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Six City: A Novel

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SIX CITY:

A NOVEL

by

Leah Bailly

Bachelor of Fine Arts
University of Victoria, Canada
2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Leah Bailly

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Dave Hickey, Committee Member

Richard Wiley, Committee Member

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and Dean of the Graduate College

August 2010

ABSTRACT

Six City: A Novel

by

Leah Bailly

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Six City is a 93 000 word voice-driven novel that traverses six countries as it follows its protagonist, a woman known only as S---, after she is reported missing by her family. A lingerie-shop owner and politician’s wife, S--- reinvents her identity from Barcelona to Morocco, through Mauritania, Senegal and Mali, and eventually into Sierra Leone. S--- is hotly pursued by a devoted “Following,” but when search efforts descend south into sub-Saharan Africa, the Following discovers that has S--- has been found dead in the outskirts of Freetown. The result: a massive chase across multiple continents, tracing the steps of a runaway who—even in death—refuses to be found.

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ᓚL KRAI DU Fᓚ BεRIN

Any kind of crying is appropriate at a funeral.

Krio Proverb



Start in the sky. It is piling with thunderheads; the rainy season now and the morning air is thick with moisture and wood smoke from the slum's kitchen fires. It will start soon, any minute, getting darker and darker with the drops. There are hardly any airplanes in the sky, only twenty flights a week into the capital, so the sky is still left to the sea birds and one or two kites made from plastic wrap and chopsticks, looping up and over the patchwork of tin roofs, the wind picking up now, before the rain.

Follow one of the kites over the coastline. There are dogs poking through the garbage on the beach and a line of squat stalls selling soap and oranges and plastic combs. Follow the kite as it is reeled in over King Jimmy, the port where they shipped the slaves, now reduced to crushed stone steps and a 'Belgian Goods' market, to the mouth of Kroo Bay, its shanty tin and plastic roofs, along the water, an empty line of fisherman baskets. And there is music: Bim Sherman's *Just Like a King* coming out of speakers at a juice stand at the end of a long muddy alley. Bim sings roots reggae, and that slows everything down. The kite swoops lazily between some new electrical poles, a hazard of mismatched wires that spark as the kite nicks against it. The sparks fall to the mud below, onto teenager in a long skirt balancing a jug of water on her head. The girl is

thin and pretty in a tight pink shirt. The men at the stand drinking palm wine laugh and call out to her. They say, Girl you so hot, you sparkin.

The girl walks past them; her neck is tall and she is being careful not to slip into the mud. Between the shacks and lean-tos someone has laid down old palettes and a few boards to make bridges over the muddiest places. She passes a tailor, past the buzz of his sewing machine powered by a car battery. The girl steps over the mud to turn towards a faded Fanta umbrella that marks the entrance to her own small kitchen. But now, tucked into a little space between her shack and another, someone is sleeping. The sleeping person is wrapped in plastic; it is as if they have tucked themselves under the awning over her little part of the alley to avoid last night's downpour. The place where the body sleeps is dry, but the girl is still afraid that the sleeper is her lazy brother so she kicks the body and says something in Mende. She stops when she feels the body is hard. Here is a problem, right outside of her door. She looks up and down the alley, and tries to decide what to do, then starts waving her hands up and down, to summon the men drinking wine at the juice stand.

In front of the beach there is a busier road with a hardware store and a hotel with a bar. Perhaps that explains something; the hotel is the kind with wicked parties through its curtained doorway nearly every night, with little rooms upstairs rented out by the hour. The rooms are moldy old clapboard with a stained mattress in each, no sheets. The music from the party thumps down the alley most nights, all the neighbours are used to going to sleep to its deep boom boom boom. In the morning though, like now, it is quiet.

The girl kicks the body. It doesn't respond, and it is obvious, now, that the body is dead. Boy, she whispers, shaking her hands up and down like she just touched something

hot. She shouts to the men at the juice stand, and it takes them a pretty slow moment to stroll the length of the alley, both of them in cheap Chinese sandals, and the planks slippery now they're covered with mud. They get there eventually, and one pulls back the plastic, but it is as if the hands inside clutch at the tarp, making it hard to pull away. Once they pull the plastic away, however, they are certain. The body inside is a white woman, and worse, she is dead.

This makes everything faster. One of the men starts running, and the music coming from the speakers picks up; there are drums, singing voices. The girl in the doorway has started to wail and people are poking their heads out of their shacks. First one neighbour comes, and then another, and their shouting gets louder, and someone covers the dead woman's face but leaves her hair to fan out over the dirt. Her hair is red and soft, and a little boy gasps as he steps on the ends of it by mistake, the crowd behind him growing and shoving from the back, everyone looking over someone's shoulder. Now thirty people have come to look at the woman's grey-white skin, now forty. They crowd around her unearthly red hair spilling out of the blanket into the red mud of the slum.

Soon, the film crew, a duo of white men, will arrive with their muddy boots and pants, the little gangplanks feeling very small for them to carry their gear. They will run towards her body, leaving their driver in the truck on the busy road. By now, the crowd has swelled to hundreds, barely managed by a half-dozen policemen in tight uniforms and light blue berets, their hands on their billy-sticks. The slow ways of the local business-bureaucrats will have kept her on the street long enough for the journalists to get their shot, that shot that will define her disappearance: a missing woman reduced to a limp,

dead body. This is what everyone's been looking for, too easily found there in the mud in front of a shack in a slum by a beach between the many people of Freetown assembled around her. Someone in the back of the crowd nervously singing. The sky above us, finally ready to rain.

The Following

Bikini: Designed by Frenchman Louis Réard, an engineer who ran his mother's lingerie shop. A Parisian Invention. Wanted to make waves so he named for the Bikini Atoll, a Pacific Island that took an atomic bomb. The press went wild with headlines: Smaller than the Smallest Swimming Suit. Miss America 1946 told the LA Times: I don't approve of those Bikini Suits for American girls. First modeled by a stripper at the Piscine Molitor. Annette Kellerman was arrested on a beach in Boston for wearing something like it in 1908. Neptune's Daughter. She got a star on Hollywood Boulevard.



We followed. We couldn't help ourselves. In many ways, she was just another version of ourselves: the Pilates instructor crying in the showers after class, the frizzy arts administrator sipping her afternoon mochachino from a paper cup. We saw her in parts, a glinty smile on a grocery clerk, the burgundy hair on the baggy-eyed college receptionist, that weary walk on the mum at daycare, worn out from lack of sleep.

Her life, though, was special—televised. There were interviews, red carpets. That said, the image they've chosen to repeat again and again on news broadcasts about her disappearance is official, formal almost. The footage is steady, recorded with a serious, natural touch. Perhaps it is the designer cut to her blazer, the lavender of her silk scarf. Maybe it is her smile, almost outshining Husband's, her impossibly natural red hair coifed around her face. Or it is her height, standing a confident five-eleven next to Husband's strapping six-two, balloons falling from the net on the ceiling around them, his arm raised in victory, her hand clenching his.

We often speculate about exactly how and why she became so important to us, why we watched so intently—tenderly posting adverts with her picture, charting the sightings on an interactive map—and how we came very close to finding her. On several occasions we just barely missed an actual apprehension; a lunch counter where she may

have sipped a cappuccino before boarding a train; a guesthouse room, still bearing her toothpaste smudge on its sink, the sheets smelling faintly of last night's damp sleep.

In the beginning our numbers were small; we were forced to resort to cursory clippings and basic news coverage, but as the story of a politician's wife gone missing mushroomed in the press, people close to her popped up everywhere: childhood friends, book club members, personal trainers and lingerie buyers— women who conspired with us, divulging their small piece of the picture, enough to satisfy us momentarily with another small set of details, another scene in the feature film we crafted in our collective minds.

For example: we know that two days before her departure, S--- (we call her S--- now because we know her real name caused her great pain, such that she changed it every chance she got) was alone in her living room with only her French-Canadian cleaning lady, Frédérique. The scene was observed from the corners of the room as Fréd dusted Husband's many leather-bound books (Fréd, if anything, was extremely observant of the details.) It was the middle of a wintery afternoon, dark except for the light from a large television mounted on the wall. S--- was perched on her taupe silk loveseat with the volume on low, watching Husband on the news, playing that politician's game of question-answer-question-answer. According to Fréd, it was the only time that S--- would watch television at all, when Husband, three microphones in his face, would lob-volley- and set the journalists' questions. We call it a scrum. Backlit by the sweeping hall and marble staircase of the House of Commons, Husband responded in a genteel fashion to the questions shouted at him from the other side of the cameras, from voices without faces. He spoke calmly but directly— no pulsing veins or twitching eye. Husband had a

habit of looking meaningfully into the camera and that afternoon was no exception. The national news often covered Husband kindly, allowing him to stay within his *media box*, not pushing too hard on questions of National Security, which was his domain, instead focusing on the upcoming election and his own riding, an oil-rich province of right-wing constituents. His eyes are blue and his hair is a light dusty brown, a trustworthy colour. He has always been the best dressed of the conservatives, which suits his *media persona* perfectly, and makes him seem urban, thus cutting-edge among the voters. That day was no exception— he nearly gleamed, holding fast to his briefcase, his tie about to be loosened, his shirt collar still starched to a stiff, clean white.

As S--- watched him on the giant flashing screen, Fréd carefully dusted around her. The room was full of heavy, modern furniture. A tall glass filled with a thick pink milkshake, (later identified as a Slimfast Breakfast shake cut with two ounces of Grey Goose) sat half-drunk beside S--- on the antique sideboard. The glass was just a thumb's distance from a pewter-framed photo of their wedding day, and beside the photograph was S---'s famous ring, empty of a finger but complete with all of its karats and diamonds and one ruby, S---'s birthstone. Beside the empty ring was S---'s cell phone, a complicated remote control, and one half-smoked marijuana cigarette.

Down the long hallway, Daisy the golden retriever clicked along the hardwood and flopped at S---'s feet. On the television, Husband excused himself from the scrum and thanked the public and the reporters before sauntering off, finally loosening the tie, sharing a joke with another, older MP as they made their way towards their own offices. More oak. Stressed leather. Then the CBC flipped to a commercial and another commercial and then the first commercial again, the television lacking him entirely.

And, like another object in the room, there was S--- blankly sitting, ignoring her phone vibrating on the glass table, buzzing it's way between the lamp and the framed photograph. The television remained on even after S--- flipped open a laptop at the desk across the room and resumed working on an already-opened document. We know now that she was compiling the first ever Encyclopedia of Lingerie, an endeavor Husband encouraged her to start but she wouldn't allow him to see. Referencing history, cultural relics, popular uses, colours, types— this was her *project*, and though it was meant to add dimension to her life as a lingerie shop-owner and wife, she found it frustrating, tiresome. She didn't feel much motivation to complete this or any other *project*; she simply wasn't the type who enjoyed our kind of suburban accomplishment.

That afternoon, S--- typed a few words and then moved to the window which she opened a crack to the almost-winter outside, the smell of the cooled screen on her fingertips. When Husband pulled up outside in his Audi, up the long driveway and into the garage, an hour must have passed since he had left the scrum. According to Fréd, S--- hadn't moved from the TV room, but as soon as she heard Husband pull up, she shook awake. In a second, the marijuana cigarette and the half-drunk smoothie disappeared from the side table and S--- was in the kitchen, shoving something down the garbage disposal and gushing water over the pink grit at the bottom of the glass. And when Husband nudged open the door, dropping his briefcase under the rack in the back hall and kicking off his waxed loafers, he was happy to see her. It was written all over his face.

He tapped her hip and nodded. He kissed S--- on the cheek. You look so nice, he said, before moving up the stairs and towards his office. S--- was still leaning over the

sink. Even several minutes later, Frédérique recalls S--- still bracing herself against the kitchen counter, her face white, gulping for breath.

That day, S--- wore a hip-length cashmere sweater and above the ankle black chinos.

That evening, out for dinner with Husband, it was a boxy silk dress in a light chocolate brown, above the knee, and pearl heels. We took care to notice her clothing then because she was not sighted for the next forty-eight hours. We clung to her silk and cashmere as some sort of clue. But it didn't help us.

By then, she was gone.

Just hours after her disappearance was reported, we started to assemble online to share anecdotes under a forum titled REMEMBERING. We created fashion files, always beginning with the black taffeta dress and Chloe pumps she wore to the House of Commons Winter Social. That particular photo earned one hundred online comments, some blogging about her smile, her casual stride. One commenter, claiming to have been the waiter who served her plate that night, bragged that S--- had avoided red meat and heavy starches, and thanked him each time he placed something before her. Meanwhile, we began to scan the few documents we could recover: a hand-written receipt, a signed yearbook, one of us dug up their wedding invitation six years old.

Next, in order of importance, we sought out the few details that were obtained with a little official influence. For example, we learned early that she had only suffered one traffic violation in 2000 for speeding through a school zone, and that she held no criminal record. She was born on August sixth at the Vancouver General Hospital exactly thirty-two years ago, and that made her a Leo. She earned two degrees, one in Sociology

from UBC and the second, an MA in Design from Pratt with one significant scholarship. We know she has owned business license for her high-end lingerie shop in the nation's capital for exactly two and a half years.

In support of these details, we also obtained some physical evidence. A marriage certificate, six years old; her tax return including \$29 670 in charitable donations, and net earnings of only \$42 000; and her credit card statement, the balance paid in full each month. We are particularly fond of her passport photo, her rich red hair tied at the nape of her neck, a dab of blush on her unusually high cheekbones.

It perplexed us, even then, how she managed to escape our gaze long enough to get away, while most public appearances ended in photographs posted to the internet, praised by fashion bloggers and coveted by us. In fact, her getaway was surprisingly simple— she drove away. The police have since published an inventory of items that disappeared with her: S---'s Canadian passport; a Coach purse, Tribeca Collection, soft pebbled leather in silver and berry; four sets of diamond and gold earrings (teardrop, stud, and two hoop); three Mark Jacob dresses; and Husband's black Audi Clubsport Quattro, the three-car garage was left gaping open. The car, abandoned in the Park & Jet at the international airport, was surprisingly not found until the next evening, allowing S--- ample time to depart and land elsewhere. Nobody, not even Husband, reported her missing for over 48 hours.

It appears as if the passport, and presumably S--- along with it, proceeded directly through security around 1:32 pm. Of course nobody stopped her; she had purchased the E-Ticket a few hours before and checked in online. With only carry-on she had no reason to face any airline personnel until she was boarding at gate C84. That's on the record.

That, and the fact that she ate either chicken cordon bleu or poached tilapia over rice during her intercontinental flight. We suspect she drank wine, a chilled Chardonnay maybe, but that's conjecture. We have to be careful not to guess, not to fill in the blanks ourselves.

We do know that there were no holds on her passport, and when she landed at London Heathrow, it was the last time she 'officially' used it. When the passport appeared three months later in the Canadian Embassy in Abidjan, we knew the passport took as interesting a voyage as she did.

But all of that would come later. It was weeks before we discovered how, after landing in Heathrow at one am local time, she taxied to the small hotel on Earl's Court (pleasant view of leafy courtyard, continental breakfast included.) It would be the last time she used her credit card (Avion Visa, credit limit \$10 000) in what could have been a critical mistake, most likely made out of exhaustion. If she had made an identifying error like that again, we would have caught her. Just like that. Needless to say, at that point she disposed of all of her credit cards, her driver's license, and any additional piece of identification (Fitness World card, Public Library membership) that connected S--- the runaway with S--- the business owner, the college graduate, the wife.

We do know, however, that S--- kept her bankcard, which she used to buy 2000 Euros in travelers cheques combined with four withdrawals (700 British pounds each, totaling 4450 US Dollars), after which a hold was placed on the card (a joint account in Husband's name) and the card was disposed of. It took another week to discover that she boarded a 'Western Loop' bus, and that we learned from a Salvadorian ticket agent in Victoria station, slow to read the headlines. Carlos Domingo informed us that the bus

must have passed through Paris, Bern, Lauterbrunnen, Nice, Avignon, before turning around in Barcelona. That meant, of course, that S--- had vanished into one of those locations.

And then, three weeks passed before we had any news. Certainly, the European press was not as initially invested in tracking her down, and she could have traveled relatively easily without their noticing. By that point, the social network had plenty of time to conduct background checks, pursue leads, but mostly, we dug into her past. That's when the public interest grew. Meanwhile S--- had completely evaded us. At that point it was clear, she did not want to be found.

For us, though, more important than her whereabouts was her motivation for leaving. What could have prompted such a bold escape from such a seemingly perfect life? We needed to know— why wasn't she happy? Early after her disappearance, we resorted to spotty reports from inside the house: Images of S--- alone in the bed, grey-faced, the comforter tucked under her chin, the clock radio, whispering news from her bedside table. Fréd (only hired to work two afternoons a week) claims on more than one occasion she saw Husband bring a steaming mug, which he thoughtfully placed next to her bedside lamp. Despite his tight schedule, he still managed to sit on the edge of the mattress for a few moments before retreating to his office where he was busy crafting a new bit of legislation. He has since explained, he was on a tight deadline around the time she left, the House of Commons in session, and S--- still recovering from a type of illness, still dozing well into the afternoons. Perhaps two days had gone by since one of her friends had visited their suburban house. Perhaps two weeks. He couldn't be sure.

She had not made any efforts to visit her little store downtown for several days but they did not depend on the income, so Husband backed off of the idea.

What he did notice: the sun wafting across the bedspread, S--- brushing her hair for several minutes with a wooden brush, then closing, then opening the blinds. When her two close friends (Jane and Phyllis, now both invaluable members of the Following) called a few times each, S--- wearily convinced them that she was fine, just tired, just a little worn out from her *project*. According the Husband, she took turns flipping from one side to the other, propping her book against a pillow and holding it against the light. Fréd tried not to disturb her, but S--- insisted she continue with the household chores, and so Fréd dusted and tidied and vacuumed the area around the bed, a kind gesture, so that dust did not accumulate there. The sound of the sucking machine, a terrible comfort to both of them.

And then the night before she left, dinner with Husband. Everything seemed better: she dressed up, and smiled at the waiter. She ordered dessert. And then the next day, Husband returning after another day of motions and votes and his *media box*— this time, the bed was empty, and he admits he was filled with a warm calm. She is rescuing herself, he thought, she is getting better. Until he noticed the missing earrings, the cell phone beside the bed, the little molehill of used tissues left behind. We imagine him there: her pillow on his lap, the sun setting its late autumn orange through the maple, the aspen, the window, the blinds. The ring without the finger, still on the little table downstairs; the television again filled with his face.

