polite and passive Thai students. I had to be stern with them in order to maintain order during class sessions. This was especially true with my three freshmen classes which consisted of about forty young teenage girls who wore black nylon capes over long dresses and covered their hair with black scarves, though a few dressed in designer clothes from Paris. Classes were scheduled for fifty minutes but about ten minutes before class let out, at least one of my freshmen girls would point to her watch and say, "Missie, Missie, time to go." I finally said that if anyone showed me the time we'd stay ten minutes longer. But when I tried to keep them late, the girls simply left anyway. Their boisterous defiance quickly exhausted me and I quit fighting.

I had two classes of sophomores and juniors with both men and women. They seemed equally anxious, especially the men who counted their prayer beads during class, one by one. My senior class had three women and two men. One of the male students in this class, Badir, was the most serious and intelligent student I had, and he showed up only half the time.

The mid-term and final exams comprised 80% of the student's grade which meant my task was to prepare students for these tests. This wasn't easy, as I quickly discovered. Not only were my students difficult to teach, but there was a major discrepancy between the *inductive*

books I was assigned to use and the *deductive* nature of the exams. Induction and deduction are two different teaching methods. The inductive method, a more student centered learning approach, provides students with examples of how language is used and they infer (guess) the grammar rules. On the other hand, the deductive method teaches students the rules first then applies them to specific examples of the language. Both methods depend on the students' attitudes, abilities, and goals for learning the language. In my opinion, the inductive method suits those students who need to learn the language for survival skills, such as students living in America. For my Kuwaiti students, the inductive books seemed useless. Their goal for taking English was *not* to go out and speak to Americans but simply to pass the exams and thus complete the course.

By the time I really assessed the situation, there was only one week before the mid-term. I tried to teach the rules as quickly as I could, but I always walked into class feeling terribly unprepared and inadequate as a teacher. The students grew increasingly aggressive to the point of insisting that I help them pass the exam, as if they expected me to magically make them know the rules. "Memorize," I'd yell. "I can't do it for you!" Lack of motivation was yet another reason induction was a lousy teaching method for my Kuwaiti students. Creative student centered learning, the inductive approach, such as the one I used with my literature class in Thailand, is not practical for students unmotivated to learn for themselves.

I made it through mid-term week, but after classes resumed and the test results were posted, my students grew wildly upset because their scores were poorer than most of the other classes. The time had come to seek Fatima's help. When we met in her office, I explained my difficulties in controlling the students, and asked whether she had any suggestions.

Instead of the support I anticipated, she said that Badir, my senior student, had blamed me for the poor results on his test. She then suggested that all my students did poorly on the exam because of my poor teaching methods.

Her blatant criticism left me dumbfounded. “But I came to ask for your help in dealing with the students,” I finally muttered. “Besides,” I added after building up courage, “it’s not entirely my fault the students did poorly. I was their fourth teacher and I only had them for three weeks...”

“Yes I know this, Teresa. But you could have taught extra hours to better prepare them.”

“How? The students aren’t that motivated! And it’s enough of a problem for me to get here in the day, let alone at night.” I nearly cried in frustration over her staunch criticism and lack of support.

“Well, Teresa. I suggest you try harder from now on. It is your job to motivate them.”

For a moment I stared at this beautiful woman behind her desk. She obviously felt in command of the situation and, I was sure, she had found herself a scapegoat. Certainly, it was her fault there had been no teacher for five weeks. She had probably misplanned the program schedule and I was the perfect sucker to blame. The notion made my stomach pang and I knew I had better go before losing control of my emotions.

I stood up, but before leaving, said, “Another problem, Fatima, is that we’re assigned to use *inductive* books when the students are graded on *deductive* knowledge! It’s a discrepancy that exacerbates the situation!”

From the look on her face, she apparently didn’t understand my meaning. This was reward enough, and I didn’t bother to paraphrase.

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My friendship with Elie Sargoutette, an olive complexioned Lebanese man with a pleasant smile and neatly trimmed moustache, began during mid-term week when he and I proctored an examination together. Afterward, he offered me a ride home, a welcome alternative to taking the bus.

When I mentioned Fatima's criticism, Elie offered his help in working with my classes. The previous semester he had taught some of the same courses so he had deductive -- grammar rule -- handouts I could use.