This is the moment we were born, the moment that gave each of us in the Following a sense of purpose, of something to look for. We can only surmise her reasons

for leaving. Even now, even after her death, we see her everywhere. She is every scarf ducking onto a public bus, every suitcase at the turnstile, every unfinished glass of Malbec abandoned at the bar, lipstick stain on the rim, stool perpetually empty. This is the way we keep her alive.

Of course, it is hard to admit even now that S--- would show up dead. Worse, that her death would be violent and terrifying, that her body will be filmed and people close to her would watch the footage and suffer and still continue to watch again and again and again. We know, for example, that she spent time in the trunk of a car. We know that she crossed a border that way, really afraid, really crying. What kind of story is that to recount? To follow? As soon as she went missing, the vilest thoughts came to everyone. We knew what sorts of things could happen to a girl like that, particularly because she was so... touched.

She was like air. So light that she could travel anywhere. Like rain through the rivets of a tin roof— little-boy mouth open to the drops.

Barcelona, Spain

Hostal Bienvenido:

If we hadn't found the Cuban at the Hostal Bienvenido, we would have been stalled indefinitely. He loved her, he told us, but he claimed it was his duty to report the sighting after she had disappeared. His name ironically is Fidel, but he was less than faithful to S--- in protecting her identity when it came to blabbing to us. They met when she took a cab straight to his neighbourhood, the sunny, old beach barrio. His hostel is on the Caille de Maquinista. When we finally met him in person, we were less shocked by his black bedroom eyes and studded leather jacket than his greasy chin. They met at the reception desk. He is forty, but that evening he was dressed like a teenager. He bragged about that. Not only was he her lover, he was her landlord. His wife's family was the proprietor of the 15-room guesthouse, where for just over three weeks S--- occupied room 203. Their first tryst was the best sex she'd ever had, he claimed. From his somewhat inconsistent

accounts, we've managed to piece together S---'s three weeks in Barcelona, with help from several other witnesses, far more reliable, and less dramatic, than he.

Avenida Vista Preciosa:

We know it began with a knock, and another knock, and the sound of bare feet on sandy wood. According to the photographs of the room that appeared online after she checked out, we could imagine the slits of sun through yellow shutters, her single bed. We were left to imagine the flit of wings against dirty courtyard walls, the dripping tap, the sheets dingy and salty around her ankles.

It is hard not to make bits up. For example: we picture her waking up, naked, one eye at a time.

According to the guests, that first morning, and every morning after, Fidel would knock around nine, the smell of instant coffee and olive oil wafting through the door and down the wood-paneled hallway, under the cracks of thirteen doors, twelve of them occupied. Witnesses claimed from the smell alone that he must have held a breakfast tray full of greasy eggs and potatoes and thick, smoky Spanish ham.

It's already afternoon, he would whisper into the hinges. Margarita?

In Barcelona, they called S--- Marguerite because of all of the tequila she drank when she arrived. According to Fidel, that night he had introduced himself and promptly bought her seven shots in a row. The evening ended shortly after he pulled his Honda motorcycle over twice so she could vomit all the lime juice and booze back into a gutter.

Now, morning in her little hostel room, S--- would pull a pair of panties or a designer slip out from under the pillow. I'm not hungry, she would say. Her voice was

gravel. Rocks. The tray clicked down on the floor and the Cuban said loud enough to hear through the walls: But you want a piece of this, right Mami? (Perhaps at this moment it is important to note: in our experience, only Latin men think calling you a variation of ‘Mother’ is hot. Sometimes, we admit, it tingles, if only a little.)

Inside her room, S--- lit a cigarette. The smell whisked its way under the door and down the hall.

Fidel, losing patience, started his tight jeans against the doorknob, mashing up and down where S--- put her hand so many times a day. The floor around S---’s bed must have been littered with sheer teddies and bikini bottoms, the lightest clothing she could find on La Rambla the day she got off the bus. Outside, the pigeons fluttered against the partially-closed blinds; one thumb-sized grey feather floated in and promptly whooshed out of the window.

S--- said, Go away.

Then the Cuban would start grinding the doorknob in earnest. The neighbours said they could almost hear his thigh-hair rubbing against the denim, against the wood. He was disgusting, one British woman told us. I thought him quite nice, her companion told us later.

Next door, S---’s neighbours, the French couple, started waking up, the girl whining as her boyfriend, an older professorial type, tried to tickle her feet. He did this every morning, she told us later, enough to make her think about leaving him. What woke them was the sound of a lorry revving its engine over the cobbles, jabbering like a set of cold teeth. Once they were awake, they could hear the Cuban groaning.

Leave me alone, S--- muttered, and the French couple fell quiet. Not you! she called to them in French but the French girl turned on the shower and the clock radio to mask the sound of whatever the professor was begging her to do next. The Cuban moaned again, long and pathetic, into the crack between the door and the frame. S--- must have yanked something on over her bare body— maybe a gold bikini bottom or a lace teddy over her flat little breasts, and tried to shush him. If she were to stand on the bed, she would barely reach both walls of the tiny suite, from the bed she could kick the bathroom door and watch it bounce against the edge of the toe of the toilet. The room was small and yellow and that was all she needed; S---'s own fifteen square meters for fifteen Euros a night.

The expected things happened: The headboard next-door started it's rapping against the wall and the Cuban took it as a sign and he started knocking, loud and official knocks, and the sound of it woke everyone—that and the sound of the chattering lorry, the rainstorm in the shower, the headboard, S---'s shouts through the door, the professor wheezing in anticipation of his morning release. S--- must have known that if she cracked open the door even an inch— it would begin. The Cuban would crumple at her feet. His back would be scrawled with scratch marks, the penmanship of past lovers or tenants, and he'd be sweating, a sort of disgusting tableau: him begging her like that, the eggs and coffee cooling by the door, the next-door Frenchman at his shrieking climax, the Cuban bending her over and running his greasy lips up the backs of her legs—

Bar Kafka:

She lived in bars. This helped S--- in a thousand ways because in bars there is liquor and there are strangers, each a small way of coping. The first stranger, a compact blond who sent S--- a vodka from across the room, was Nikita Alyosha, the Russian. The bar was like a cave dark, low-ceilings and a troll for a bartender. The Cuban had brought her there but was busy chatting with a group of men around the bar. S--- sat alone, until the Russian nudged in next to S--- in her booth and pretended that he already knew her, kissing S--- on both cheeks instead of shaking her hand. Suddenly, she was exactly where she wanted to be: underground, with a Russian. He didn't ask S--- where she was from or what she was doing in Barcelona without a husband or a friend; he saddled up to her immediately complimented her shoes and strapless dress. Around the bar, a few teenagers bawled along with the song, all tight jeans and low-slung shirts. S---, he told us, was looking thin and sober.

We say *vostorge* for that kind of excited, Alyosha said to S---, and he pointed to a tipsy girl in the corner, her high heel over one wrist. They watched as the girl tried to hoist herself up out of her booth by grabbling at a plant, her little twiggy legs buckling under her as she dragged herself to the bathroom.

They're gorgeous, S--- said.

I prefer *kaif*, Nikita winked, the feeling of stoned. You like it?

I do like it, S--- whispered to him, and Alyosha motioned to the bartender just as the waitress saddled up to the table with two champagne cocktails. The girl smiled as S--- reached for the Russian's hand, and they tapped shoulders as she passed by.

The street outside teemed with young people: shrieks, the music leaking out from the bars up and down the alleys, the shops' tin doors carved with graffiti, stenciled rock and anarchy symbols, sexy kitten silhouettes. The Russian passed S--- a thin joint and she puckered up and rolled it between her lips. He tucked S--- into the crook of his arm. The night was warm. Someone hollered. She told him she was relieved: Here, there were no helicopters pouring over the sky, no freeway sounds, no garage doors that open with clickers, no piled up snow, no invitations to baby showers. On that street in downtown Barcelona, there were no college reunions, no upholstery cleaners, anniversaries, book clubs, no important *media box* S--- had to tiptoe around, no mortgage payments, visits with gynecologists, dying fathers, zen centers, no hormone shots or antidepressants or sleeping pills and no fucking contest to see who can say the truest thing about the wine—

Down the street, someone laughed, a dark crazy laughter, someone trying to show off, with something to prove. A nightclub opened its door and techno poured out. S--- let her head knock against the stone of the building and she flipped her heels off and felt the warm stone under her soles and Nikita stepped away, realizing it was S---'s own hysterical, barking laughter ripping up and down the cobbled street, scaring him and worse, scaring herself.

La Mar Bella:

The next scene in the movie of her life: Coastline. Night. Man and girl up against the wall, her thighs wide in a pretty white skirt. High tide, so there isn't much beach left for walking. The two of them are cast under the light of the beach kiosk, like a spotlight on a bad high school stage.

According to the reports, S--- kissed everyone that night. Maybe she was simply trying to keep warm, and kissing, that night, was the only way.

For the beach kiss, she was nestled into the arms of an American from Pittsburgh. He wouldn't say where he was from; he made her guess from the clue, the Paris of Pennsylvania. They were the same age exactly but he was divorced, his wife was unfaithful. He really wanted to talk about it but he tried to stop himself, the man his wife slept with, a kind of fixation.

S--- met the American outside the cave bar at the little terrace table where she was smoking and drinking Rioja and the Russian had just left with a beautiful Spanish boy named Frisco and the Cuban was inside dancing with two teenage girls. The Pennsylvanian tried at first to seduce her and then, he just wanted to confess. They walked down to the beach. After kissing under the kiosk lights for a moment they moved away from the lights sat a few feet away from water's edge. He made a little ditch in the sand with his toes; S---'s skirt got damp. They talked about how to get to the ferias in San Sebastian and then up into France to the surf towns, and they drank wine from a bottle he had bought by banging on the door of the little grocery on the corner by the beach and waking the old Vasco woman who came to the door with a kerchief. S--- hardly spoke. Before long, she lit the filterless hash joint that the Russian gave her, a pinner really, but it made the American cough and cough and then he was really stoned. A couple of blonde girls walked by in boots and tights, looking fine and both cracking up in a sunny, careless way. The American took a few pictures of S--- but she told him that he couldn't post them anywhere. He didn't get it at first.

There are people who want to find me, S--- told him.

So there's going to be a chase-scene later? he asked.

S--- said nothing. She was squeezing little sticks between her toes: open-shut open-shut, then she flicked the sticky little roach into the tide. Their hearts were going, the water very cold and stinging the skin on their ankles.

I know a really freaky-sad story, he finally said.

Tell me.

There was a girl in my class who ran away, my senior year, he said.

Just then the waves picked up and a push of cold water climbed towards them and wet his cuffs. That's all he managed from the story until they were seated back a few feet, on the malécon wall. He carefully removed his shorts and laid them on the wall to dry, his skinny white legs poking out from his briefs.

I used to sell underwear, S--- told him, I'm used to seeing people in next to nothing.

That's hot, he mumbled, and tried to kiss her, but she pulled away.

He shrugged. So this girl... he started again, ran away to a crazy bible cult in South America. She supposedly fell for the Jesus guy and the two of them burned a bunch of buildings with people sleeping in them.

The American lit them each a cigarette, then passed one to her. There were fewer people on the beach now, and a street light kept flipping on, and then off.

I heard about her, S--- whispered and shook her head, knowing.

Nova Mar Bella:

Later, that same night. The tide low now, she had been on the beach that long, weeping now onto the Cuban's princely lap and drawing with a pen on his forearm, the tears dripping straight from her eyes onto his skin beside the ink arranged in little shapes: flower on a stem, the foot of a bird.

What happened exactly, according to the Cuban, is somewhat hard to decipher. By the time Fidel had tracked S--- all the way to Playa Maribel, the Pennsylvanian was nude and S--- was in her panties and nothing else, waist-deep and shouting and ready to swim home. They screamed at each other, all three of them. Then Fidel swung at the Pennsylvanian's face. It was horrible, loud.

Afterwards, she cried, first calmly and then hysterically, and Fidel didn't know what to do to sooth her, so he gave her a pen to draw on his arm. He felt terrible. She quieted down but wouldn't stop her mewling tears. A few minutes passed like that, Fidel listening to her whimpering and saying nothing, just watching a crow clicking at them and the lapping sea, the little stars for lights on the food kiosk, blowing out. It must have been five in the morning, the tears out of her eyes like strings, like threads slowly being pulled from the little lip of her eye onto him.

My father was a doctor, he said at some point.

All Cubans are doctors, S--- sniffed, but he didn't laugh, he just wanted to talk about himself, which would have made S--- feel better if she could have just listened.

He was a very excellent piano player also, he said. His hands were so fine that he would jump up from the table if something was going to spill.

You have nice hands, S--- said and played with the soft skin on the inside of his wrist.

All I do is fight. Fuck and fight. I don't help anybody.

S--- drew a moon. A cat's mouth. The light around them started to open to a sandy grey.

You help me every day, S--- said, but she was still crying, the memory still warm of the Pennsylvanian sprinting up the beach, his trousers in hand, steering away from her. The Cuban stroked S---'s back but she wouldn't stop her weeping, the little strings of her tears tugging down.

Demi-Pensión:

The next day, around two in the afternoon, as S--- stepped over her cold breakfast and groggily left her room, she encountered the French girl in the guesthouse hallway. The girl was trying to leave. A backpack was already in the hallway, and the girl stood in the middle of her small room with the door flung open and the professor's things thrown everywhere. He's shopping, she said after she spotted S--- looking in at her. He's married, you know.

Everyone's married, S--- said. I'm married.

The girl pulled her hair back into a ponytail and wiped her face, and it wasn't until her cheeks were clear of tears that S--- noticed first, that she had been crying, and second, how small she was. The girl blinked her dark eyes and said, I was probably the smartest in the class, and now... this.

The girl looked around the 15 Euro hotel room and swallowed.

Was he your teacher? S--- asked.

The girl gave her a dirty look and said, Are you stupid?

Is he going back to her? S--- tried again, Because that does mean something, you know.

What do you care? the girl suddenly said, her voice louder now.

I'm sorry, S--- whispered and retreated towards her own door.

You're sleeping with that disgusting Cuban, the French girl said even louder. S--- started fiddling for her keys, trying to get back inside. He's filthy and his wife just lives downstairs and you don't even care! The girl was really yelling now, enough to hear from other rooms.

I've never seen her, S--- muttered, shoving her weight into the door. The French girl started stomping around.

Of course you haven't seen her. You only care about yourself. The girl pulled at her hair. What do you care? she yelled. What do you care?

I... I don't, S--- said, I... I mean I do care. I just...

The girl looked around nervously and grabbed a book and threw it against the wall.

Look. I'm... I'm sorry, S--- managed and finally pushed into her room, averting the girl's darting eyes, unwilling to see this terrible version of herself, her misery spread out like that, an inventory of the ways he dominated her, his little course hairs and wires and messy piles, the sweaters full of his smell and the books full of his ideas, all of it so stifling a girl has to pack herself up for even a second just to see what she's made of—

La Rambla:

S--- was not seen for two days.

Finally, after a prolonged absence, S--- was spotted shopping on La Rambla with a British boy of nineteen and an American girl of twenty-one, two witnesses who have emerged separately but with the same story. According to their accounts, they had started the little dance of dating, but each of them admitted that it wasn't going well at that point; they were young, and bad at it. They had met S--- at the Picasso museum, and she had promised to walk them through the busy, touristy part of town, past the buskers painted a trembling silver, past the ragged bird seller, past the stalls selling roses and gold crosses that spell Barcelona across Christ's chest, in blood. They chatted nervously, the streets full of English. The British boy remembered lighting a fag, then putting it out after two puffs when the girl made a face. The girl remembers stopping for a to look at a rack of thick leather belts, the vendor a rotund curly-haired hippie woman. The boy claims the American girl spoke too loudly in English; the girl told us how the British boy, his neck red from shaving, looked at some sunglasses on a cardboard cutout beside the girl and almost rested his arm over her shoulder, then pulled it back. Bad nineties love songs blared from an unseen boom-box.

S--- could have kept walking and left them, but they had asked her to teach them how to use Metro and S--- told them she would show them how to buy a ticket, get to the beach, where to get off for a good lunch. The two of them, children really, must have fascinated her, their nervous hands around each other's bodies. La Rambla was full that day, the McDonalds and florists and portrait painters all making money. S--- flopped

down on the bench and lit a cigarette, just as a tall African boy pushed past the American girl and knocked her over.

S--- must have known, instantly, that the boy had stolen the girl's purse.

She screamed. The hippie jumped, and the girl looked up in time see S--- say something to the African. Then the African started to walk quickly away but S--- followed, speaking at first in French and then calling out, running after this man who had maybe stolen a girl's money, and he started running too, and he wouldn't let go of the pink thing in his hand and S--- dropped her cigarette and nearly pushed a couple over saying STOP STOP and he was sprinting now and S--- could barely hear the shouts from the British boy behind her until it all faded away, no one else was chasing him except for S---, swearing and shouting into the mouth of one alley and then another, the boy gone and her voice hoarse, emptying into the empty doorways and against the tightening walls—

Cuarto #14, Windows Open to the Sea:

Morning, waking up with the Cuban. Their first full nights sleep together, his arm behind her, her cheek on his chest. He told us he stroked her lips to wake her, just as the sun slid through the shutters and the pigeons splashed around in the puddles of the courtyard, before slipping downstairs to make coffee and breakfast for his wife. She must have needed him. A moment of weakness. We realize though, that she could not have stayed like this forever. Margarita, the tramp. Monique, the runaway. S---, the woman trying to hide.

Catedral de Santa Eulalia de Barcelona:

The atmosphere that night was perfect for a catastrophe. It was gorgeous out, all the young girls of Barcelona in late summer dresses and candles everywhere around the plaza, a waxy smoke over everything. The art show started at midnight, in the square in front of the Catedral.

According to Nikita, S--- looked tall on the Cuban's arm in an A-line skirt and shawl. He told us, over the phone, that he ran into S--- as she was watching a young girl with ribbons hanging from her wrists twirling between the candles. The three of them walked together, discussing a series of gold and blue paintings lined up against the old stone. The Cuban led S--- around by the elbow, introducing them both to an accordion player and a thin dancing boy dressed as a doll.

The police, unlike us, would be completely unimpressed by these details. The colour of her shawl (peach) or her type of shoe (strappy around-the-ankle sandal) would seem banal to the RCMP, unimportant. For us, however, it all meant something. She was shrinking away, growing fearful. She was not in her signature heels and bold colours. This meant something, something big.

Later, only a block away, in the little bar with the big swinging doors, S--- stretched out on a rock wall lined with pillows and drank wine from a stemless glass with Nikita and the young dancer. The boy was gaunt and flamboyant, his clothing all black except for a giant purple scarf. The windows above the bar were flung open and two girls fit inside its frame, their knees propped under them, dropping cigarette ash on the awning, and everything was calm and warm, still smelling of the wax and wine and the old stone.

Then it sort of fell apart. Nikita saw it first, then S---. The Cuban. Kissing. Someone. Else.

He was leaning into the woman's neck. The background music was insipid, a chirpy song who's chorus simply repeated the phrase Shut Up, and the girl was frighteningly young, her blonde hair swept over one shoulder, a string of light glass beads long off her neck and between her light little breasts. S--- couldn't breathe, the girl tossed her head back in a fake way, the Cuban gnawing at her ear now. The music got louder, *Shut up just Shut up*, and S--- pushed off the wall, and the dancing boy said, What happened and Nikita said, Nothing and S--- walked away from the bar, away from the Cuban, away the Nikita trying to grab at her wrist and the waitress with whom S--- had a tab for over thirty Euros worth of wine. She just walked, the city crowding around her, with nothing but light in her eyes, cobblestones, smoke.

It was nothing, but everything, all at once.

Cuarto #14, Shutters Closed:

There is a certain cageyness to traveling alone as a woman that most men will never know. Some eat to stave it off. Some write or smoke, some walk, or take constant buses or metros or sit on terraces to surround themselves with strangers. That companionship is only temporary. Eventually she returns to a guesthouse room alone, her novels and journals and tired belongings, her only company. For some, the entrapment is in the mind, for others, it steadily clenches around the throat, or stomach, or chest. That same cycle: Boredom-Fear-Boredom-Fear. Alone with her spinning mind, staring at the ceiling fan. The solitude is frightening, but the outside world, more alarming still.

The guesthouse room. Three days like this: Nothing but the sound of water down a drain, a broom whisking across the dry stones. Grey sky through slats. Dizzying shadows on the ceiling. Under the tap, a drooping tear, clinging until it is stretched too far.

The Cuban ignored her completely for three days after she walked away from the bar. Three mornings like that, no knock on the door. We have evidence that indicates during this period S--- wrote a few journal entries, dove into a novel about Nigeria but it was seriously violent, people lighting themselves on fire. She cut her hair, shorter on one side than the other, and she dyed it burgundy red. She also trimmed her jeans into tiny jean shorts that she wouldn't take off for three days except twice, when she walked to the ocean, swam, and walked back. More ceiling fan, more novel. No course knuckles at the door, no morning tray of coffee and eggs.

And no answer that afternoon when S--- called home to Husband. She used a calling card to mask the number, but even still, she must have known it was a mistake as soon as she dialed. She didn't stop herself; her own canned voice on the answering machine, requesting that we leave our time of call and a 'brief' message. After the beep, there was thirty-two seconds of breathing. Husband listened to it seven times before turning it over to the Police.

Then two days more of silence. Another shower, more raking the razor up her shins, another coat of red on her toenails, more spray in her hair. Perhaps she was bored, going crazy, having second thoughts. Most of us would have packed up and flown home by now, the adventure over. The thought must have crossed her mind.

And to compound everything, the French girl never left, S--- could hear her rustling in their sheets then her whining as the professor tickled her feet and she grunted her disapproval. Perhaps that made it harder, the fact that from her room S--- could hear everything: their small pecking, the rubbing of their skin. And he the way he pushed into her, too early because of her little yowl, it wasn't hard to picture her legs wrapped against his back, her nipples stiffening, his fingers on her eyes, her throat, the foam of the mattress compressing, the tiny bubbles exhaling under them as they push and push— they were trying to be quiet but they couldn't. They snorted and laughed and through clenched teeth, gasped and then huffed and then blew. First him. And then, unmistakably her. The pigeons outside ruffled and took flight and the professor wheezed. S--- ran a long hot shower.

The French girl told us later that, at this point, S--- must have been hurting. She apologized later in the hall, apologizing to S--- and S--- telling her not to worry, claiming she was angry only because she knew that it was time to move but she didn't know where to go. And when the Cuban finally knocked on the door—café con leche in hand, holding a fistful of negligee—that was suddenly everything. She couldn't even pretend it didn't matter anymore.

Barrio de Sosa:

Nikita's studio was white and clean and in the modern part of town, with low leather couches and the walls full of good art. S--- and Nikita sat on the floor smoking between his big plants, and there was an Asian boy there, and a Nigerian man on the floor beside Nikita. Alyosha and the Nigerian were speaking in a relaxed mix of English and Spanish,

and the rest of the room seemed to be listening. Before long, the Nigerian asked S--- what she was doing in Barcelona.

I've been hiding out, S--- said.

From her Husband, the Cuban butted in.

From her country, Nikita added.

S--- brushed both of them off. I'm reading some excellent Nigerian writers, she said. Wole Soyinka, and a novel by Chris Abani, but it's totally making me crazy, she told him.

The Nigerian nodded and started talking about a bar downtown Lagos where he met Wole, a sweet, fiercely intelligent man. He lives outside of Los Angeles now, he explained, away from Lagos.

I'm going to Africa too, S--- said, abruptly, and the Cuban raised his eyebrows at her. But in this book it seems crazy. People lit on fire in the market, S--- said. It can't possibly still be that violent.

The Nigerian's eye twitched, then finally, he chuckled. We all come running this way and you going down there, he said, now laughing with his whole belly, and for no reason. He started a story from when he was a child, when he saw a thief in the market burnt alive with the tire around his neck. The Asian boy stopped him, shrieking, How horrible!

You go down there to hide away, and the next thing you know, you'll be a Nollywood star, the Nigerian patted S--- again on the knee and touched her red hair. Nikita lit a joint and passed it to the Nigerian, who inhaled very carefully and held the smoke inside him.

Across the room, the Cuban decided to show a DVD of himself skydiving in Roses. In the film, he was strapped under a larger white man who was clearly the one who attached to the parachute. The Cuban's cheeks flapped ridiculously, and he pointed at the camera nearly the entire time he fell; S--- tried not to look. She kept talking about the book she was reading, or Soyinka's plays, but eventually she must have felt weirdly responsible for his movie, so she quieted and they all watched. The landing was shaky. The man who had been filming him fell landed afterwards, and the video only recorded the top of the Cuban's parachute as it deflated onto the runway. The camera turned off before the cameraman finished his dive.

The Nigerian applauded generously. The Cuban opened a bottle of rum for everyone to pour into the soda, and the room saluted him. The conversation moved to skydiving, the Costa Brava and the work of Dali, years alone in his house in Cadaques. But despite the light conversation, everyone in the room was still lingering in that Nigerian market, returning again and again to the image of the thief burning alive, a ring of rubber fire around his neck— and wondering if that could still be true.

Barceloneta:

The malécon at dusk. A vendor weaves between the glass pylons, his cotton candy bobbing from a hobo stick slung over a shoulder. Below them, Mar Bella is speckled with lovers: a gay couple putting on shirts and shorts after a day of sunbathing, a tiny-breasted girl trotting towards the ball from her paddle game, the Cuban watching her tanga move against her narrow hips.

I am leaving. You know that? S--- hissed, first to herself, and then right into his face.

What are you talking about? He turned to her, but she had stopped walking.

You sound like an idiot in front of our friends, she muttered.

My friends, he spat back.

She wouldn't look him in the face. If tears unwittingly welled up, she sniffed them away. You are an idiot, she said. You were right. All you do is fight and—

So go, he said, and his eyes darted between her face and the girl on the beach. But you gotta pay us what you owe, the Cuban said too quietly.

You can go to hell, S--- said, and the cotton candy vendor turned to stare at them but the other dozen or so tourists and families strolling the sea-side didn't seem to notice.

You owe me like a thousand Euros, the Cuban said casually, and S--- threw up her hands and started to storm away. The Cuban grabbed her wrist. You think this is fucking free? You think you can fuck your way around the whole fucking world?

She shouted something to him in English that he didn't understand.

You love this! He gyrated at her and she tried to push away again. You better be careful or I can call your husband and you'd be—

Fuck you, she said.

You think you can keep hiding out? You think I'm gonna keep protecting you?

Let go, she said.

What is wrong with you? he yelled at her, and she said, Let go, three of four times and it made him finally stop and release the hold on her wrist. The cotton candy

vendor's mouth had opened. The girl on the beach stopped playing her paddle game and had turned to look.

Then as she tried to walk away again he stepped towards her, speaking softly now. Come on, baby. Maybe you should just go home.

Fuck you, she hissed.

Just go home. Your little adventure is over.

I can't.

He yelled again: What is it with you? He tried to grip her face in his hand, but she shook her head away. You don't miss anyone?

And she stared out over the beach and said, No. I don't miss anyone. And as she turned to leave she promised herself she wouldn't.

Bogatell:

And then the sighting was posted. That prince from Pennsylvania, the photo of S--- on the beach in her drizzled make-up, the night sky behind her a purple bruise. In the photo, despite the hour and her drunkenness, she looked young, the dress, expensive. The French girl is the one who showed her and she said the same thing: At least you look good. S--- explained to her how now she had to leave. She must have known how thrilled we were, sharing the link, printing out copies, pasting it to our fridges, the corkboards above our desks, even warranting a thirty-second spot on the evening edition of the National. She must have pictured Husband, staring at it long enough to trace his entire trajectory, ready to hop a plane, to steal her back.

Autopista E-15- Sur:

And then she vanished. The traveling, we can picture it now: S--- on a bus, her hands cradling her face in an attempt at sleep, her chin propped between her palms. The glass of the window rattling, black. Outside, it is only night. The seats are the non-reclining kind, the bus, a second-class sort of thing. The boys behind her, teenagers veering towards the beach ferias, miraculously fallen asleep. The bus is half-full and she's placed herself exactly halfway to the back, still she can hear the bus driver humming along to his radio, through Valencia, Murcia, his mouth a little motor, propelling her all the way south.

At four a.m. they pull into a cafeteria-gift shop, the crowd filing through the glass doors into the buzzing white of the store. At a table in the café, a group of African boys crowd around a bowl of instant noodles, runaways too, heading the opposite direction. S-- - is compelled to ask about the way South, how they caught a boat to the continent. She doesn't ask though. Something keeps her quiet.

We like to imagine her following an Italian woman and her daughter as they push towards the bathroom, who in turn follow a young girl in heavy eye make-up, groggily swearing at the smell from inside. The tinkle of all of them in their separate orange stalls is momentarily comforting, lined up at the sinks, rubbing their hands under hot water, splashing their faces. Then, all of them file back onto the bus, away from the café, their paper cups full of espresso and their shopping bags with chips and ripe peaches. We hope that she felt safe in these moments, surrounded by strangers: the Italian woman clucking at her daughter, the teenager punching something into her phone, the humming driver making small talk over his cigarettes, the Africans looking up at her from their bowl of noodles, as if welcoming her into their world.



We had to learn fast.

The simple things evaded us at first, like the fact that we couldn't trace her ID because she'd never use her driver's license, which meant she couldn't drive, or she couldn't get pulled over. We couldn't track her credit cards because they'd been canceled, and she couldn't acquire a new one, so apartments rentals and health club memberships, even online purchases were out. Runaways lived by cash only, which meant she couldn't pay a water bill or sign up for a phone, anywhere in the first world anyways. And of course, the runaway can never return to her home country. Not for a friends' wedding. Not when her parents die. Never.

We scoured the tattered handbooks in our public libraries with titles like 'How to Find Anyone Anywhere' and 'Locating Lost Family Members & Friends', and we memorized mantras that we repeated to ourselves and each other, things like: *Never discount or disregard any type of information, or An investigation is a collection of facts.* And then we compiled our facts, assembling whatever details we could glean from those of us who administered for the City (school records, business licenses), the Courthouse

(traffic records, marriage certificates) and the Feds (voter registration, and most recently, passenger arrival lists.) Those of us with the resources ran phone number traces and credit checks. It didn't take long to realize that the handbooks from Cincinnati and New Jersey were written by wise old PIs with a penchant for the orderly and a deep loathing of scoundrels, and their mantras proved true: *An investigation has a life of its own.*

So we acted like PIs from our various cubicles, home offices, retail outlets and classrooms. We became trackers ourselves. We learned that the best trackers are people paid by the governments: FBI and CIA, public defenders and tax officials. They have unlimited access to the resources and they get paid to search consistently and diligently, and they usually get their mark. The non-licensed investigators are the collection agencies, bail bondsmen and adoption agencies, most of whom launch an investigation with a mere name or a phone number, but still manage some degree of success. Then there are Private Investigators, usually ex-cops with friends in the records departments. And bounty hunters. All available, for a price.

Some of us, between kindergarten carpools and coffee breaks called up a few real PIs. They too had mantras, things like: *You don't know what you are looking for until you find it.* They asked basic questions about how she ran away, and filled us in on what clues that provided. For example, she didn't fake her own death, an exit required by those deeply in debt or owing too much. She was allowed, they assured us, to simply leave her house. She could even change her name and assume a new identity; that isn't against the law.

If you still want to find her, they would say, find her money. The runaway can't earn wages by cheque and can't get over-the-table jobs without being tracked, so money

inevitably becomes their major issue. According to the PIs, the question of money will inevitably become dire as the runaway grows more desperate— eventually runaways will do anything for a little cash.

Meanwhile, we unhappily searched morgues in every small town here she was sighted. We sought Jane Does in hospitals, victims of alcoholism, car accidents or botched abortions. We consulted directories for local mental hospitals, scoured newspapers for any disturbances, any questionable occurrences that could have involved a young(ish) foreign woman. Of course S--- spoke languages, which was a problem for us because she could move with relative ease through the various social strata's. She was well-dressed and pretty too which we knew was like having a secret password into fancy hotel pools and parties and dining rooms, the bellhops winking her through doors normally closed to the rest of us.

What helped us most was the press interest. At 48 hours, Husband reported her missing and immediately, she made the front page of all the local papers and the front section of all three national papers. Social networks and fashion blogs buzzed incessantly with her photo and last sightings. An American tabloid published her photo with the headline, Politician's Wife Vanished! Minister Lead Suspect in Wife's Disappearance. Among her followers, suspicions naturally grew about potential kidnapping, and at hour 62, Husband was brought in for questioning, but quickly released. Some outsiders guessed at murder, spousal abuse, but we knew better. A key issue for the RCMP was the fact that Husband had waited over 48 hours to call the police, and of course, the papers were angry that he didn't immediately get in touch with his contacts in the press. After returning to their happy home, everything turned still. S--- had been missing only 72

hours when Husband retreated to his oak library, requesting a leave of absence. He posted a heartfelt message on his constituency website by hour 79, and shortly thereafter, his friends, lawyers and fellow MPs sent their official regards. By day three, members of his party were berated in the scrum, the media calling his desire for privacy ‘suspicious’ and ‘worthy of investigation.’

Meanwhile, he must have learned, as we did, that the first 100 hours of a search are a sort of benchmark, the runaway having just slipped the pursuer’s grasp. By hour 90, we had shifted from a Group on a social networking site, to a completely independent website of our own. We dedicated every forum and photo gallery to her disappearance, and we called ourselves The Following. We started small. In fact, most of us were drawn in the same way, by noticing that one of our friends had ‘joined the group’. In the beginning, our new members resorted to clichés and calls for prayer (the public turns weirdly religious in times of disappearance or death) but we quickly switched to a bulletin board format to discuss ‘the facts.’ We scoured our cameras and found photos of a fashion show one of us had attended with seats beside S---, high tea at parliament, and we linked old newspaper stories, footage from the election luncheons. Shortly after that, many of the MP’s wives joined our ranks, contributing what memories or condolences they could muster. She was our friend, almost, and she was gone.

Our website’s access was completely, one hundred percent user-driven, and our members vigilant. We promptly compiled what anecdotal evidence we could massage out of family members and close friends and we made lists and more lists: Did she require any specialty items? Was she dependent on any prescriptions? Did she ever have plastic surgery? What birth control did she use and did it require refills? She was eating,

sleeping, registering for hotel rooms or guesthouses. What kind of place has she stayed before? Where would she be shopping?

Some of us even hounded the police. A few detectives helped us initially, but they assured us that S--- was not a 'high risk runaway.' She suffered from no physical or mental disability, no discernable drug problem. She didn't appear to be in any present danger of exploitation, though that would become more apparent as her resources dwindled. And further, they thought we could easily find her. She was not the most difficult kind of missing person to track because she was not a child, some waifish nine-year-old 'who's radius of safety had been penetrated' by some overzealous molester or greedy parent. She could, one hoped, take care of herself.

The runaway, though, is limited in terms of who can help her. She cannot contact old friends or family, without fear of being turned in. She cannot stay in a homeless shelter or hospital without ID, or register a complaint with police if some abuse is committed against her. She can't even win the lottery or even enter a sweepstakes without an official Social Insurance Number. S--- was now reduced to the underground economy, a world where cash is king and scoundrels rule.

It was our general, hazy knowledge of this underworld of derelicts and prostitutes that set us into motion. It sounded too horrid. We simply needed to find her before she succumbed to that degradation, so in an effort to mobilize somebody started delegating tasks. We don't know who took control, but with so many admins, each of us being asked by anon to join the ranks of the admins until we too became anons, we invited others to join us. It worked. We gained over 4600 members in the first 100 hours, thanks to the

virtues of viral networking— we managed to ‘spread the word’ to an additional 100 members an hour for the next four days.

Some of us were better at the blog. Others had influence. We sent telegrams to our European contacts with ‘forwarding requests,’ in the hope that somehow she would learn of us, and we, in turn, would learn more about her. We conducted interviews over the phone: Frédérique the cleaning lady was immediately forthright and then immediately fired, and could no longer provide us with the physical evidence we would grow to crave. S---’s employee at the lingerie shop, Veronique, a girl of twenty-three, managed to duck out of view after one brief conversation when she mistakenly answered the phone from inside S---’s store. Most likely the small inventory of corsets and lace that went with her was more valuable to her than the desire to narc out her boss. S--- had no siblings. Her mother, recently widowed, left to her Point Grey money, told what she could to the police. She hadn’t heard from her in weeks.

Meanwhile, we scoured her online photos. We craved glimpses of her face, her clothes, her languid wave. We learned new words, like: Abscond- to depart in a sudden and secretive manner. And we tried not to obsess, but we logged hours tending the site, trolling through travel blogs from the areas where we thought she could be, scouring local newspapers for headlines, developments, clues.