Elie also lived Salimiyah, and soon after we met, he began stopping by my apartment to take me on a walk or a drive, or to study the Bible. He was a Maronite Christian and religion always came with him. This didn't bothered me too much since I needed his company to help escape my isolation and to have another escort when Steve was preoccupied. Naturally Elie asked if I was a Christian. I said yes even though I wasn't. It seemed the easiest way to avoid his attempts to convert me. And I didn't care to explain that I had difficulty believing in miracles and myths.

Before coming to Kuwait, Elie had taught English at Beirut University, but for safety reasons, he had to leave. One day over lunch at the Hilton Hotel I asked him about the turmoil in Lebanon and he said, "My country was once the Riviera of the Arab world. She has mountains, beaches, fruit trees... Do you know a cedar tree is the emblem on our flag? It's a symbol of strength and power... 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: and shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon,'" he quoted from the Bible.

"What happened to change all that?" I asked.

"Too many religious factions struggling for supremacy... That's the problem. Lebanon is a fragmented soul."

How true, I thought. Religion does tear people asunder, like the Bengalis of India. Or it sends into battle Hindu against Muslim, Muslim against Jew, Catholic against Protestant or any one sect against another. Condemnation of the outsider seemed the mainstay of most world religions. It was tempting to condemn religion altogether, but there were people like Elie, Kumala, Surlee, and the missionaries of Saibury who were caring and sincere in their religious pursuits. Besides, I found something attractive about Elie being so religious. He knew his purpose in life despite the torment of his homeland, and this seemed to give him strength and freedom from the plight of the chaotic world.

Elie's disposition put me at ease. I knew he wasn't judging me or looking for new gossip, as some of the other ELU teachers tended to do. Within the closely confined expatriated community of teachers, gossip had become a natural pastime, perhaps like it was on Lamson. The week after I started working in the College of Arts, one of the teachers, a woman from Wisconsin, telephoned to warn me she'd heard gossip that Steve and I were sleeping together. This astonished me and I told her Steve and I barely knew each other. "It doesn't matter," she replied. "People around here don't have anything better to do than gossip."

It was gossip, in fact, that first worried me about Elie's intentions in becoming my friend. Someone at work claimed that Elie was looking for a wife and Steve himself warned me to be cautious around Elie, unless I wanted to get married. I tried to ignore the gossip, believing I was above it, but it did bother me and often I felt embarrassed to be seen with Elie, even after he became my closest friend. In time, Elie admitted straight forwardly that he was praying for a wife. To keep a safe distance between us, I claimed to have a fiancé in Portland, but then he continuously asked about this "so called" fiancé and about what kind of wedding we would have. I told him we hadn't decided and tried to avoid the topic during our two month association.

Throughout my stay in Kuwait, I usually went to bed early. At 4:15 every morning I awoke to the Islamic call to prayer echoing from the mosques throughout Salimiyah. I found the rhythmic call peaceful and lulling. It was a soothing reminder that life had meaning beyond what we see, feel and physically live, even in the chaotic sprawl of a large industrial city.

Only about 40% of Kuwait's two million people were Kuwaitis or other Gulf Arabs (from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, or the United Arab Emirates). The rest of us were expatriated workers -- Westerners, Egyptians, Lebanese, Indians, and Third World laborers from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Thailand. There was also a large community of Palestinians who weren't really expatriated because they had no homeland to return to.

I found no opportunity to socialize with the Kuwaitis, as I had with the Chinese and Thai. My friends were expatriated Western teachers and we called ourselves "expats." There must have been at least one hundred expats working in the colleges of Arts, Commerce, Medicine, Engineering, Computers, and *Sharia* -- the Islamic code of justice. Many teachers were gay men, a few were blacks or Arabs, and most came from America and Britain, though one or two were from New Zealand and Australia. Kuwait University was a popular place among English (ESL) teachers. It offered a good salary, a large modern city, and yearly air fare to and from the teacher's home city. Most expats took advantage of this travel benefit by stopping off in places like China, Africa, South America, Hawaii or Indonesia on the way home.