Then, as photos of S--- from Barcelona started to surface, we could not contain ourselves. We analyzed first her appearance, then the clubs, the beaches, the sometimes hideous, sometimes gorgeous men snapped at her side. Experts among us tried to identify landmarks. As the RCMP temporarily closed the investigation (she had broken no law, and was clearly not kidnapped) she grew to be our national treasure, our paparazzi queen.

What was she wearing? Did she lose weight? Is that a ring on her finger? Our toddlers tugged at our pant-legs and our bosses peered over our shoulders, and they all disapproved. What was the big deal? It was a difficult situation for most of us to explain, needing so very badly to find her, a woman we hardly knew.

Of course, as we attempted to approach those who had been close to S---, the more we yearned for clues, motivations, insight as to why she would have left. It was a small miracle when, unbidden, they started coming to us.

The Friends

Torsolette: Traditionally used for tucking in the tummy, propping up the breasts— the torsolette is largely ignored in favour of the corset, the brassiere. Because nothing is sexier than bursting out the top. Spotlight between the velvet curtains. Usually made of lace and satin, little buttons slipped through strings. Eyelashes like spiders. Curls over the nipple. Best with fishnets, garter belts, an audience. Better in Arabic, with a veil, and batting eyes. The Torsolette is the last naughty bit of business. It isn't designed to cover your private parts. Like a showcase, it thrusts them out to the stage.



Jane:

Honestly, I loved her like a sister, but she was troubled. I'm a councilor now, so it is easier for me to recognize the signs. In fact, I'm working on a book at the moment that examines female sex-disorders in the public sphere. Sandra is my key case study; I trust you'll keep my answers her confidential. I'll be using much of this material in my work.

To be honest, I've been hesitant to talk to anyone about Sandra with anyone. For one, the police never questioned me. Peter never called to let me know she was gone. I actually heard the news from Phyllis, and she called us all in such a state, it was hard to actually voice my opinion at the time, though I certainly had my own idea as why she disappeared. At first, I was very resistant to the Followers; I felt you missed a lot of details and I refused to co-operate with you for obvious reasons. It wasn't lost on me, the weak analysis of her behaviour based in pop-psychology and television diagnosis, and to be honest it was totally disheartening to hear you speaking so frankly about such a close friend.

I suppose, you did get a few things right. Like I said, I'm a councilor, trained in the personality disorders that occur in sexually active girls. Since her disappearance, I've submitted her profile through a variety of disorder-tests, and I believe I've isolated the

real source of her problems. Sandra is an extravert. An extreme extravert. In her case, I'm afraid it's clinical.

My husband Frank, a gifted psychologist and a Jungian by training, assisted me in the diagnosis. Extreme extraversion, according to his research, often results in mania-like behaviour. Sandra was no exception. Certainly, she was fetching, photogenic. New friends constantly flocked to her, and she always welcomed them into her circle. However, unlike most extraverts, she rarely sought attention from her parents or teachers, even her friends. Extraverts are externally referenced, and crave approval from the outside world for all of their actions. S---, on the other hand, was far more particular in her quest for approval. She only sought attention from boys.

To be blunt: Sandra was a sex addict. Growing up, it is a wonder I didn't see her sexual behaviour as dangerous or compulsive— we thought she was just wild. In college it was a sort of fun, a few boys here or a party there, Sandra suddenly leaving in a cab and not hearing from her for a few days. Of course, it came as a shock to all of us when she became a political wife, because her tendency to find man-trouble was so acute.

I believe one of the causes of her sex addiction was the fact that she didn't hold up well to public scrutiny. In similar cases, high stress situations result in a patient's desire for fantasy and withdrawal. Often, during a sexual experience, one can completely escape from the high-stress life they normally lead, thanks to the extremely high levels of phenylethylamine (or PEA) that are released during a sexual encounter. Not surprisingly, the chemical can be addictive. The higher the stress, the more the addict craves a sexual experience to ignite another release of PEA. The cycle is formed.

In retrospect, it is easy to see how Sandra buckled under all of that public attention. To begin with, Peter had a stronger public persona than most Canadian cabinet ministers, the press quoted him more often than others, and he photographed well. As you know, the 'Bedrooms of the Nation' are guarded here in comparison with the US or the UK, but the press tends to be somewhat vigilant of the wives, especially the wild ones, especially Sandra. Before long, she was showing off to the cameras, posing for the national news in some provocative piece of clothing. She did, after all, run a lingerie store, and certainly spoke openly about sex and sexuality. Her first photo-spread, for example, was hardly the proper coming-out for a nouveau femme-du-jour. More like enfant terrible.

It was sickening, if you want to know the truth. Trust me, I've known her long enough. Men have always loved her, and she's always loved men, a fact that earned her great enemies among our high school peers. I never dared say it to her face, but I overheard conversations in bathroom stalls and intercepted notes passed between desks, and I could decipher the message despite the feeble attempts at writing in code. By eleventh grade, she had earned the acronym DLW: Daddy's Little Whore. Girls resented her, because she was different than the other promiscuous teens, usually from a lower socio-economic standing or a history of abuse. Unlike so many girls seeking sexual attention because of low self-worth, S--- would not wallow in self-loathing after an affair. She reveled in her licentious acts.

I know for a fact, S--- was sexually active from the age of thirteen, and I've pieced together a loose chronology of her various sexual encounters throughout her teenage years. In fact, I'm working on a crucial aspect of the book that reveals her entire

sexual chronology, from 12 until her death. Names have been changed, and the following examples only serve as a sampling of the many partners she exploited as her addiction grew more and more outrageous. Much of this has been gleaned from eye-witness accounts, and of course, my own memories. I was, of course, one of Sandra's dearest friends.

Chris Westin: age 13, in the alley behind the elementary school, the day seventh grade spring report cards revealed her straight B average. She let his hand drift up her shirt after lifting her onto the garbage cans, he shimmied his narrow hips between her spread legs and slipped her the tongue.

Sam Christ: age 13, also in the alley behind the school, only one day after Westin. This time, she wore a short skirt and knee socks, and allowed his fingers to trace the outline of her panties. More tongue.

Chris Westin: age 13, jealous of the news that Christ had gone further, Westin invited Sandra to his home the following day to show her his older brother's Playboys, and to remove her shirt. Halfway through the ordeal, his mother arrived home from work to find Sandra hiding in Westin's closet, topless. Westin was grounded for a month.

Sam Christ: age 13, the day after Westin was grounded, in the bathroom after school as the drama club rehearsed in the next room. Sandra lost her virginity straddling a boy in a Nirvana T-shirt, as he sat on a toilet with his jeans around his ankles.

Chris Westin: age 13, same bathroom, a few days later.

Simon Hastings: age 14, in Chris Westin's loft, during a party in which Mrs. Westin had specifically banned Sandra's attendance. She snuck in through the back door, with Chris' help, after which she provided Chris and Simon Hastings a double hand-job (or DHJ), with Simon Hastings receiving the left and Chris, enjoying the right.

The Hastings Twins: age 14, so thrilled with their new-found love for the DHJ, Simon and Craig Hastings invited her to their home the following Tuesday, and reportedly, she was not shy to repeat the maneuver. Sandra's first reported use of lubricant. (I can personally report here, she experienced no shame afterwards, but a clear and persistent curiosity.)

Heather Harding: age 15, first reported bi-sexual experience.

Andrew Choy: age 17, first Asian sexual experience.

Humphrey Sanko: age 22, first African-American sexual experience.

I could go on and on, and of course, it would only fuel the fire that is burning up her reputation. At the moment, I'm the only one who's working on this sex-addiction theory; my husband Frank and I are the only ones publicly making that claim. To be honest, I don't know why there aren't more psychologists and investigators working this promiscuity angle. It seems obvious. Sandra got into trouble from sleeping around, heading to Africa, of all places. That kind of behaviour always results in danger. I'm not afraid to say it: She was asking for it, and I find the whole thing quite disgusting.

She makes me sick, if you want to know the truth.



Fran:

When Samantha, that's what she called herself, traveled south from Spain to Morocco, I was the one who took her, on my yacht.

It wasn't complicated. You see, most refugees travel by little wooden boats, but no Samantha. She is too guapa and rica and encatada for that. We traveled on my father's sixty-foot catamaran. The yacht sleeps six comfortably, so I called my gran amigos Gabriel and Roberto, and we had a party. We love a good party, and Samantha, she loves a good party too.

It really wasn't hard. Samantha needed to get across the Strait of Gibraltar into Africa, not the other way around, and so she called up our friend Nikita. He's a Russian and he often sells us cocaine. I don't think that is really important, but he's pretty nice for a fag and he's got some very funny friends. I ran into him at the Café Toulouse one night, and he introduced me to Samantha, who was super-guapa and spoke some Spanish and was a hella good dancer. So me and Niki go into the bathroom stall to blow a line, and the fag asks me, your dad still has that yacht in Malaga, right? And I said yes, but my father was trying to punish me for skipping out on school in London and coming back to Barcelona before the term was over, so I wasn't really allowed to use it these days. The girl was outside at this point, and Niki says to me, Well, I would sure love it if you could point me in the direction of a good yacht. She needs to get to Africa.

I know if I did a good favour for Niki, we would get some good blow and a couple of culos and a fiesta de verdad, so I called up my dad and say, I have to go to Morocco for some research. I've decided to go back to school! And he's so happy, that idiota, that he just offers the yacht like that.

I've been sailing since I was a little kid, and I never feel afraid on the water. When I called up Roberto and Gabriel, they both felt a little more nervous, especially about smuggling a gringa into Morocco. I didn't even think about whether it would be hard to get some chick into Africa. I mean, we gotta really nice boat, and it'll be a party, right? They all agreed and we arranged to leave the next Tuesday. On Monday night, I stopped by Niki's place and he gave me two big eight-balls and a handful of pills and says, be careful, and I say, of course Niki, and I kiss him on the lips, because that fag loves shit like that.

So the girl, Samantha, is waiting for us in Tarifa, which is real nice, because there isn't too much room in my car, and Gabriel and Roberto and I want to do all the blow before we get there. Well, maybe I'm driving too fast, but we still have some left by the time we pull into Malaga, and we're feeling really good, like we could party in Malaga all night, but we call her anyways, and I tell the guys, oh, she is so hot, let's go find this chick, and so I ask her where she is and she tells me she's booked into this guesthouse in Tarifa under the name Blair Jones.

So, we park at the yacht club where my dad has a slip, and we run around for an hour buying booze, mostly, and a few bits of bread and ham and some fruit, and we take off. It takes us the whole evening to sail over to the Real Club Nautico de Cadiz up the coast on the Atlantic side, and by the time we call her number at the guest house, I guess all the windsurfers had gone to bed early because it rang and rang and finally she is the one who answers the phone. She's killing herself laughing, and she tells me, try to sleep, hermanos, it's four in the morning, I'll see you here tomorrow. So we pass out for a couple of hours but the coke is bad quality and we really can't sleep.

The next day we are up at noon and sailing down to Tarifa. We get there for late afternoon I guess and we're feeling sketchy, so we find Samantha and she treats us to a massive paella and three bottles of wine and cheese and bread and olives and nearly a full bottle of port. And we finally felt good again.

We each took a couple of the pills (she didn't though, she said she was feeling kind of sick and maybe she shouldn't, and we packed up her shit and took it to the boat, which I guess we had illegally parked at the Tarifa Marina. We told the marina boss that we were going to be quick but after the long dinner and coming back all boozed up we had to pay a bit to get back on his good side. It was sunset, a perfect time to start an all night party.

And so we left Europe. She spent three days on board.

Even drunk, I can be the one to tell you that I am a very competent sailor, and we took turns steering and tacking away from Tarifa, but mostly I was in charge. We spent some time on the water the next morning, sun-tanning and drinking beer. Me and Roberto felt really rough after the pills the night before but Gabriel and Samantha felt great, they woke up early and swam and cooked us ham and eggs for breakfast and we drank coffees with rum. They must have fucked, she was so fine, with such long legs in that bikini. Me and Roberto were getting along too, and we had even tried fucking ourselves after dancing all night on the deck and necking a little bit. The coke Niki gave us was shit but the pills were really amazing. Anyways, I'm no fag, and in the end I couldn't get it up for Roberto. It didn't matter, it was three fun days. We ran out of pills on the second night when we started railing them, but we kept drinking booze. The third day was rough, so

we kept a low profile and that night Gabriel rowed Samantha out to the beach on a little dinghy.

It was a fishing village. Ksar Es Seghir. The weather was calm and their landing went pretty smoothly. It was dusk in the fishing village when we anchored the yacht and Gabby rowed Samantha to shore. According to him, they just had to stroll up to the immigration office and the officer offered them tea and I guess he was pretty pleased with the generous bribe from such a hot chick. He gladly stamped her passport, but didn't write down her number or anything. It was all pretty casual.

Now, considering all the shit she'd been through, I realize that when we dropped her on the beach in Morocco, she turned into a real fucking hardcore criminal. Crossing borders under the radar is very sketchy, way more sketchy than blowing lines and popping pills, but she was so chill about it. We didn't take it too seriously.

Anyways, Gabby found her a driver who would take her all the way to Tangiers, then he kissed her goodbye, and she came out to the beach to wave to us, but it was really getting dark by then and we couldn't see her. The sailing trip home was really quiet. The pills were gone and we felt kind of quiet, just sipping rum in our coffees and listening to the wind. We parked the boat in Malaga the next day at noon, and I called my dad and thanked him. I told him I wasn't going back to school though. I couldn't lie about everything, all of the time. Could I?



Darryl:

I'm pretty sure I know why she left.

I'm her neighbour, at the shop. I've got a printing store here in the downtown and I had seen her around, late nights, I've thought of her there alone, in that lingerie store on our quiet downtown street, at 11 p.m. on a nondescript Tuesday. I've given her a lot of thought actually. Too much. Maybe.

The night I imagine, the nondescript evening I keep picturing over and over, she's in the office checking receipts against totals, after placing an order a new supplier in Milan, and she is alone, usually alone at this time of night, and there is only a small light from a small yellow square facing the back alley, only that light would indicate that anyone could be inside. Someone could come in. It would be too easy.

What if someone thought it *was* too easy.

I don't want you to get the wrong idea, because I'd never do such a thing. But I've thought about this so many times, I can almost picture it, like it was real, the whole thing could have happened, you know. When she disappeared that night I almost called the police to tell them my theory, but I didn't want to freak anybody out.

You see, there was only that one small window facing out to the alley, and I used to look up at that window all the time and think, What if that window impossibly, instantly smashed?

What if the individual who smashed the window was young?

Brawny?

A man?

What if that young brawny man was black? (I mean, would that make it worse?)

It may sound a bit harsh, saying this, because there aren't many black men here in the city, but there have been a few reports of violent crimes committed by black men. I mean, I try to follow up on these things, and it wouldn't surprise me if she was attacked by one of them. Because she was a target. For young men. Men thought about her all the time.

Maybe this young black man was suffering from a panic, a moment of weakness, and succumbed to the appeal of the break and enter—

What if he entered?

What if, at approximately 11 p.m., the black man shattered the little back-alley window of the downtown lingerie store with a tire-iron, illegally entering, then proceeded to the shop's small office, where he found her cowering behind a desk. What if the man had a gun?

A knife?

Only the tire iron?

I can picture him there with all of those weapons hanging off him. A knife hanging off his belt. A gun on his hip. Maybe even a grenade. And she would be very afraid. Cowering, really cowering behind the desk. Maybe whimpering a little. But not saying anything, not yet.

Would she open the safe? Would she hand over the cash she normally keeps in there? More disturbing still, would she—at gunpoint or knifepoint or under threat of the tire iron crushing her skull— would she do what he asked?

Would he even ask her? Or would he force her?

This is the part that makes me shiver. I've thought about it so many times, but I don't know how to answer this question without losing it, I mean, it makes me want to blow my top.

Would she take off her clothes?

She would rather die.

No. She wouldn't choose to die. No one chooses to die. We do what we are told.

What if she did what she was told: first removed her blouse, then slowly unzipped her skirt, and stood there for a moment in just a push-up bra and cotton thong, at which point the intruder moved towards her and placed his large black hands on the light skin around her waist,

And slipped his thumbs under the tiny elastic string around her hips,

And gently, gently pulled them down her thighs,

And then from behind, took her like that—

What if, for only an instant, he was more of a lover than a thief?

And then the cycle starts again. I start again with the window, the sound of the smash, the black man, it is always a black man, entering while she cowers behind the desk whimpering?

Oh God.

Sometimes, to make it a little bit more intense, I picture someone watching.

For example: What if her husband watched?

What if he had seen what she had done— and what was done to her?

What if there were surveillance tapes in the little VCR? And the next day, when her husband returned to the shop after an afternoon as a busy MP, to sweep up and to

place boards over the little broken window facing the back alley filled with frozen puddles and bricks stained with soot and graffiti, he spotted the little tapes in the VCR.

I imagine that I'm the police inspector, the one who notices camera when we're filling out the report, and the two of us sit together in the little office, sipping coffee, both of us perched on the edge of desk, surrounded by overturned binders of receipts and catalogues littering the floor.

What would he do if he saw everything? Those black hands all over her creamy torso. Her perfect body bent over the desk. That thong around her knees.

What if she looked right at the camera? Husband, pale. And me, sort of ashamed and swearing under my breath, trying to look away.

What if Husband can't help it, but actually blames his wife (because maybe, during the attack, she looks as if she is aroused, like she is actually enjoying it—)

No. Husbands don't blame wives for being attacked.

Husbands provide their support, demanding the tapes be taken off the internet, (the tapes would be leaked, of course, I'm not claiming responsibility or anything, but the public should know)

But what if viewers can't get enough?

What if people keep finding it, sharing it, watching it, over and over. After all, she was a star! Wouldn't the response be massive: millions of hits, criticism, backlash, outcry, public demonstrations, experts' testimonies, divorce, criminal charges—

What if the suspect is eventually turned in by a family member, and is arrested in a midnight raid to his Eastside trailer park. And what if one night, at approximately 11 p.m. the suspect is reported dead from multiple stab wounds, suffered while in police

custody. The police inspector so angry about the tapes he watched in that little room with her husband he couldn't hold himself back.

What if reports spread over the internet that the wounds were self-inflicted.

What if the man has stabbed himself to death. Maybe with a toothbrush, a fork, a switchblade smuggled in by a cousin for his own protection.

What if, that very evening, local police team up with FBI agents, in the bizarre disappearance of the rape victim. What if she is just Gone. M I S S I N G. What if YouTube, having recently removed the rape footage, encourages Husband to video-broadcast his appeals for his wife's safe return home. His messages, are tear-jerking and widely popular: his first video titled *We Love You Come Home* garners nearly two million clicks after only one day online. What if Husband, originally a criminal attorney, proceeds to launch several lawsuits, including a multi-million dollar suit against the security company, YouTube, the family of the suspect.