At least once a week, Elie and I walked to the local co-op, the post office, or the Marsuq, a grocery store that sold lettuce for seven dollars a head. I generally prepared my own dinners since restaurants in Kuwait were expensive, but occasionally I went with either Elie or Steve to the Kentucky Fried Chicken or Herfy's Hamburger Restaurant along the Gulf boardwalk or the

Pizza Hut in town. Elie and I often drove to Kuwait city to shop at the Suq, a market area covering several blocks. We began at the women's suq held under a large canopy between two shabby brick buildings. Here Bedouin women clad in veils and black capes sat on tables amid brass ware, silver jewelry, perfumes, incense, and piles of sheer veils, scarfs, and kaftans. Beyond the women's suq stretched a labyrinth of narrow alleys winding through concrete open front shops selling frankincense, brass ware, spices from India, prayer beads, hardware, luggage, and Arab clothing -- red checkered or white kaffiyehs, black agals, skull caps, cotton kaftans from Morocco, and polyester dishdashas made in China. Shops lining one of the wider alleys sold Bedouin crafts and carpets from Afghanistan and Persia. At the end of this ally was a meeting place for men, part of the traditional desert culture kept alive in the modern city. While holding vigorous discussions, the men gathered around the tables, smoked from hookahs, drank strong black Turkish or yellow cardamom tinged Bedouin coffee, and often watched a soccer game on television.

On weekends, there were two major places to travel to outside Kuwait -- Faylakah Island in the Gulf, and Bahrain, an Arab state more liberal than Kuwait because it allowed alcohol. A few years before I arrived, the expats took weekend trips to Baghdad, but now they only talked about the war between Iran and Iraq. A few teachers claimed to hear bombings in the nearby Iraqi city of Basra. I never did, but I sometimes thought about the early voice of Sufism echoing from Basra across the world and that Iraq was the birth place of this mystical and poetic sect of Islam.

Living in Kuwait was like living in any major U. S. city -- there were always piano concerts, parties, and theatrical productions to attend. Despite the high costs, teachers went bowling at the Hilton, took karate lessons at the Sheraton, or paid for pool side membership at

the Marriott. There always seemed to be a weekend brunch to attend at one of the first class hotels, or a camping trip to the beach, a small dinner party, or a game party featuring Trivial Pursuit. Almost every private expat social gathering featured alcohol, which was all the more desirable because it was outlawed. The most common form was wine made from grape drink. My neighbor across the hall attempted to make beer but each of his jugs exploded in the process. At one private gathering, I encountered a brand of moonshine that tasted like turpentine. The more popular method of procuring hard alcohol was to sneak it past customs at the airport, which apparently wasn't too difficult.

Twice a week I took yoga lessons from a middle aged Indian woman with a long thick braid down her back. Sita was a Christian from Kerala and she held the lessons in her living room, making space by moving the furniture to one side. Each session began with me lying supine and relaxed on a floor mat, in the "sponge position." After a series of strenuous exercises, Sita had me return to the sponge position, and she would say, "Meditate on the symbol of your choice. A cross... The Mother Mary... or a circle of pure white light..." Not being used to deep meditation, numerous images popped in and out of my mind -- Kali, Nataraja, the Buddhist wheel of dharma, the tai ji, the Islamic crescent moon.... The cross predominantly came to the very center of my concentration, perhaps because of my Christian background or because the cross has a central point easy to visualize.

After one session I asked Sita, "What's the best symbol to concentrate on? I mean, for a beginner in yogic meditation." She told me not to worry but to allow whichever one came to mind. "But I have trouble concentrating," I replied. "My mind wanders."

In response, Sita had me return to the sponge position. After I relaxed she said, "Imagine you are a blue lake... Your waters are deep and vary in temperature and texture. When a wave

comes let it pass... Let yourself flow with the waves.. Let the waves flow over you...” I fell asleep.

For the last part of each session, after my deep meditation in the sponge position, Sita had me sit up in the lotus posture for deep breathing exercises. With my eyes closed, I would inhale and exhale until Sita loudly uttered an exhaling “Ahhoooommm....” I repeated “Om” and this continued for five or ten minutes. When I asked Sita the meaning of “Om” she said, “It’s a symbol of the cosmos, of all sound from beginning to end. To utter “Om” means to lose yourself in the rhythm of God. Once you are familiar with this symbol, you’ll discover your own connections with the universe. But it takes time, patience, and much practice. You simply cannot attain yogic consciousness in one afternoon.” Although I tried, I never quite mastered deep symbolic meditation and cosmic connections.

In addition to the many activities and events in Kuwait, expats offered one another painting lessons, Arabic classes, a Carl Jung study group, and a meditation workshop. Throughout the expatriated community there was strong interest in New Age phenomenon, especially when delving into the past or future. An English teacher from the College of Commerce was an astrologer. Steve’s contribution was the reading of tarot cards and shortly after my unpleasant encounter with Fatima, I asked him for my first reading. More than anything else, curiosity drove me to explore the cards, although, admittedly, I hoped to discover some meaning relevant to my situation.

When I entered Steve’s smoke permeated apartment for my reading, a cassette player on the corner bookshelf played Joan Baez singing in Arabic. I sat on the sofa before a coffee table cluttered with Oreo cookies, Coca-cola cans, Pringles potato chips containers, dirty glasses, coffee cups, and ashtrays. “Sorry,” Steve apologized as he cleared a small space on the table for

my cup of instant coffee. “The maid comes tomorrow.” As did many expats, Steve hired a Sri Lankan maid to clean his apartment once a week.

“Do tarot cards really tell the future?” I asked, probing for Steve’s insight.

“People use the cards in a variety of ways. For me, tarot is a method of exploring the subconscious mind, the psyche, through the symbols that unfold during the reading.”

“My yoga teacher has me concentrate on the symbol of my choice, but most of the time my mind jumps from thought to thought, like a grass hopper.”

Steve laughed at my remark. “If you spend too much effort trying to understand a symbol, meaning evades you. With the tarot cards you have a reader, that’s me, to help you interpret symbols and unite the conflicts within your psyche.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Think of your life as a quest of self-discovery. As you travel you must learn to balance the various aspects of your psyche -- your higher and lower self, pure and dark nature, your intellect and instincts, masculine and feminine self, and so on....”

“You mean the yin and the yang?”

“Exactly. The symbols of the tarot cards help the seeker, that’s you, discover your unbalanced thoughts and emotions. Your inner-most conflicts.”

Joan Baez began singing in French when Steve sorted through his colorful deck of tarot cards. “We’ll use just the major arcana,” he said, “in order to explore the main symbols of the deck.” He explained that the tarot deck had 40 numbered cards in four suits, the minor arcana, and twenty-two picture cards, the non-suit major arcana ranging from the *Fool* to the *Universe*.

“Choose one.” Steve fanned out the major arcana cards. I selected one and he placed it in the center of the table. “This is the Significator and it represents your present position. Because

it’s upside down, the influence is subconscious instead of conscious. In other words, you’re not conscious of your present position.”

The card, called the *Lovers,* had a picture of a young man standing at a crossroad. A prostitute stood at his right and a virgin at his left. “The prostitute and virgin represent vice and virtue,” Steve said, “and the young man has to choose between the two...”

“That makes sense. I’ve always been plagued by choices... Even now, after having reached my goal to live and work in the Middle East.”

“Perhaps subconsciously you’re wondering where you’ll go now that you’ve reached this goal. But let’s not try to decipher meaning too quickly.”

“Can the meaning of the card be reversed? I mean, am I one of the women in the card or can I be the young man?”

“Every individual has feminine and masculine traits. They’re archetypes, symbols of the human psyche. You are the hero, prostitute, and the virgin, too...”

“So... At present, I’m standing at a crossroad trying to understand the choices before me?”

“Since the card’s reversed, be careful or you’ll make the wrong choice and step out of harmony.”

“In other words, I must reason out the right choice?”

“Reasoning is just one aspect of the psyche. Don’t let it rule your instincts and intuition. This is your present position of indecision... The starting point of this reading. Let’s go on. Now concentrate on the Significator and think of what question you want addressed. Make it specific... not too vague.”

For a moment I reflected on the possible directions that lay before me. Originally, my plan was to stay in Kuwait for at least one year, but now I wasn't sure because of my conflicts with Fatima and with my restive students. Could I put up with another year of torment? Of a witch who hated my guts? And if I returned to the U. S. before replenishing my savings, what would I do? Teach? Write? Begin a new career? The uncertainty taunted me and I took the cards seriously. They would answer my question so I had better pose an important one. I am a traveler far from home.... Am I after money? Adventure? Maybe. But what am I really looking for in life, in traveling? The question seemed vague, but it was what I wanted to understand. "OK," I said aloud, "I want to ask..."