No.

It wouldn't be that big. It starts small. With a little yellow square of light, coming from a little window facing an alley. I've pictured it so many times, I think I've got the whole thing figured out. It started small. It started with the sound of a window smashing, the light tinkle of glass in a dark alley puddle.



Matthew:

I always thought I would be lonely traveling alone, but everywhere I went, beautiful people surrounded me. Sonja was just one of them, an angel, really, that just popped up at the perfect time and lead me to the things I needed to see.

I never had sex with her, if that's what you want to know. We woke up once holding hands across the space between our twin beds in a guesthouse in Fez. That was the closest we came, but I can count her among my best friends. To this day, I think Sonja is one of the few people who actually knows who I am.

I am a drug addict, recently reformed. It was crack, if you can believe that. I can hardly believe it, really saying it out loud. Crack is one of those things I guess, it just sneaks up on any kind of person in the wrong situation. I didn't even know I was in a situation until I was totally messed up. I accept responsibility for my actions though. I let it happen, and now, I'm doing everything I can to fix it up.

I grew up in Buffalo, a pretty rough city, and I got into being a pretty bad kid right from the start, I guess. My mom was single but she was getting good alimony from my Dad, we lived in a pretty middle class suburb, and I walked to junior high and there weren't guns in my classes or anything. I wasn't a ghetto kid. I did skip a lot of school though, and I made friends with kids who wanted to come over to my house during the day because my mom was at work and they could smoke weed and eat our food and not get bugged by anybody. It started with joints, on the back porch, and I got real heavy into pot really early, and then at a party, there was this older kid there selling everybody rock and we just smoked it. True story. I was on that shit for a long time, on and off.

I'm twenty-five now. My rock bottom (no pun intended) was last year, when I stole my mom's car and I tried to drive it to LA. Of course, I was totally ripped, and I only made it as far as the state-line before I got busted. I feel pretty bad about that; she had to call the cops on me and I got sent to rehab. Something about seeing her there on the other side, in a courtroom, that is really the lowest you can get, stealing your mom's car, a lady who has been working her ass off for you her whole life. Anyways, that time at rehab, it really stuck with me. I started thinking about God, and how He leads us down the path of temptation. God helped. This whole year, I went to meetings every week and even traveling I managed to get to a meeting every once in a while. I read the NA literature every night before I sleep, and I'm tempted, but I haven't even had a drink since I left home.

I was traveling in Morocco for a month, a good amount of time. Before that I was working at a record store in Buffalo, and I saved up a couple of grand and decided to go where I really wouldn't risk getting any drugs or booze. I landed on a Muslim country, because they're pretty clean, and I really liked it there. Yeah, there are a few guys smoking hash around me, but nobody is ever drunk, and there is no party scene at all. People are very religious, and it's not just about Jesus, or Mohammed, or anything. It's about God, being everywhere, in everything, helping us along. I liked that.

I met Sonja on the roof of our guesthouse in Fez, which is a market city. She was playing with these tiny little kittens that had just been born and we played with them and talked for a long time. Right away, I told her about my addiction. I rarely do that with people I don't know, but she had this really trustworthy side to her, she looked like she just wouldn't judge, and she didn't. We talked about my tattoos and my mom and

stealing the car, all on that first afternoon on the roof. We went out for dinner that night at this weird little place, we shared a couscous. The next day we planned to walk around together, and the day after that we decided to go to the coast together. I had about a week left of my trip by that point, but she told me she was planning to go further south. She never judged me for being sick, and she listened with patience and care. Really, angelic.

Look, it's not like I didn't think she was beautiful, or anything. She was gorgeous. She often walked around town with a scarf or something to cover her hair or shoulders, and still she got a lot of hisses and attention. It made me feel really protective, actually, and when we met Jacob that night with the Danes at that guesthouse, I guess I overreacted when she started flirting with him right away. She told me she had left her husband, and she wasn't really into a relationship, but I could tell right away where things were heading with her and Jacob. Even though it was just a week, she knew my real thoughts. I told her to watch out, because so many men will love her, and she laughed and told me not to worry.

Our last day together, we went to the beach and played paddleball and swam, and all these guys stared at her in her bathing suit, and I just felt so happy to sit beside her, and finally be one guy out of a million who didn't want to have sex with her. I told her that, and she squeezed my shoulder and chucked me on the chin and said, Ah Mattie.

It's hard to tell, because she seemed happy, but maybe she was at rock bottom, and I didn't know it. Sometimes you've gotta sink all the way to the depths of the ocean before you can touch your feet down, and finally spring up for breath. That's what they keep telling me. We're all just floundering around I guess, trying not to get sucked back down, and with the help of God and friends and family, we can pull through one day at a

time. I just wish I could have saved her too. It just kills me to think of her like that: face down in the muck. Dead.

So to answer your questions, I never had sex with her, but I loved her. Everyone did. Everybody loves an angel.



Cherifa:

Tetum and I are the twin sisters that run the shop below the guesthouse where the lady stayed, here in Essaouira. She was so beautiful. We noticed her right away. We were always careful to clean her room nicely, and we slipped her extra pats of butter and disks of bread for the morning café. We loved her clothing too, and her quick laugh. Our father says we are opposites but both devils. Tetum is the tousled, unruly one who makes friends with the foreigners who rent rooms from our father, and she always makes a point to serve them tea, and she is screamingly jealous of our brothers who sell the French backpackers bits of hash and smoke with them all day along the beach or on the rooftop. I am Cherifa, my father's favourite daughter. I am the one who loves clothes and make-up and Italian crooners, and I am the one who traded with S--- a pair of turquoise earrings for her short cream dress.

My father, several years ago, built us a room on the third floor of the guesthouse, just like the hotel rooms with cement walls and shuttered windows, but as a place for us to use however we wish. Our father, a liberal and not the shrewdest of the business owners in town, offered this one room to his daughters as some sort of exchange for our otherwise restricted lives. He studied literature in Paris, and knows that young women

need a space full of mirrors and pillows and clothes and carpets where we can smoke, away from the lewd looks of the boys and mothers spying on the streets. And girls aren't allowed in the cafés, so he was generous, and he gave us a second-floor room with electricity and a sink so we could boil tea and play music. Last year, I trimmed stars out of silver paper to hang from the ceiling, and my mother saved an old rug to cover the floor and our brother brought us a mirrored chest which we have placed in the corner of the room and we've filled up with scarves and short skirts. S--- was in our special room the day when Aina cut Tetum's hair into little Mohawk. It was outrageous.

I had never even heard of such a thing as a Mohawk until one morning, S--- and Aina were bored and sitting together looking at all kinds of internet sites on the computer my father has reserved for guests. When I came into the room, Tetum was perched on a stool nibbling at cookies and watching them. When Tetum started making very funny jokes about their brother as he passed by, S--- asked her to do an imitation and the likeness was perfect. Tetum is very hilarious. She started asking to look at the pictures that Aina and S--- had found on the internet and as soon as we saw the Mohawk, Tetum started begging them to do that to her.

It took a long time to convince them. We finally took the girls upstairs to our special room, so they could see how, on the walls, Tetum had pasted posters of Japanese punk-girls in school uniforms made ugly with digital graffiti, and I had hung huge life-size images from movies from Burkina Faso, their titles in French, Arabic, Spanish, of teenage boys leaning out of car windows and my paper hearts fluttering around their heads. When S--- first stepped inside, our mother almost shrieked, and she reached for a scarf to cover her hair dyed burgundy and hanging loose around her face and to cover the

cigarette burning in the clay pot by her feet. The girls spoke to her for a while in French and she finally relaxed and offered everyone cigarettes. Then we put on some music and we all, even Mother, danced around. Then we begged Mother to let the girls cut Tetum's hair into the special Mohawk, and finally, after some pleading, she approved. It was marvelous, we knew it could take forever to grow back, and she would have to cover her head for the whole time she was outside of this room but it didn't matter, to any of us. We shaved the sides and spiked up the top using the special gel Aina had bough for her in the market. My sister Tetum says that was the best day of her life.

We wanted to write to you to tell you of this special day. That afternoon, S--- taught us many moves and we taught her to shimmy her hips and tilt her head like a Moroccan. We would also like to give to you this photo of ourselves, each of us dressed in S---'s short cream dress. As you can see here, I am the one with long hair down my back. Tetum is the other twin, the one who still has her hair shaved into a Mohawk. We are both terribly sorry, now she is dead.



The Following

Panty:

Little short, little jockey, little butt, little girl, bikini brief, boy brief, wide leg, wide ass, nude nylon, pink cotton, black lace, sheer front, sheer back, seamless sides, seamless top, bowed top, control top, brazilian cut, butt cut, thong cut, never wear a skirt without them, plastic pack, pant protector, panty-liner, elastic bands, I see London I see France, pantaloons, petticoats, Friday Flip-up Day, edible panties, granny panties, training panties, undies, drawers, skivies, snuggies, tangas, tap-pants, at times, unbelievably: crotchless.



We've done the research.

There are three kinds of fame: the fame you are born with, the fame you work hard to acquire, and the fame that is unwillingly thrust upon you. There are scores of theorists bent on sorting through the psychologies of stardom and the fans that follow. According to the experts, people who achieve fame are different than those who acquire wealth or power. Celebrity, whether you choose it or not, is merely a type of social distinction, an extended version of “me vs. everyone else”. Polls conducted in China, Germany and even the US all reveal the same results: thirty percent of adults have daydreamed about being famous, forty percent expect to achieve some degree of fame in their lifetimes. Few, however, are chosen. The back-story must be perfect, the time and place must be exact, there must be a degree of sensationalism in the idol's rise to celebrity status. And of course, the star must have that distinct, ineffable appeal. In the end, it doesn't really matter whether a star *chooses* to be famous— the equation is often the same.

Even from a young age, S--- exhibited all of the characteristics fans seek in an idol: perceived sex appeal, pro-social activities (she was hardworking and generous) and

of course, mystique. We cannot deny this fact: S--- was stunning, her slightly unsymmetrical green eyes and dimpled chin, her one hard currency. As a teenager it was her smile and lean body that attracted false friends and suitors, but by college, her brassy red hair melted into a subtle burgundy, and her lips and cheeks managed an unnatural rouge against her flawless creamy skin. She was tall, and thus intimidating, only pursued by the brave or the reckless. She didn't ask to be beautiful, but she certainly didn't conceal it.

The rise to fame, and a star's motivations to seek fame, are highly contended by experts. Some claim stardom stems from "insufficient parental attention" and the general deprivation of love as a child results in a need for mass love as an adult. The Compensation Theory doesn't fit S---'s profile. According to her recently widowed mother, S--- was an only child, generally worshiped by Daddy. Her father, a union buster based in the affluent if understated Point Grey, an old money Vancouver neighbourhood. Handsome and kind, he was a difficult father to hate. He had taken S---'s mother as a far-younger second wife, and doted on them both as his prized possessions. The three of them would travel often, from their second home in Scottsdale, Arizona to Europe, and even once to safari in Kenya, which made an indelible mark at S--- ripe age of 16.

Others would claim that S--- experienced "Reinforcement of Exhibitionism" by her father, whereby she was rewarded for showing off as a child. This, too, is somewhat inaccurate. Certainly, judging from her photos as a seventh grade team figure skater, or as editor in chief of Point Grey High School newspaper, she occasionally took center-stage, but her parents hardly rewarded the behaviour. At once athletic, graceful and quick to laugh, she managed considerable success in school without any wrenching effort on her

part. Her parents acted like a couple of pals: S--- never experienced much of a youthful rebellion, nor did she have to fight particularly hard to win their approval.

One particularly brilliant work by two psychotherapists in London contends that in every famous person, whether they choose to be famous or not, there is a certain degree of expressiveness, exhibitionism and (as earlier identified by Dr. Jane Everett) extraversion. S--- was expressive from birth, she couldn't help it; it had something to do with her staggering beauty. Her extraversion was what made her so beguiling. Extroverts are gregarious, fun, at moments even loud, and S--- was no exception. She sought action instead of thought. She preferred breadth over depth. But extraversion and expressiveness alone do not make a star. The most striking aspect of stardom is that of exhibitionism. The desire to be recognized by the public must be stronger in the fame-seeker than her fear of public failure. And so, here is S--- running down her suburban "crescent" in a nightgown, in the rain. Husband is after her, chasing her down the wet sidewalk in his running shoes. They shout at each other, her nightgown is getting soaked. He is angry. His fists are clenched but he won't swing. He's a rugby player, sure, and tough in a bar brawl, but he'd never strike his wife.

Nevertheless, there they are in the middle of their street, screaming, both of them, and her little lace teddy is completely see-through; he's ripped off his jacket now, and he's forcing it over her shoulders. He's weeping too. Ridiculously, a sprinkler system leaps to life on the lawn beside them, and they stop, she starts to giggle. Now he's sitting the sprinklered lawn, the rain beating hard under the awful orange glow of the street light and before long, she falls into his lap and unzips his pants...

Psychologically speaking, this is exhibitionism. Why take the argument outside, where others could potentially watch? Why end the fight with a sexual act, not in the privacy of the bedroom, but in public, where neighbours could be privy to the overt nature of their reconciliation? Of course, there were no cameras present that night, no paparazzi to immortalize another defining moment in their tumultuous marriage. We must resort to eye-witness accounts like these to piece together her private life.

That said, according to some friends, she was not always a seeker of such public attention. At 18, S--- quietly enrolled at the university nearest her home, and completed an undergraduate degree in Sociology by 22. Though she moved into a beach-side apartment with two long-time girlfriends, Phyllis and the aforementioned Jane, she remained close to her parents. At 23, S--- decided to travel. Backpacks dutifully filled with loose cotton layers, S--- and her best friend Phyllis embarked on an 4-month train-trip across India, where they learned to smoke hash and pray with the sadhus and stretch like yogis and take rickshaws through busy market streets. They spent the last month in Mother Theresa's mission in Calcutta, where they washed babies and spent evenings drinking beer with German volunteers. From Calcutta, S--- applied and was immediately accepted into the Pratt School of Design in New York, based on a portfolio of sketches she had developed while in India— variations on the sari that were not particularly inspired. She had them sewn in Varanasi, and for the portfolio, she modeled all twelve of them in a series of photographs, bathed in morning light along the funeral ghats. This photo series does nothing to hide her pronounced beauty, and is likely what got her into the school. In New York, she was left coolly alone, until one accidental meeting thrust her into the public eye.

From the beginning, her relationship with Husband was torrid and televised. The Canadian Business delegation in New York hosted a soiree at the Plaza Hotel and S--- attended with her father, there to represent the steel industry. Recently re-elected despite a public break-up with a Canadian millionaire turned bumbling politician, Husband's career was on the upswing. The heiress had been aloof and somewhat catty with the press, and Husband, perhaps eager to shed his bachelor status, was on the prowl. He too was from a political family, and had most likely met S---'s father at another Canadian industry banquet, both of them from the West and closely tied to the Progressive Conservatives. It was a match. S---'s father had made a point of sitting Husband (twelve years her senior) beside S--- (dressed in a grey and violet cocktail dress, Saks, purchased that day.) Between speeches, Husband managed a few questions over the clapping audience. How do you like New York? What are you working on? When are you moving back to Canada?

That night, the photos of them in a well-heeled club in SoHo bordered on raunchy. She was leggy in her heels and short dress, holding a perpetual cigarette and vodka martini, the pictures documented her various states of drunkenness. By the time they exited the club his face shone with a certain erotic, stunned impairment. The photos emerged the next day: MP with his shirtsleeves rolled up, his arm around a young girl's thin waist, his lips on her neck. The paparazzi knew little of his rising stardom in Canadian politics, or the how much these images would one day be worth. The only magazine willing to purchase them at the time was Hello! Canada, the editor of which was not particularly interested, and buried the nastiest shots on page six. These pictures, however, have immortalized that first encounter: S--- and her future Husband, their

grinding legs intertwined, Husband's head thrown back in bass-beat exultation, her mouth pouting to the people of Canada: Let me be your star.



Essaouira, Morocco

La Forteresse Walls:

Photograph Number One: S--- stands on a giant gun. A cannon. There are four of them around her, you can see the backs of their heads, and it is night. Behind her is the sea. Her hands are raised as if conducting some sort of bohemian rhapsody. She is smiling, wickedly.

They are a crew. Their members: one French graffiti artist, who's been living out of a backpack for two years, his main residence a shack outside of Chamonix; one Danish girl with devilish blonde bangs and her hippie boyfriend, ten years younger than her and bearded, the Jesus type, the two of them in a country band that only covers the most lamenting of the Patsy Cline numbers without a hint of irony; and one salt-and-pepper American painter, Jacob, in his late forties, with black under his fingernails and a Marlboro perpetually hanging from his lips.

The city they had chosen to occupy is Essaouira, designed by a French Architect for Sultan Sidi Mohammed bin Abadallah. It is a breezy place, a rampart built against the coast, and inside its narrow walls, the white washed squares, each with a café, each a garden. They like carving Thuya wood there, the air is fragrant with it. Also, the city is usually full of painters. Jacob is a painter. He had been there for a month.

We know all of what happened in Morocco because Jacob came to us, shortly after S---'s body was found, and donated these photos as a strange sort of memorial. He added a few portraits that S--- had taken of him: in them he's always peering at the edge of the landscape through his heavy-rimmed glasses, hands fidgeting around his mouth. He belongs in Brooklyn, and in the photos, he is so utterly overdressed in this little Moroccan beach town in his tight black jeans and T-shirt, it is a wonder he isn't ridiculed by the teenagers that fill the place. His best feature: he squints when he's looking at someone, in a way that feels like already composing your portrait, sucking in his cheeks around his smoke, running his hands through his messy hair.

At the very bottom of the photograph, which was obviously taken on a tripod ten feet away, you can see a pair of fingers reaching out to S---. They are about to touch hands, S--- and this American artist. His name is Jacob Salvador Bigalow. He was gutted by her death. He told us that he wasn't drunk that night. None of them were. They simply stood on the thick forteresse wall, and howled, hard.

Photographs Numbered Two, Three, Four: Different poses on the wall. The Danish boy is beautiful, that flawless Scandinavian skin, and his girlfriend is in her mid-thirties but has maintained a perfect, long-legged figure. They both have dark tans from surfing, whereas Jacob and the French graffiti guy, Daniel, are still pale. S--- is tanned

too, a leftover from the Barcelona beaches, but since arriving in Morocco she's been careful to cover up; she wears jeans and flip flops every day, with shirts that tuck over both shoulders, revealing as little flesh as possible. Now, Jacob skirts his arm around the middle of her back and she cranes her neck to look up at him, grinning, but we can tell from the photo she is about to fall over, almost knocking both of them off the wall.