"No! Don't tell me your question. I need to interpret the meaning without subjective interference." Steve reshuffled the cards and handed me the deck. "Divide it with your left hand into three piles."

I did so and Steve gathered up the piles in reverse order and placed a series of cards face up on the table in a pattern he called the Celtic Cross. On top of the Significator lay the *Devil.* "This card represents the obstacles concerning your present position. Since it leans to the left, the crossing is in your personality. In other words, meaning is not hidden. This is how you act."

"Do you mean I act like the devil, or I look like hell?"

Steve smiled, sipped his coffee and said, "A certain behavior crosses your present position. An obstacle. The Devil represents bondage to materialism, egotism, and excessive passions. Perhaps at the crossroad the side of vice weighs heavily. In other words, this card symbolizes the dominance of pleasures and the difficulty of withstanding temptation. Like the devil in Christianity. He keeps you attached to base emotions instead of a spiritual course. You can believe it's an actual devil, or you can view it as your lower self."

“So the obstacle is my present error in judgement, because of base emotion?”

“Maybe. But it’s not necessarily bad. Without error, there can be no progress... Think about your question and the obstacles you’re encountering.”

OK, I thought. So I’ve always been plagued with choices. Becoming spiritual but not religious.... That’s hardly material. My desire for Lamson was one of passion.... But I gave up the pursuit. I came to Kuwait for money. But this is no “big deal” income. “Steve, I just don’t understand what the obstacle is. Even with all the difficulties I’m having with Fatima and my students, I refuse to let my emotions get the better of me.”

“Look Teresa, this is an obstacle deriving from how you act. I know you’ve got lots of willpower. Maybe you need to better direct it to more positive areas. Be sensitive to your subconscious mind.... Anyway let’s move on.” Steve pointed to the *Sun* just below the Significator crossed by the Devil. “This card is your foundation. It’s upright which means the influence is conscious. You’re aware of your foundation. And it’s an excellent, solid one filled with sunlight expressing the awakened spirit freed from confinement.”

“I’m not sure about this Steve. Is anybody ever truly free? We all suffer and die, even the hermit hiding in search of bliss. Really, spirituality seems self-indulgent. What good does it do to pursue spirituality when there’s so much torment in the world? Why not put this energy into restoring nature, curing cancer, or cleaning up poverty? No, this notion of an awakened spirit is too intangible. And meaningless. I’m not after spiritual freedom in this life or in any after life. Why should I be? Just because some guru prescribes it?”

“Don’t block your subconscious feelings with rationality. Be patient and think about the symbols as they occur in the card spread. Now this card,” Steve pointed to the card above the Significator, “represents your goal.” The card was *Death* in the upright position.

“Death is my goal?”

“Take it symbolically -- not literally! Death represents change, transformation, the desired outcome of your question. Think about it.”

My goal is to find death from life? This is weird, I thought. Death to my question perhaps. “OK Steve, go on.”

“Death is the guardian of the subconscious mind, connector between the higher and lower self. The lower self must change in order for your existing situation to end so you can reach a higher resolution. Outer change is necessary before inner transformation can take place. Without death you have stagnation... Through death comes rebirth. Change old ways of thinking to create new, better ones... Think about your question.”

I pictured the Nataraja in his transforming dance of destruction and renewal. Is my goal in life to transform from my lower to higher self? I remembered Kumala telling me how people were glued to their conditioning, which keeps them from changing, “We cling to our possessions, our environment, our finite time, and in this way, to our own bondage. Sat Chit Ananda -- Truth Consciousness Bliss. Fully believe in yourself. Self-realization is the only path to God.” Still unsure of what old ways to change, I told Steve I had trouble understanding the cards.

“It’ll come to you. Give it time. Remember, the cards indicate that change comes after a solid spiritual foundation, but something must change to end a bondage that still crosses your present position. Let’s continue. This card is your past.” He pointed to the *Temperance* at the left of the Significator. “It represents the influences of your recent or distant past which are still in operation.”

“Being the scapegoat!”

“Perhaps. The Temperance card leans to the right which means the influence is from the outside world and not from your subconscious. In the card an angel pours fluid from a gold to a silver vase. This represents the flowing of the past on to the future. In other words, the seed of future events has been sown, but the outcome requires patience and self-control. Don’t push too hard or you’ll lose balance.”

“Keep to the middle way.”

“Right. No extremes. Now, this card is your future.” He pointed to the *Universe* at the right of the Significator. “It represents the influences of your near future. It’s upside down so the influences are subconscious. It’s a good card and expresses that your future holds new world vision... However, the reverse meaning indicates that *if* you fail to understand cosmic laws, faulty vision will come. People in power cause you difficulties. Fear of change will keep you in a rut. Success in life comes from abiding by spiritual and physical laws. You must understand the world as it is, not as you wish it to be.”

Steve pointed to the next card and said, “This is your environment.”

“Naturally,” I said. “The *Fool* upright!”

“The influences are from other people and not from you.”

“All the world’s a fool... or is it a stage?”

“Don’t be a cynic or you’ll fool yourself. The fool is beginning and end. The youth starts his quest with boundless confidence...”

“Which is how I set off from Portland three years ago. But what does it have to do with my present environment?”

“The outside environment creates disillusionment. Unexpected influences create changes in your plans. Your awakening perception contradicts outside reality.”

“Am I the fool or is the environment fooling me?”

“It depends on how you react to the situation. Turn it on yourself and be the fool, turn it around and be triumphant.”

What am I looking for in life? I thought. Truth, of course. But in order to find it, I need to change in a world of outer misconceptions. Maya. But realizing maya doesn’t make the search any easier. I’m no further along than I was with Kumala in Calcutta. This is what confuses me. I haven’t found any answers to my spiritual needs or whether or not this is even important.

“Now this last card, the *Moon* upright, is the outcome of the issue at hand and it holds the answer to your question. The moon is the weaver of delusion. Your eyes must adjust to objects on a the path poorly lighted. The moon stresses the phases you pass through in life -- from good to bad, full to new, happy to sad, then back again. Now, think about your question and the symbols on the cards.”

While contemplating the cards, it occurred to me how often the moon appeared in Asian poetry, art, festivals, and religious symbols. It had even filled me with enchantment and obsession while casting beams on my path through Asia. Why is the moon so interwoven with Asian culture and thought? With my own thought? I recalled Mr. Jin telling me, on Wudang Mountain, that “because the moon is darkness and light, we say it is the perfect cycle of nature... The new moon is all dark, all yin... Then light grows until it is full. This is yang.” If the moon symbolizes endless change, then is my question unresolvable?

I mentioned my uncertainty over the outcome, and Steve suggested I have our astrologer friend draw up my chart so I could further explore my question. “Meanwhile,” he added, “meditate on the tarot symbols and listen to your subconscious mind. In time you’ll discover your own answers. The cards are never wrong. It’s the interpretation that can be misleading.”

On the night I had scheduled my astrology reading, Elie telephoned and invited me to a Maronite church service. I told him about the meeting and he pleaded that I wait for him in my apartment. After arriving, he exclaimed that astrology was terribly wrong, adding, “The Bible teaches that the just shall live by faith in God and not in the ways of the world. I’m afraid the devil is drawing you away from the Lord.”

I argued that astrology, like the tarot cards, was a tool to help me better understand my subconscious mind. “I’m not trying to know the future or anything like that. I just want to understand my recurring habits, idiosyncrasies, and why I’m often troubled by the events of life.”

“Oh Teresa! Prayer is the only way out of trouble.”

Elie felt so strongly about my not going through with the astrology reading that I canceled my appointment and promised not to make another one or to have another tarot reading. He grabbed my hand and prayed that I would overcome the evil influences around me. I quietly feigned prayer while feeling like an actress extremely aware of her performance. This disturbed me for I had never before felt so removed from prayer.

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The last half of the semester dragged by slowly as the arid heat swelled to one hundred fifteen degrees and desert sands scoured the metropolis. To make matters worse, the semester ended during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting. Ramadan commemorates Allah’s revelation of divine wisdom to the prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. During this holy month, Muslims observe one of the five pillars of Islam by abstaining from food and drink

from sunrise to sunset. Kuwaiti law prohibited eating, drinking, swallowing, or smoking during these hours and people were occasionally arrested for such crimes as drinking a soda in public.