Photographs Numbered Five, Six:

Earlier that night, over dinner. The rooftop of a former aristocrat's mansion. S--- is in the chair beside Jacob, the five of them share a tagine with almonds, and chicken and raisin couscous, and a whole fish, grilled without the skin and served with lemon and crusty baguette. According to Aina, the Danish girl, they drank two bottles of wine between the five of them, though the woman serving from under her veils made her husband pour it into the glasses. And all night, Jacob told jokes, which he is very good at, making the Danish couple's eyes run with laughter, and he was the one who started the whole howling episode, yelling at the waves from these thick walls, squinting, all knees poking out of his jeans.

Photograph Number Seven:

Jacob pulls S--- off the wall and into the bricked plaza, the light spilling out from the hotels along the water. Tell me something about yourself, he asks her. What are you doing to make yourself happy?

That's a funny question, she says.

You going to let me cut your hair? he asks and S--- nods. And paint you? Why can't I paint you? They've only known each other for four days, but it feels like more.

I'll paint you before I go. In Sidi Ifni, maybe. Are you coming with us down there? And S--- nods again, and he squints back at her. You're an artist. Aren't you, he says.

And S--- nods.

This one is in black and white. It is hard to tell if they're pulling apart or pushing together.

Maison Des Rêves:

Aina, the Danish girl, started filling in some of the gaps from the period when S--- traveled Morocco, and later, after her death, lead us to Jacob, who in turn posted the photographs. Aina and S--- spent afternoons together, when the boys rode camels and took pictures, the girls would go down to the patisserie or just lounge on the rooftop terrace at the Maison Des Rêves, drinking hot mint tea and smoking her hand-rolled tobacco. And they had conversations. They really talked:

I was married at twenty-six, S--- had said, but he was older than me by twelve years. For some reason she had decided to tell Aina the absolute truth, about everything, even running away.

I was married at thirty, the Danish girl admitted. He was an architect.

S--- nodded. That's nice. At least architects are artistic.

The Danish girl shook her bangs over her eyes. He had a secret escape window in our house. I found out, he was running out every night sleeping with boys.

Oh God, S--- said. On the rooftop patio, everything baked, the whicker chairs and ashtrays and little empty cups from tea, dried out at the bottoms.

And he wasn't even smart, the Danish girl said. Was your husband smart?

He's a politician, and a lawyer, a big politician now, S--- confessed. That's why they're looking for me.

Was he boring?

No, S--- told her. He was a bachelor for a long time, from a political family. Conservative. There were reporters at our wedding.

What did you wear? she asked.

Chanel, S--- said, and they both nodded, as if that explained everything about the wedding, the marriage, the reasons she had to leave.

Old Mellah:

That month in Morocco was a sunny. In the photos, S--- was healthy, almost peaceful looking. According to Aina, there were sandwiches on baguettes for fifty cents and sweet little cups of espresso and the International Herald Tribune downstairs every morning. The sky was always clear: Chefchouen, Fez, Essaouira, city by the sea. Jimi Hendrix wrote Castles Made of Sand about Essaouira— it is that lovely at night, with its flickering off the thick stone walls and the plazas lit by lanterns made of mirrors and glass. Every evening they would go to the sea to smoke or talk, the whole town out for an evening stroll once the sun calmed into the dusk. And the sea would change and they would watch it work on the city, beating into the stone of old forteresse and in the salt air on the terraces.

And everyone spoke French and S--- finally felt comfortable in the language, and she conversed easily with all of the people she met, teenage boys, so many young boys on the beach with their beach soccer and their thin little beach fires at sunset, sitting on their

surfboards or just strumming a plastic guitar, singing to S--- in Arabic. They all tried to get her and Aina to smile, such pretty ladies, trop belle, they would say.

They had been in Essaouira for ten days when Jacob decided on a sort of fancy French supper club on the Carré des Artisans, and he wore his motorcycle jacket and the girls wore dresses. That afternoon, S--- had let Jacob design and execute her new haircut. Everybody loved it, gentle around her face but almost punk— short on one side, so close to her skull it bristled under his fingertips.

For dinner, they ate little French hens stuffed with couscous and oranges. They talked about books and bands, and decided to share a taxi to Sidi Ifni, a little desert city that used to be Spanish. The Danes had a connection there, a little house that the boyfriend had rented the winter before from a Berber named Ishmael, and they both spoke excitedly about the surf and the abandoned beaches and the cliffs covered in moss. Daniel told them then that he would not join them the next day, he'd be traveling back to Marrakesh. They fell sort of quiet, then they all touched wine glasses, realizing that this dinner will be their last night all together, that they'd never speak to this French graffiti guy again. So now it was time to ask him questions and for him to recite his little life story before he was all alone again, this strange family forged and lost in days.

Mosque Oqba ben Nafi:

Love scene: The tiled guesthouse room in Essaouira, the little blue door and window in the whitewash enough for a wrist to fit through. Picture this: the day she arrived, the man who handed out the sheets tried to hit S--- up for his daughter's school. She thanked the tout and asked how much for just walking her that far. All the boys on the streets jumping

onto each other's backs, the town joke that weekend, with little plastic whistles someone had strung up and sold between the sandwich shops. Such thick walls. Medina with fountain. From the roof she could see all the way across the giant gate to the sea, and if she leaned over the wall she could peer down into a corner of the mosque, the backs of the men as they knelt for prayers, head to carpet. The sound of waves, whistles. The attendant coming late that night and Jacob at the door trying to dismiss him, a bit of hash burning between his finger and thumb, her bare nipples, red, between the rough cotton of his sheets.

Gare Routière:

Travel day. Up at five the next morning, the four of them sleepy and cracking jokes— jokes with their host when they check out of the guesthouse, jokes when they pay their respective bills, the four of them lugging versions of the same pack, their mussed beds left behind, a few coins left on the pillows, perhaps a few things left in the room, a bottle of unused sunscreen, a finished novel.

And then there is the bus to Agadir, with its broken springs in the seats and a praying driver— tassels around the windshield like a tawdry stage. And then the uneven dirt of a taxi lot, the rows and rows of Mercedes painted turquoise, waiting indefinitely for passengers. They sip Fanta out of glass bottles while Jacob bargains for a cheaper ride. Their driver, when they choose him, sells them a hunk of hash wrapped in an Arabic newspaper. They are three across the back, blowing smoke out the windows, like teenagers, the Danish boy trying to strum a guitar in shotgun, quite out of tune. Morocco

out the window, the brown of the earth and a few bits of brush and the mist shredded to thin air just inland.

And then they pull up to the little town, Sidi Ifni, with its the dusty streets, and they're met on the dusty street by a little boy who knows the way to the surf shop, so off they go, four of them kicking at the dirt and it's past noon by now and they're hungry. So first, they stop in the Nomad, a restaurant with the nicest cook in the world, who gives them fresh bread and coffee and two grilled fish and green salads, and he sits and drinks tea with them when they've finished their meal. And yes, Mohammed knows the very same Ishmael who rents out the house for ten Euros a night and so they call him up and wait another half an hour and share another Coke and a few cigarettes and then the four of them say goodbye to Mohammed and walk with Ishmael to see the house and it is beautiful, with its two little bedrooms downstairs filled with pillows and its central courtyard, open to the sky.

They snooze for an hour, the hottest time of the day now, and Jacob and S--- stretch out on the mattress on the floor, their little ground-floor room painted pink and so much cooler than outside. They kiss naked and then fall asleep for two minutes before Mohammed is knocking on their wooden door. Jacob wakes up laughing.

Within the hour, they're straddling rented surfboards, out in the swell. S--- wears bikini bottoms a little shirt so her top doesn't chafe against the wax. They take turns back flipping off the back of their boards, over the crush of the wash. She's not good at it, but it doesn't matter. The sun is low, the ocean turns to liquid gold and the boys with the camels on the beach drift home, pulling the beasts off by their foamy mouths. Mohammed has paddled back to the beach and he and his pals have started a little fire.

But they can't go in yet so they just sit out on the glassy part on the backs of their boards and reach for each other's fingers on the uplift of the wave, their shoulders aching, happy to just stay and shiver in the dusk, waiting for a surge big enough to carry them all in.

Quartier Español:

Notes on a diminishing city. Caged dove. Crumbling gateway to the Sahara. At dawn, a prayer call down a lane, a daughter's veil slips off a shoulder as she sweeps, swirls at her feet. S--- wakes up at dawn sobbing; Jacob pats her hair and rocks her back to sleep on the thin mattress on the floor.

La Gondola:

Beachside: a cobalt sea, tidal grasses in the pools. So many boys. Boys trying to fish in the pools. Hairless boys that run up and down the length of beach to catch glimpses of S--'s exposed mid-drift, kicking footballs in front of where she and Jacob reading there, each time calling at them to join the game. And in the evening, another fire by the port (scrap wood, old carton) where they grill salted sardines with Mohammed and ten of his friends. They talked about fishing and the port with no work and they ate the sardines with the boys. The oil stains their fingers with stink, their hands greasy and popping in and out of their mouths, sucking the juice out of the little sardine heads.

Jacob told us later that he smelled fish heads on S---'s breath for days. There were days like this, he told us. In the morning, the two of them eating peaches with their juicy mouths, Jacob wrapping her in clean towels, Jacob hollering when she caught a wave. S-- - asleep in the sun, so he could see her heartbeat through the thin skin around her neck:

bird flight, wind up the cliffs, cooling the verandas on the long walk home. There is an old pier, he tells us, collecting himself. Like a gondola leftover from Spanish times. It was a gondola for Spanish cars, to take tourists from Spanish Morocco to the Canary Islands. We walked to it twice between surf sets.

I mistreated her, he says to us in his letter. I let her go.

We picture her walking with him, layer upon layer of beach break just like the Moroccan lady's headscarves, floating nearly to their feet. A long beach walk, some hulking scraps of metal along the tide-line. The boys along the rocks, their long poles flung further and further into the swell. In his final photograph, there is a cliff shaped like an Arabic arch with S---'s gentle body leaning into the hole in the earth. His caption: This is the place where, each day, the rock filled and emptied with tide.

L'Hôtel Mystique:

Then, Milla. She was small and blonde and muscle-tough, and she too loved Jacob. That was all that mattered. According to Aina, the girl appeared after they had been in Sidi Ifni for roughly ten days, and she was traveling alone. Her name, Milla, was a mean German name that means industrious. Her body was just like that (industrious, a working thing) and even in Morocco she was still not afraid of exposing her muscled legs or shoulders in her jean shorts and strappy tank-tops. The men stared but she didn't seem to mind. She had come to Sidi Ifni to find Jacob after meeting him first in Fez and then again in Chefchouen, probably by the little swimming hole where the boys from the medina would dive head-first off the roof into a pool not much bigger than a bathtub. Her English was perfect and she had a light laugh that didn't match her stern body. Remember? she

nudged Jacob when she explained how they met. The bees that day, she said, would not leave us alone, and she giggled and touched his arm and all of them knew immediately that they had been intimate. They were together in that little mountain town.

His face gave nothing away. Even when Milla first walked into the Nomad that morning and she squealed and ran over to him. Aina and S--- left after breakfast and when they had returned from a long beach walk around noon Milla had moved onto the roof of the rented house. Milla was an artist too and when they asked to see her work she showed them a series sketches which to Aina's mind were brilliant and terrifying, all emaciated bodies with enormous, bone-crushing musical instruments.

That night, Milla stayed in the house to sketch and read and S--- and Jacob tried the restaurant in the faded Hôtel Mystique. According to Jacob, their meal together was strained—the two of them poked at a tagine for an hour, not talking but listening to the strange flute and drum haunted the room. Then the owner of the hotel interrupted their meal to introduce them to Ali, a young soccer player making his way up from the Ivory Coast. He was good-looking, black. He played midfield for the town's team. Ali joined them for tea after the owner cleared the plates and he spoke slowly so Jacob could keep up with his stubborn American French. They talked for a long time and Ali told funny stories about how hard it was for him to talk to girls in Morocco. By the end of the night, Jacob had his arm over S---'s shoulder, but by the walk home, he didn't even reach for her hand.

Le Pissoir:

The next morning, S--- woke up alone.

There are such moments, with pearl handles and rusted fittings, to be opened later as if sealing them away could preserve them from sand and sun. Later that afternoon, Ishmael, Jacob, and S--- were stretched out on the rooftop's wicker furniture, the scent of almond biscuits and mint tea wafting up from the kitchen below. Ishmael had brought his daughter over to cook Moroccan lunch for them. A heavy mist had hung over the coastline since their arrival, but that morning, the fog had almost collapsed into the surf to reveal a crisp horizon, over both the sea and dunes to the east.

Ishmael's was a small Moorish house in the Spanish quarter, closed to the street but for a simple blue door. Before their arrival, Ishmael's daughters had decorated the sitting rooms with frayed pillows and mats, and scrubbed the chipped tile with bleach. Ishmael was a merchant. This second house spoke to his wealth.

That day, Ishmael doted on the city like a guide, pointing out the obvious from the rooftop, the abandoned zoo, the cracked and faded Spanish consulate, now devoured by sea salt. S--- excused herself and stood to leave, and Jacob reached for S--- and without thinking, kissed her wrist in passing.

S--- passed Milla on the narrow spiral staircase and made her way to the bathroom under the stairs. The toilet was the only unclean part of the house, the basin always smelling of piss, the stream of fresh water never fully rinsing it clean. She was in full squat when the voice came through the plastic curtain between the bathroom and the hall.

We should talk, the voice said.

And S--- must have known even then who spoke, and she couldn't have been surprised when she finished splashing water into the toilet and opened the curtain and Ishmael was there, waiting. He wanted to talk. Aina, remembering, told us there was a

softness to Ishmael, with his bovine eyes and damp handshake. He leaned in towards S--- his tepid breath thick with the aroma of the Fez tannery, rotten hides hanging bits of flesh.

I know what you want, he said.

S--- tried to push past him.

You want to travel south, he said.

Excusez moi, S--- said.

I can get you a driver, he said, his old eyes filling with salt tears, amphibian and cold.

Really, she said. Or maybe she said nothing.

Outside, the neighbour children were shrieking between kicks at a deflated rubber ball. Upstairs on the rooftop, tea was served by a timid daughter, veiled and glancing at Jacob's tattooed arm and green eyes, and then to Milla's bare shoulders. The small Spanish city stayed quiet below them. Jacob took a photograph of a collapsed archway, covered in faded decals.

You are such a pretty girl. It would be such a pity if you fell into the wrong hands.

S--- shook his hand off of her elbow, but he held fast.

I can help you. For...

She looked at him, knowing.

One kiss, he said.

No, she looked at him dead on. If you want to help me.

Just one.

And then she let him pull her hand up to his parched lips. As if he should be awarded some generosity simply because it was offered in such a suffering city, at the hand of their host, himself, a receding man. But Ishmael did not ebb, he seemed to expand.

Aina was witness to the kiss. She watched quietly from her doorway as S--- backed towards the front door and pushed through.

Tomorrow, I introduce you to my brother, he said to her as she stepped into the street swarming with children. Ishmael, inflated, returned to the rooftop. Aina watched as S--- drew a shawl over each shoulder and looked to the little girls, still tossing hair about, uncovered. But by the time Aina reached the door S--- had vanished. The next day Aina asked her boyfriend if they could leave. This was a city of criminal little secrets, shuttered to the desert wind.

Le Petit Bazaar:

Sidi Ifni, however, is not an easy city to leave. Between the Western Sahara and Morocco is a stretch of disputed desert, a No Man's Land that is quite impenetrable, full of landmines marked by little piles of rocks. The road is paved until the border but to get past that, the way is guarded by dead ends and a series of winding tracks, mostly hugging the coast but occasionally curving inland and through the deeps of desert, brown and rock and all the same. Hitchhiking is impossible through that.

To travel south across the Sahara, tourists also need a visa to enter Mauritania if they are to travel by official means. The visas are only thirty dollars each, but travelers require a yellow fever vaccination and a passport valid for a year, and one may not buy

the visa at the border, but at an Embassy, found only in capital cities. Bribes are not accepted. If you do manage to cross the border and then manage your way across the unsigned, unmapped, terror zone, the road north of Nouâdhibou winds along the coast and if you are lucky you end up 435 kms south in Dakhla, and if you're really lucky you drive straight through.

Once you're in Mauritania, more problems: checkpoints outside of every town and the police acting as if they're military, the guns are that big, hauling everyone off of the bus to take a look at your passport and jotting down the details, every time. An entire country like that. Even if you make it across to the other border, through the desert towns to the Senegalese side, there are exit taxes and official passport stamps required. No.

She would need another way across Mauritania. So S--- must have done the same calculation that we did: Four hours from Sidi Ifni to the border and onto Laâyoune → From Laâyoune to Dakhla, eight hours → Dakhla to Nouâdhibou, eight hours → Nouâdhibou to Nouakchott a mere six hours and the roads are smooth → three and a half hours, finally, from Nouakchott to St-Louis, the border town inside Senegal, a country where she didn't need a visa.

And so, she did what she needed to do:

It must have been ugly, having to go and ask Ishmael for help.

I knew you would find me, he said prophetically when she arrived at his storefront later that morning, she had a bathing suit on under her cotton button-up and he could see the outline of it's pink. She knew how much she wanted to pay but he started with an outrageous price. They drank tea and smoked and sat for a long time talking about it, him rubbing her leg and her saying, Stop it, and he would, for a while.

We can't be sure exactly what price they finally negotiated.

His shop was crowded with copper and tin lamp covers and mirrors and carpets and goatskins hanging from a giant nickel ring. Then Ishmael pulled a box of jewelry out onto the carpet in front of her and he laid out one piece after another, asking her to just put the things she liked in a bowl and they would talk about price later. She wanted to talk about the car, how they were going to get her all the way across, but before long, she was trying on bracelets like the ones she wore at her wedding. In the photos, she has silver on both wrists.

Ishmael dropped a few stones into her bowl, one green and a ruby inlaid on a hanging gold teardrop, beautiful. Then Ishmael's brother and his nephew, a tiny kid of seven, looked in the doorway and the little boy rushed in and plucked up the ruby and none of the men stopped him. Ishmael spoke to his brother in Berber. Alsaïd introduced himself then as the taxi driver, and he looked like a good man but she couldn't be sure, only judging by his spectacles and the kind way he let his son play with such expensive things.