During Ramadan, my students, weak from fasting, became unusually quiet and passive. My only concern was that they achieve better results on their finals. To accomplish this I quizzed them on grammar rules every day. I became so busy correcting quizzes and homework and preparing for classes, that I tended to back out of invitations to expat parties and activities. At the same time I saw more and more of Elie. We began spending almost every evening together, at my apartment or his, working on class handouts and quizzes. Afterward, we usually walked along the boardwalk where Kuwaiti families gathered on the strips of lawn to break their day's fast with huge picnics. Here, a cool breeze blew off the Gulf and eased the scorching heat of day.

One evening, about two weeks before finals, Elie and I drove along the gulf road and parked beside huge boulders lining the shore. In the refreshing sea air, we sat on a boulder and ate salty cashews and sweet sticky dates. The sun had set hours before and a waxing moon shined over the dark Gulf waters.

"The next new moon will announce the *Eid Al-Fatir*," Elie remarked, as he leaned back on the rock.

"The what?" I asked while the dark wavering sea held my gaze.

"The *Eid*. When the new moon rises at the end of Ramadan. The Muslims will have large feasts and wish one another a Happy Eid. In the same way we say Merry Christmas."

For a moment I quietly listened to the nearby traffic on the Gulf Road and to the water splashing against the shore. My thoughts drifted miles away, back to Thailand where I had watched the full moon burst from the sea and rapture me with serenity.

"Did you wish on a star?" Elie interrupted my reflections.

I peered into space and picked a distant star. It wasn't the brightest one but it looked lonely within its void of blackness. A burning sensation invaded my thoughts, an almost desperate desire to wish for something, but for what, I wasn't sure. Was it Elie I wanted? An end to loneliness. A balance through marriage. But if we were to marry, I would have to surrender my questioning nature and follow the straight and narrow road to salvation. "I don't know what to wish for anymore," I said, feeling somber. "My wish used to be to live overseas... in the Middle East. Now, here I am. It's as though I've spent all my wishes chasing dreams across Asia. I don't know. Maybe what I really want is to know exactly what to wish for. It's like I'm waiting for something to happen. A perfect explanation.... But I keep waiting, hoping... wishing... but the answer never comes. Does this make any sense?"

"No." Elie smiled, his eyes sparkling from the neighboring street light. "But it doesn't matter. What you need is a closer relationship with the Lord."

His answer disappointed me. But what had I expected him to say? Elie was a religious man and I had lied about being a Christian. I ached to yell in frustration, "No! Yours is not the answer. Nobody has the Answer..."

"Please don't be offended Teresa," Elie said, seemingly detecting my suppressed rage. "I really do like you, a lot, even if you have a fiancé."

Elie's reminder of my so called fiancé distressed me further. For days, I hadn't mentioned this fiancé and Elie had quit asking about him, to my relief. I felt terrible about fabricating the story, a lie to protect myself from a friend.

Without a warning, Elie reached over and nervously kissed me. He then sat back and asked, "You haven't talked about your fiancé lately. Why?"

I dreaded the question. Should I tell the truth or lie to protect myself from my lie of protection? “Well... “ I said at last. “He hasn’t called or written for several weeks.” I hated myself for not telling him the truth. But the truth would hurt Elie and would make me look foolish.

“So there’s hope for me after all?”

“Elie.”

“Yes?”

“The truth is, there isn’t a fiancé. I’m sorry I told you otherwise. It’s just that I didn’t know you that well, and living in Kuwait has been difficult. But now that I know you... Well, it’s different. Can you understand?”

He laughed. “It’s all right, really. I understand.” He paused. “Do you think you could live indefinitely in a place like Kuwait?”

What was he asking me? I knew. Gossip and Elie himself had forewarned me. I almost desperately wanted to become his wife. Born again in marriage and into an enormous circle of fellowship. Freedom from inner torment and confusion. Surrender, will, surrender, I said to myself, this will make your path through life easy. But I resisted, feeling vulnerable and too uncertain. Something wasn’t right.

I decided to leave Kuwait and return to Portland until I fashioned my next course, whatever that might be. I wasn’t disillusioned by the expatriated life in Kuwait. It was no worse or better than most cultures, groups, or lifestyles. I had reached my original goal of working in the Middle East and this satisfied me, but I couldn’t see spending another year in a place where I

got off to a bad start with the director. Besides, I didn't even like my students so there wasn't any altruistic purpose for remaining, except to be miserable or to wind up married out of loneliness.

After I told Elie about my decision, he felt sure I was leaving because of him. This depressed me at first, but as the days passed, I felt less emotionally involved and more convinced I had made the right decision.

I resigned formally in order to get half of the summer bonus pay which amounted to about three thousand dollars. The ordeal of processing-out vastly differed from processing-in with Bashim driving me around and advising me on what to say. I was on my own now, taking crowded buses through the stark desert heat to the police department, the hospital, the immigration department, and to the campus library where I had to get a library card so I could turn it in and have the librarian sign my release paper.

It delighted me to hand Fatima my resignation paper to sign. She couldn't possibly bother me now. "Well," she said as I entered her office. "I'm sorry you haven't been happy here." I merely nodded and watched her sign my paper. I had nothing to say and felt no need to get even.

Outside Fatima's office, I ran into Badir, my best student and the one who had originally complained about my teaching methods. He politely greeted me and asked about my summer plans and what I would be teaching next semester. Without bearing any hard feelings, I said, "I won't be back next semester."

Astonishment came over his face. "But why are you not returning, Miss Teresa?"

"For a variety of reasons, Badir. But mostly, I really don't belong here."

"You've had a difficult time but we are not against you." I thanked Badir and told him sincerely that his concern made me feel better.

The next day Badir approached me at my desk to tell me he had met with Fatima. “I explained to her that you have done the best you can because you have come late to Kuwait. I have also told her that it is not your fault that the students did so poorly on the mid-term. You had the unfair disadvantage, I understand. And I apologize for speaking to Fatima earlier, before I know you.”

He then handed me a card and gift. “Miss Teresa. We are sad to see you leave. On behalf of the class, I would like to give you this gift for your efforts to help us.”

When Badir left, I opened the card and read, “I appreciate your sincere effort throughout the course. We wish you the best in whatever you decide to do. Yours sincerely, Badir.” The gift was a bottle of Cartier perfume which I later priced at one hundred dollars. But it was hardly the gift that uplifted me. It was the fact that Badir was not indifferent. He cared about my feelings and didn’t want me to leave his country filled with bitterness. I was deeply moved and glad such a rare show of compassion had come from a Kuwaiti student.

I left Kuwait the day after the new moon signaled the Eid Al-Fatir holiday. The fast had ended and Muslims feasted, gave alms, and rejoiced at their mosques praising Allah for his greatness. Allah for some, Jesus or Kali for others. For me, nothing but uncertainty lay ahead while experience trailed behind.

As I gazed from the airplane window, Asia appeared to me as a time and place of fantastic myths and ideas. Had I developed any grand conclusions about life? Did I intuitively feel the rhythm of Nature? Of my nature? Was the dance of bliss the dance of knowing what I truly valued and believed? Of feeling compassion for others -- not for the sake of reward, but for

the sake of compassion itself? Perhaps I had fabricated my own Divine Faith from aspects of world religions and philosophies while expunging the discriminatory and supernatural beliefs.

If Asia had unveiled my spiritual side, it revealed a soul that did not look up or within and say, “My God! My God! How I worship thee!” My soul is humble and does not seek rebirth, pure land paradise, the golden streets of heaven, or eternity itself. And I cannot touch my soul like the pilgrim touches the Kaaba. Nor can any God, Goddess, symbol, or the luster and glint of tradition. It is the beggar woman with the dying child who touches my soul, as well as the puppy starving in my hands, the student who cares about my feelings, and the moon in gracious splendor casting moonbeams on my sight.

Sometimes Nature sends me soaring high into the clouds. Other times it creates a reeling plunge into the valley below. Contrasts are my nature, opposites that fade in and out, like the phases of the moon. When unity occurs -- the harmony of diversity -- tranquility invades Nature, my nature itself, and I know the journey is not over.

During my flight, one image kept returning to my mind -- that of the Islamic call to prayer. I pictured the minaret tall, like a candle inflamed against the haze of early morning light. Beyond it rises the new moon with the awakening day. In my mind I heard the muezzin calling the faithful, “Come to prayer. Come to prayer....” The call is soothing, reassuring, although I cannot put meaning to the words. But the rhythm is there, a rhythm that has become clear to me, as clear as the moonbeams in Asia.