The men spoke for a while and thought and tapped at the teapot and S--- glanced around the room at the hanging lamps and curled her legs under her and leaned back on the pillows for a second, tired. Beside her, in a basket she found two small wire animals, a bird and a fish, each with a little wire door on the side with a latch. She showed them to the boy and they grinned, the two of them.

Then, Alsaïd said suddenly in English: Much of the journey, you'll be hiding.

The little boy gave S--- her ruby back and he fingered another bracelet in the bowl but put it back too.

But I get to get out and breathe, right? She asked first in English, then French. Je veux respirer.

Bien sur, Alsaid said.

And S--- nodded nervously, and they made a show of shaking hands, laughing lightly about it, with the kid looking on.

La Plage Tiznit:

Jacob's final photographs of Morocco: the cliffs a deep red and it was sunset again, the hanging garden on the rock pierced by tiny star blooms. The five of them had promised they would stop when the sun went down to smoke their last bit of hash together before Aina and her boyfriend went north and S--- moved south the next morning. They were tired after a long day out, and by chance as the sun was turning orange and started dropping from the sky, that was the exact moment when Milla's little Beetle failed her and coughed its last cough. The desert was ugly around them, and they still had several kilometers to travel back to Sidi Ifni. But they smoked their spliff and built a squat fire and sat there for a while. Milla started talking about the car— how she had bought it in Casablanca from a bulletin board, from a French board in a French-owned guesthouse on top of a bar. The man had decided to fly to Egypt and didn't want the bug, and knew it was on its last legs. There was an ownership tax, he needed to fake the papers and sell it to another European National; it was bureaucratic and confusing. The man was kind enough to Milla and he traded the bug for a few hundred Euros and a painting. He told her then that it would die and so that when it did, she wasn't surprised.

Jacob had bought some expensive beer from the only Chinese shop in Sidi Ifni, and they drank it warm, squatting in the dirt beside the dead car, quiet now.

Let's all sleep out here, Jacob finally said to break the bit of silence, and S--- shook her head and said, I should leave tomorrow. The arrangements... And she trailed off and Aina plopped down beside her and passed her the joint and they both picked at the fray on the bottom of S---- jeans.

Milla and the Danish boy sat on the hood of the car looking for fish jumping in the water way below the cliffs, both of their hands black from trying to fix the engine, without any good luck. Jacob couldn't sit still, he scoured the desert for little things he could burn, the sun red behind him now and dropping fast.

Then he said: Let's push the car over the cliffs.

The others didn't hear him at first.

C'mon, is this really going to start again? he said. Do we really want to fix it? We could all leave tomorrow, we'll just take the bus, and we could meet you on the other side, in Senegal, in a week, c'mon. What do you think?

Nobody said anything.

When will you ever do something like this again?

Nothing.

It'll be fabulous, we'll take pictures!

And finally Milla perked up, her light laugh, she leaned against the windshield and tossed her head back and slapped at the hood, shouting, Okay! Okay! Let's do it!

They all jumped up then and started pulling things out of the back seat and the trunk, their day packs from their hike up the beach, the hunks of bread and empty soda

bottles, and Milla stripped the dashboard of her funny treasures, a few crystals and an evil eye hanging from the rearview mirror. The sun very low now and their pile of belongings beside their fire, almost embers too, and they all held hands and jumped up on the back of the little Beetle and each said a prayer, a hope for the thing, and they passed the joint once more and then they screamed and jumped up and down and cried out at the sky.

They saw some headlights, and hopped down and waited until the car passed and then they looked at each other and howled again as it drove away, blinking its brakes at them in the twilight.

It didn't take long. Milla popped the Beetle into neutral and they slapped and banged the sides as it went by and they pushed and pushed and the cliff was about forty feet and they had to run the last bit to push it over the edge and then stop themselves so they wouldn't go down with it.

And they let the car sail the whole way down in silence.

It flipped before it crunched on its back on the rocks below.

There was a satisfying crash! Broken glass. Twisted metal. Beautiful.

They didn't notice at the time that Jacob had snap-snap-snapped the photo sequence, and so they looked right away into his digital lens and saw again what they had just seen and then Milla wanted to pick her way down the cliffs to go see the wreckage and take pictures of the tide coming up inside of it, but the way down was too difficult, the night coming now and it was nearly impossible to see even the car down there. Then the smell of gasoline wafted up and they realized collectively that they were guilty of a small oil spill, and then they realized too that someone would be mad at them for wasting the parts and the metal and the walk back to Sidi Ifni would be long in the dark.

But they didn't care.

The wind had picked up from the desert and the sun was gone and the cold air rushed to replace the air that had heated up during the day and it was suddenly cool, their hair whipping around their faces. And they walked with their arms around each other with their blankets and bottles bundled on their shoulders like wild children of the desert, still singing, howling some of them, sure of nothing but filled with impossible joy.



After Morocco, we thought we'd lost her completely.

Eight weeks had whiled away since the night S--- went missing. After Jacob's photos surfaced, we couldn't find a trace of her anywhere for three weeks. Of course, we knew that she had been planning to penetrate the Sahara to descend into sub-Saharan Africa, but we didn't know when and how she had attempted it, or where exactly she would land. The number of hits on our site petered out, photos dried up, and we even lost a number of our Following's members. After all, a woman missing for over two months is rarely found.

At this point, the Following had split into two distinct camps: those who want her to get away, and those who want her detained. Distinguishing between Followers was not always easy. Occasionally, a Follower would be rooting for her, excited by her escape but so full of fear for her safety it became impossible to follow without wishing to intercept. She caused us great excitement, and discomfort, simultaneously. Some among us simply could not stop scrutinizing the chase, secretly terrified and glorified by the idea of her return to her former life, certain that she must face her multitudes of fans, that she must

confront her husband. Poor Husband. Then, there were those of us who wanted him for ourselves.

We should also mention at this point, that there were those among us who did not believe that she even ran away. Using police tracking methods and classic psychology patterns, these Followers established a very convincing case: that S--- had been taken out of the country against her will.

There are certain facts that they used to prove it:

1. The lack of note or goodbye gestures on her part.
2. The missing jewelry and cash was more than originally reported after her departure, and in photos of the crime scene, clothing was strewn about in what could have indicated some sort of struggle.
3. The fact that she had planned a dinner party for that coming weekend, the tenderloin already purchased, the marinade recipe stuck to the fridge.
4. No previous interest in international travel, with the exception of her appreciation for Italian underwear.
5. Her lack of savings.
6. The lack of motivation. Because really, who would leave such a perfect life?

It is easy to say now: we needed something to unite us, and most felt it was some form of ignominy on her part. Some scandal. Among the photos and lingerie and official documents we collected, we hungered for some new, illicit piece of information, some kinky past or mental illness we could use to excite public interest in S--- once again. We had mixed motivations for this desire for smut. Some admitted to having a sense all along

that Husband was profoundly good, with his conservative values and rugby-tough good looks, and we wanted to pinpoint that thing about S--- that was profoundly ‘bad.’ Some thought she was too casual and young. She was too pretty. Some wanted the public to assist in finding her for her own well-being, Africa, of course, being no place to start a new life. Others feared that she would eventually run out of money, and be forced into sort of trouble. We wanted to crack the story before she showed up dead.

It was around this time, week eight, when the rumours of her affair started to surface. At first, the nature of the gossip was so explicit, we held it close, only sharing what snippets we could on our most private of forums, but the information was so visceral, so juicy, it went viral in a matter of days. We admit, at that point there was only speculation, and publicly, we remained wary of the news. Secretly, though, we were thrilled, which may have been why we were so quick to jump on Daniel’s story, even though it sounded so completely outrageous. We wanted to believe that it was true.

Daniel Levi was tall, ugly, and forthright. He contacted us, and though he had neither photographs nor any physical evidence, we were still quick to publish the first interview, earning us millions of hits in the first 48 hours online. S---’s family and close friends claimed slander and hearsay. We wouldn’t listen. We’d nurtured the suspicion all along:

S—had taken a lover.

And Daniel was nineteen years old.

We were, like everyone, scandalized. A sex scandal is defined as “a disgraceful and discreditable sexual relationship that results in damage to one’s reputation.” Fame, as we know, often exposes potential weakness from too much intense public scrutiny.

Famous people are thus more susceptible to scandal; fans love to see the weakness in their supposed idols, and idols often crack under such burdensome adulation.

S---'s popularity, not surprisingly, soared when Daniel surfaced with his story. The details left most of us generally shocked and delighted. Daniel claimed that Husband was boring her. Daniel claimed she suffered from an existential crisis. Daniel claimed that she was an animal in bed, and had even taught him a few tricks. And finally, Daniel claimed that he had dumped her, and she, quote, 'Freaked out and peaced.'

After the video interview on our site, his photo was pasted on newspapers across the country. Husband did not appear for over a week to comment, retreating, instead to a fishing lodge on the isolated North-West Coast. Meanwhile, we all believed Daniel's tale of lust and adultery. We loathed her now, and simultaneously felt more pity for her than ever. Like many to whom things come easily, she must have suffered deeply when she was rejected. It all made sense now; she was afraid for the story to break, and so she fled.

We yearned for every gritty detail. Daniel, thankfully, told all:

The day they met: S---'s lingerie shop was crowded. Two pudgy Mexican sisters in red and black lace ducked in and out of the changing room, snorting. A mother sifted through a table of training bras, the almost-teen girl too afraid and waiting by the door. And, of course, Daniel strutted in, a self-described tall youth with glasses and a sleeve of new tattoos. He just stood there, not touching anything but looking at the purples, the blacks. S--- approached him sweetly and asked if he needed a hand. He muttered: I don't know what she likes.

With one eye on the Mexican sisters, one eye on the teen by the door, she replied: I'm sure we can find something to suit her taste. And S--- smiled, her voice a little loud

over the FM radio. Between her and the tattooed kid was a rack of lace overlay baby-doll tops; he even told us how S--- brushed her fingertips against their thin straps.

She's not really pretty, he said too quietly and she had to lean in towards his face to hear it over the dingle of the little bell on the door; the teen girl outside now, her back against the glass of the window.

What? Her eyes flitted around his mouth, wrapped some silk around her thumb.

It's true, he mumbled. She's terrible to look at.

According to Daniel it wasn't long before they 'got naked' in the shop office. After he walked out without paying for the teddy. After he showed up the next morning before she opened, sitting with his feet under him, waiting against the door. After he asked for her phone number so he could let her know about one of his gigs, and then asked her to go to the show that very night, right across the street, when she had closed up. After she admitted that she was married and he just sort of shrugged and asked if Husband wanted to come too. But Husband was working late, so she did go across the street and tucked herself into a booth and ordered a small plate of pasta and a glass of chardonnay and shook hands with the members of the band before the show.

She kept the booth and the better looking guitar player's girlfriend joined her, and finally after their twelve song set, they all crowded in with three pitchers of lager. That's when she made to leave. She spoke to Husband on her phone outside, tucked behind her collar and shouting above the noise of the sidewalk smokers, but he was going to be another hour, and he was exhausted. Heading straight to bed. So. Seven glasses of wine later, the guitar player started with the Goldschlager and the headliners blew an amp on

the first song and instead of hanging around they ambled across the street to her lingerie shop to smoke a joint. According to Daniel, S--- marveled at these young rock and roll boys, pawing at the assortment of silks, blowing smoke through the holes in the panties. Until they all sort of left except for Daniel.

Standing there, shirtless, his young hairless body, his tender new tattoos. She perched on the edge of the counter and smoked his American Spirits and he recited the story of each small part of the drawing. Such that she leaned in. According to the boy, it was S--- who was the one to reach her hands around his face. And hold it there.

The expected things happened:

He started calling the house. When she picked up, he asked for Husband in a disguised voice, laughing manically when she hissed into the receiver. He showed up at the shop at six and sat in the chair in the office and peeled off her tights as she counted the credit receipts. His smell repulsed her. She rented motel rooms, always using the store's credit card and never for the night but for afternoons, when the sun predictably slanted in from between the heavy drapes. Scratchy sheets, cheap soap. He didn't bother to keep any of the receipts.

Meanwhile, back at her lingerie shop, she hired his friend, Veronique—a natural blonde with fabulous shoes—to whom she confessed everything and who swore by crossing a French manicured nail over her heart, she would never tell. (To her credit, she never did; she remains at large to this day, a small fortune of lingerie in her possession.) He started bringing wine, then bourbon, then blow. His smell turned her on. They took freeways to suburban strip-mall restaurants where they squeezed into booths, legs

intertwined, and drank margarita after margarita, ignoring platters of enchiladas going cold. She was 31 years old. She had been married for six years, seven in June. She was consumed. The tinkle of the shop door: him. The buzz of her phone in her pocket: him. Two half-drunk snifters of Wild Turkey stuck to the register when she opened the shop in the morning: Stupid. Idiotic. Furious with herself for days; what could have been Husband's first clue.

She tried to break up with him only once, Daniel claimed. Two weeks into knowing her, at a punk rock bar. It was three in the afternoon and the place with dirty, that dungy smell of hops and sticky floors. They were doing a sound-check for Daniel's band, and S--- was at the bar, bored, loitering too long at the bar, neglecting the shop, expecting the girl to call any minute overwhelmed.

According to Daniel, just as the drummer was getting ready to go, she dragged him through the Ladies Room door, a dirty thing in itself, covered in layers of black gummy punk stickers.

He followed her in.

I'm dumping you, she said. My life is perfect, you know, without you. He grinned and lifted her up onto the counter and she glared at him but wouldn't look in his eyes, staring instead at the space around his mouth missing bits of whiskers.

You have to stop calling and writing those notes and stopping by the shop, she said. He notices everything, he's going to— She was hissing right in his ear.

He laughed, and reached down her calves to her slip-on shoes and pulled each one off, then kicked open the door and tossed first one, then the other, out into the bar. She

shrieked but didn't jump down, wouldn't press her bare feet to the bathroom floor. My girlfriend is getting jealous too you know, he said. Her face burned. You think you're the only one?

The sound of the drummer thumping through the sound check began: massive bass drum, boot against pedal. Stop it, she shrieked, kicking at him with her bare feet, but he was stronger than her, her arms swinging at him, and he was suddenly behind her now, twisting the tap until she got a lap full of water. The stream of it soaking through her slacks so that she jumped up and ran out into the bar dripping water down her front. Her, furious with him, standing barefoot in the bar's doorway, too angry to even light a smoke; him, on the bar's grungy dance floor, making a game of kicking at her shoes.

Women idols often fall into one of two categories: those who behave like men, and those who are exploited by men. In these terms, it is no wonder that S--- quickly returned to idol status in our minds, becoming once again the object of our "collective worship." Somehow, during her affair with Daniel, she managed to do both.

Daniel told us their relationship lasted three weeks, but it had been the wildest of his life. Their last weekend together, Husband was away for three days in Chicago; Daniel was idling in the driveway when she arrived home from the airport drop-off, his arms full of bags of pink pistachios and four bottles of champagne. He loved her house, he claimed. He immediately steamed every shrimp in the freezer and let them cool outside on the patio as he smoked, moving back and forth out there by himself to music from the living room. That night, he remembered opening the champagne and drinking a mug of it to

himself before he called her outside for a toast. After the second bottle, they yelled along with the television. Den carpet. On the hardwood of the office. And then in the bed. She was a maniac, Daniel told us. The best sex of his life.

They took the fourth bottle between the sheets with the pistachios, and everything was washed in a dirty pink pistachio light, their greasy fingers swiping each other's mouths and all over the pillows, smudging their pink lips up and down each other's chests.

Then they did some blow in the downstairs bathroom, off the vanity, blow off the piano keys. He pressed the C Major key down with the rolled-up bill and the note held. Then she stripped down to her panties and a scarf, lipstick smeared across her neck and curled up hysterical at the foot of the stairs, him standing above her, spilling champagne down her throat. Then in the tub, on top of the drier, because her whole life she had heard about doing it on driers. And then they started on the pills. Neon sky. Daniel dressed in the fuchsia negligee and S--- in nothing but stilettos, sliding off the coffee table, both of them screaming along with Stevie Nicks on the stereo: *LOVING YOU ISN'T THE RIGHT THING TO DO—*

More pills, more booze. There was nothing left to wear.

When the story broke, and Daniel's video-confession went viral, very few skeptics arose among her close friends, and no statement came from Husband or her family. People close to her claimed she had been acting strangely during the three weeks prior to her disappearance, and some blamed a lover, though no one had ever met the young man, Daniel. We analyzed his story, and on the surface it seemed to match up: his description

of her house was accurate, he seemed familiar with the shop. His band-mates, when questioned over the phone, confirmed that Daniel had certainly engaged in a sexual relationship with an older woman, but none of them would positively affirm S---'s identity. No one could refute Daniel's confession, and thus, we had no reason to believe it wasn't true. He signed on for big television interviews, found an agent, shopped around for book-deals and movie-of-the week contracts. In other words, without anyone to stop him, Daniel Levi moved quickly and efficiently into the public eye.

Admittedly, the Following found itself so hungry for news of her whereabouts, we looked to Daniel as some kind of back-story affirmation. He started to disgust us. He started to make her look like a fool. We hated him, sure. But we realize now, at the time we were positively desperate to know her motivation for leaving us behind. And so we admit, we speculated. Invented sometimes. Occasionally creating hypothetical situations to play out the scenarios. Meanwhile we continue to theorize why S--- should want to leave us behind. But even so, understanding why or how she left only brought us so much comfort. Finding her— that was our only relief.

This is how we learned that we were Followers, fans, and in some ways, worshippers.

The term *fan* comes from the Latin *fanaticus*, meaning inspired to frenzy by devotion to a deity. Fans, according to the professionals, create a 'sense of identity out of following the movements of their idol.' We purportedly maintain a *parasocial attraction* with certain stars, whereby our relationship exists only indirectly, via mass media rather than via direct experience. Some fans claim to have a quasi-friendship with their idol, despite the fact that the relationship is one-sided. According to psychologists, even

knowing a celebrity's intimate details can provide sufficient feelings of familiarity and companionship.

Unsurprisingly, the most devoted fans are those who are near polar opposites of the star themselves. Followers are often introverts with extremely active fantasy lives. Supposedly, star-obsession is a defence mechanism whereby lonely people avoid the disappointment of real relationships in favour of idolization. Like religious zealots, true fans are known to worship their idols to the point of destroying them, only to revere them more in death. One expert recently compared our affection for S--- to Christ's first apostles, whereby the idol is followed, killed, and then resurrected after death via the fans' obsessive post-mortem stalking. We take offence to this comparison. We aren't that crazy.

We admit, however, that like other devoted groupies we collect items once belonging to the famous, discuss our idol with like-minded others, and eventually, the most devoted of us, did attempt to infiltrate the life of the star. Like us, fans are known to become "unofficial archivists" of a celebrity's life, documenting comings and goings, back-story, and during times of trauma, take careful note of any detail to relay to the public. In the case of women, this can lead to *Female Group Hysteria*, known first by Frank Sinatra and later by the Beatles when they received thousands of shrieking fans at airports. These young girl-fans often suffered from *emotional contagion reactions* like crying and fainting. Of course, we cannot be compared on this level; none of us has ever fainted. We also know that some lunatic fans dress like their idols, send gifts, even make obscene phone calls. In the case of dangerous fans, experts have identified a certain "pathological love condition" known as *Erotomania*, whereby fans follow in a

threatening manner, thinking their idol loves them back. Thankfully, none of us falls into this category.

But, like most fans, we attempted some form of correspondence with our newly famed S---. Some of us were simply curious, and wanted to know if she missed Canada, or what she was eating, or where she was heading next. Some of us requested items to add to our collection, current photos or discarded garments. And so we wrote her letters and emails, and eventually attempted to track her down. It was innocent, really. Many simply sought to express adulation, to flatter her.

Many of us, though, didn't want to flatter her at all. This is difficult to admit, and it took us a while to articulate, even amongst ourselves. Despite the attention and care we took to documenting her life, each one of us, in some small dose, didn't even respect S---. She repulsed us. Disgusted us. Her behaviour was perilous, out of control, gross.

We know that fans, despite common sense telling us otherwise, tend to expect our idols to transcend our mortal ways. We expect them to be absolutely fucking perfect. And strangely, when they are not perfect, we ogle. We stare. We comment. When they gain ten pounds or look unflattering in a particular photo, or worse, when they are involved in some kind of misconduct, some immoral behaviour, we flock. It makes us feel better, somehow.

It is true that fame exposes weakness— high-pressure situations, claustrophobic attention from the public. But in the Fifties, the press protected its stars: JFK never suffered through an affair scandal, Hemmingway famously bought journalists drinks to cover for punching some lug out in a bar. Now, maybe because we see fame as more

attainable, something we too could get a piece of, we pay our journalists well for dirt. We revel in our seeing our stars stumble.

We seek drug addicts, adulterers, celebrity cum derelicts. S--- earned a mere 100 hits on Google before her flight to Europe, and a staggering 1.5 million the week after her disappearance. Of course, it seems obvious: who is more interesting? The bad-girl runaway than a do-good politician's wife? For all of those disgusting, rebellious, sensational reasons, the more S--- found trouble, the more impossible it was for us to look away. It was a complicated relationship: Idol/Follower. Star and fan.

We worshiped her. Because we hated her. In part, because we hated ourselves.

It should come as no surprise. We grew desperate. As a means of tracking her movements, some of us started dropping small sums of money in Western Union accounts in her name, hoping that if she claimed the cash (which must have grown more and more tempting as her resources dwindled) we could track her whereabouts.

To top our fears, she was heading to Africa. Africa scared us. It was a volatile place, uncertain, poor. It was so unlike the places we had been before. It seemed impossible to penetrate, even with drivers and guides to help her through the throngs of people, crowding every street. We could only summon images of hungry black rapists, thieves and gunmen surrounding her on all sides. We grew more afraid for S--- than ever.

Filled with trepidation, we resorted again to the press. We took out advertisements in newspapers over Europe and Africa, her photo pasted in the odd Liberian or Burkina Faso daily with a public plea for any information witnesses could provide.

But we got nothing.

More nothing. The third month passed and then the fourth. It was as if Daniel's story was so outrageous, it scared all of the people close to S--- and they all clamped up. Or disappeared. Or she was dead. We had no way of knowing. The Canadian winter was settling in hard now and most of us were busy just getting over Christmas and flu season and our own busy existences. Perhaps we would have left her there, in some unknown tropical destination, our own small troubles snuggling in close around us for the long haul through January, March. For many of us, S--- had merely turned into another gaping hole in the threadbare tapestry that made up our lives; another banality, another unfinished *project* we weren't special or talented enough to complete.

Until finally, Everything changed.

Like some weird beacon out of the blackness, she contacted us.

She made contact.

She wrote us. The email was untraceable in terms of location, but it didn't matter.

It was S---, no doubt in our minds. Writing. To. Us.

The email was made up of six brief lines. The tone was formal, careful. The message only relayed to us that she was safe, that she had been careful traveling alone, and that she was in good health. She told us that the story about Daniel, the nineteen year old lover was false. It was true that Daniel Levi was familiar with their home. He had done some landscaping not long ago, and had been allowed in for a drink of water. She also told us to be more wary of these so-called confessions.

She also told us that she admired our hard work, but to be heedful of the string of lovers claiming past affairs. And finally, she asked if we could help her cause.

She needed our help, the way we needed her.

She said: Please respect my desire for privacy. She asked for privacy, but we could not give her that. We were elated, and acted too soon.

We posted the email immediately, and the press caught on; we made front-page headlines from coast to coast. Husband contacted us immediately for the email address, as did the RCMP, as did our members— and just like that, in less than 24 hours, her email, a thoughtful little note addressed to her few dedicated Followers, had turned to national news.

We had ruined it.

And then we ruined it further. In an attempt to apologize, we bombarded her with responses. Each one of us was so excited, we couldn't stop ourselves from writing to her personally, aggressively, often in a tone so exhilarated and furious and unrestrained, we made our one crucial error.

We asked her the one question she didn't want to hear:

Why did you leave?

We never heard from her again.



Nouakchott, Mauritania

Four in the morning and a blackness of sky. The few street lights, nothing but bare bulbs over the doorways of the shops. All of the windows all over Sidi Ifni, all over Morocco, remain boarded. In a few kitchens, the beginnings of tea must be gurgling in tin kettles, only the mothers up and sweeping dust out their back doors. S--- tries to walk on the shadowy side of the lane to Ishmael's shop, tries to ignore the sound from the few animals pawing at the dirt. She hadn't woken her friends to say goodbye, though she had promised that she would.

The door to Ishmael's shop is closed but the lantern inside pours out between the cracks in the shutters. She knocks. Alsaid opens it an inch, and his eyeball shines through. Then he opens up. He looks as if he just woke up himself, the boy asleep in his arms, his face

pressed against his father's shoulder. Behind him, the shape of three bodies on mats sleep in the corner of the room, their breathing slightly lifting and lowering the sheets. We arrived very late, Alsaid says, and tilts his head in the direction of the sleepers. S--- sees a foot poke out from the light blanket and it is the small pink sole of a child.

In the back of the van, there is a container, built into the floor under the back seats in a somewhat ingenious, crude way. There is a seat in front of the trunk so she can not clearly see the driver or his passenger. The wooden trap door to the trunk opens sideways and she has to roll her body to get in and out. The outside walls are covered in carpet. When the door is closed, she has to lie with her knees bent under her with her small pack tucked in the curve of her waist. Inside, it is raw plywood, the smell of urine, splintery. She can not spread her arms to the side. She can not picture three of them in there.

She rolls into the container. He starts the van. The wheels, when they pass by a small scrub brush or dune or over some loose sand, shudder. She can feel it, the back wheels kicking up a brawling dust cloud. The back of the van is dark, inside the trunk is dark and hot and haunted. When they drive between the first check-stops on the Moroccan side of the open highway, Alsaid's boy props the door of the wooden coffin open so that she can stretch out with her head out of the box, out on the floor. The boy knows how to close the latches and how to signal for her to roll back in. S--- calls him the brains behind the operation, and the kid laughs and salutes her like a general.

The first border comes too soon. She has fallen asleep and is woken by the boy pushing her head into the box with his little boot. She rolls inside, and the wood slaps shut. There are soft muffled sounds on the carpet on the outside of the box. She pulls a bandana over her mouth to shield the sharp piss smell and has to breath very slowly so she doesn't feel she will run out of air. Her foot falls asleep under her but she is too scared to shift. Voices move around her. The van door opens. She falls into a terror sleep.

She wakes up with her bandana stuffed in her mouth, to stop herself from screaming. She had been promised she would be allowed out every three hours to breathe. She has no sense of how long she has been in there but she feels cheated out of her three hours. All she knows is that they are moving again and the boy has not come back to open the door. Her foot is dead. She worries that a border patrolman has boarded the van, she hears muffled voices, someone else is there. The compartment is wide enough for her to unbend a leg only slightly, all she can picture over and over is stretching her body all the way up to the van's ceiling. It is an unlikely van. Japanese make. She names every car company she can on her fingers. She was promised she would be allowed out every three hours to breathe. She lists the cars again, then candy bars, then cars. She unbends her leg, one millimeter, and then another.

Angel breath. The door swings open and real, cold air pours in. She has been crying. Hours hadn't passed. They are stopped but Alsaid calls back to her that this is the No Man's Land. Nothing matters here, he says. It has only been an hour. In the back of the van, around her, there are new boxes, a few clinking bottles of booze and a few other

packages wrapped up. She stretches, gloriously. She wiggles on the floor like a snake. Blood seeps back into her feet and it rips up her leg like fire. She reaches her head out beside the door and looks out onto very grey, almost purple desert. She tries to wiggle herself towards the door, but she can't walk. Not yet. Dawn is coming.

Then they wait there another hour for the jeep to arrive. S--- props her feet against the window and bicycles her legs and hums along with the music from the tape deck. Alsaïd, (who she learns later is not Ishmael's brother at all but just a neighbour from the days when the Berbers were nomads, friends of the Kasbah) knows all the words to the song, and he tries to teach a few to the boy. She and the boy take turns lobbing a little rubber ball from the front seat to where she lies on the floor. Then he starts screaming, she tucks her legs and screams too. She rolls into the box and slams the lid shut herself. Her whole body pulsing with it.

She must have passed out, and then woken up. It is getting to be morning now— she can feel the heat of it through the box and she hasn't felt the need to piss yet but now it is infernal, a hellish thing. She refuses to piss there in the container, hiding like a refugee, pissing herself, but all of those little bumps and jostles tear at her like an animal or wind or something stronger than her. They are crossing the mishmash of No Man's Land and that's why she needs to go so badly, maybe fear. When she feels the wheels spin and then spin again under her, reeling, she feels an insane joy. She will have to get out to help push.

The wheels are ankle deep in sand, both front wheels are sunk too and she squats beside them and relieves herself into the dirt, hiding more from the sky than anything. You're fine, Alsaid tells her, No one will see you here, and he watches her piss beside the car. Then, when she is finished he watches as she pulls up her pants and sulks behind the van to help push it out of the ruts. The desert around them, the No Man's Land between the Western Sahara and Morocco, is a snarl of tracks worked into the desert. She would never decipher the correct path by herself. The van is almost hot to touch so she pulls her shirtsleeves over her hands and makes paw-sized prints in the dust. Alsaid has to brush them off with his newspaper. The next border is coming too soon.

Then voices around the container, the opening and closing of the sliding door, boxes being moved around her. A terrible, warming fear. A perfect memory of her high school boyfriend's bed the afternoon they had skipped school and she had hidden under his covers naked when his mother came home. Her shoes were by the door, his mother must have noticed them. Her boyfriend tried to casually shave in the bathroom while S--- hid there under the thick duvet and he spoke to his mother, leaving the bedroom door open so his mother wouldn't suspect. S--- remembers sweating and listening for her, anticipating how at any moment his mother could whip the covers off and find a startled naked teenager. In the coffin S--- stifles a laugh, then catches herself. Nothing is funny about being stuck in the coffin, men's hands around her, ready, at any moment to pull back the sheets.

Crack of light. The boxes that had been stacked around the coffin, half-gone. Morning has come by this point, a searing yellow over the brown of the desert and already, just a couple of hours past daybreak, a hot blue sky. She rolls out of the coffin and twists out her legs and she nods when the boy hands her a small bag of fried plantains. She groans audibly as she stretches out her knees and the boy mimics her and kneels beside her against the door and twists his fingers into her hair. They copy each other's sounds for a moment; it is a game to him. It calms her. The ocean is visible now, they have passed the border into the Sahara and the road is to run all the way down the cliff side, a cobalt blue. She notices the boy's baby teeth when he grins and shakes his head so close to her face; she realizes he is very very young, a bit of drool glinting from his chin.

Then the heat turns wretched. By noon, the boy is dead asleep in the front seat, the air has turned to molten lead, blistering her skin and lips. Each breath is a small wheezing labour, the dry crackling air sucked through her teeth. The metal strips on the bottom of the van grow too hot to touch. The van turns into an oven, the earth heating under them, and only the fierce desert air through the windows to breathe. She starts passing out. Then Alsaid yells, and she wakes with a start, and rolls back into the coffin and the hot blackness devours her again and again until the check-stop has passed or the town is behind them in the dust and again, she can crack open the coffin and breathe more hot air, her hairline wet and her clothing tight and chafing around her. The driver starts playing a type of prayer on a cassette, the voice—a moaning monotone of koranic phrases. A manic vibe settles on the van. She doesn't know, Is this Mauritania? A larger town approaches,

flanked by police check-stops, and she rolls again into the coffin, so sleepy now from the heat she almost welcomes its darkness, its weird foreboding.

And then the boy is gone. A door slams and she hears a tap on the coffin wall and she gulps awake. Time stalls. That strangled darkness. And then the searing crack of light. She rolls out of the coffin and blinks, but she can't see him, the sun blazing into the window and that rush of hot wind. She is soaked around the chest and neck and the boy is gone. She doesn't know his name. When S--- asks Alsaïd first in French and then in English, But he is your son! Where is he? Where did you drop him? Where did he go? He will not answer. He just glances occasionally in the rearview mirror and grins, and S--- knows then that things have turned, that the real Africa is starting now and that she is very, very alone. Out the window, the road hugs the cliffs that fall to the sea, a terrible endless blue thing.

Now, everything has changed.

The road goes on and on like that, a ribbon of road along the edge of a cliff that drops into the ocean. Beautiful, hundreds of miles of it. No Man's Land is behind them and they are in Mauritania now, the borders a confusing thing with territory still disputed, but now, she's certain. And the boy is gone. S--- knows that the coming night will be unfathomably dark after so much bright blue sky and sun. She also knows that they will land in Nouakchott and Alsaïd will sneak her into the basement of a brothel where they will eat food from tin plates with their hands, and then he will drink tea from a hot glass cup and then, without speaking to him, she will have to do what is expected.

Now, everything has changed.

It will begin as a sort of bored strip tease there in the cement room with the curtains over the iron grill covering the window. One item of clothing. Then the next. Then she will have to climb over him and pull his pants to his ankles. He will speak to her in a language she won't understand. Maybe he'll slap her buttocks. Maybe he'll just lay there and she will have to ride him, his loose chest and stomach wagging under her—

She will not sleep that whole night but instead, the next day. She knew how she will climb voluntarily into the coffin and sleep a hot, dreamless sleep and not emerge until she has arrived at the Senegal River. She will stay in there. Perhaps she thinks she will never get out.

At least she will be grateful for the chance to bathe that night, in the basement room of a brothel in Nouakchott, even though washing herself will be part of the garish show, her naked body stripped and used up and deflated now, straddling the pitcher of water in the corner of the room. She might be thankful that she is alive and halfway to safety, that there is a little cube of soap left on the towel from the brothel attendant. It will bring relief the next day, locked in the coffin, sweating blackness. That night, in the corner of a concrete room with the grate over the window and Alsaïd watching her from the bed, she will lather her hair and legs and belly with soap and then spread it under her arms and breasts and under her feet, efficiently. And as she laps the water over herself, she will coo, comforting herself, like a mother bathing an unwieldy child.

The Friends

Teddy: Designed to slip off the shoulders and traditionally fastened under the crotch. Began with bunched lace in the 1880s; the 1980s dabbled in spandex, hugging the figure, to shift away from Art Deco's draping angles. The 1990s gave rise to the thong. Twinned with sheer camisole, in fuchsia, black, silver. Cute little bear. Perfect for the larger figure, the rotund, the less-than-raunchy. Now the teddy world is carved into two distinct camps: baby-doll and swimsuit. One pinching lace and see-through up the belly. The other barely revealing one's silhouette.



Yvette:

We met in Podor, on the banks of the Senegal River, where my husband and I had rented a room in the charming auberge au bord du fleuve. Our second morning, when breakfast was served downstairs on the terrace, she was there.

I'm certain there wasn't anything particularly special about the meal. We drank that horrid Nescafe, and there was a reheated baguette and a few types of jam and the boy had sliced some oranges for us. The town was very small, some dirt streets and an old fort— only a few of the buildings along the quay had been restored. This auberge, with its small gallery and garden on the main floor, was, along with the old Catholic Mission, the finest colonial restoration in the town. We had arrived two days before; my husband was working on a microfinance situation, a Dutch project, and I was traveling along the Senegal River with him. My father had worked for the République, and he had lived not far from here as a young man. Like me, he was trained as a lawyer. Back then, however, we still had colonies where intrepid young men liked to work and find adventure. I was searching around for a few of his old haunts; they struck me as romantic. The whole of Senegal did, really, but perhaps I was seeing the country through his young, dauntless

eyes, before he married and settled down in Lyon and had his children. He had died a few months before. That might have had something to do with my feelings at the time.

Anyhow, the microfinance project was going poorly, and that afternoon, we were supposed to drive out to a few small villages to sort of intimidate the borrowers into paying the organization back. This was quite typical really. Often these people don't think they have to give anything back. Anyhow, it was all quite pointless. The villagers must have seen it in our furtive glances that we had no real intention of pushing anyone around; we were still clearly on their turf. I was simply on vacation. A learning vacation, and a hot one.

The temperatures in Podor were unthinkable. It was only the beginning of March but that meant the hot, dry season was upon us. Even at eight the next morning, we could feel the air spreading thin around us, ready for that infernal climb up the thermometer. I arrived first to the breakfast table and my Husband, freshly shaved, came down the steps after this girl, very beautiful but very tired looking, her face nearly hanging with it. He introduced her as Jeanette. She shook my hand daintily and told me that she had arrived very late the previous night, by boat, if you can believe that. We were certainly the only foreigners in such a small town, and the auberge is very small. I told her I was surprised we didn't wake when she arrived. It was very very late, she told us. She spoke in very nice, very efficient French, with only a slight accent. She did look exhausted, with huge circles under her eyes.

After breakfast was finished, she asked if she could look at our guidebook, and of course, I obliged. It seemed quite reckless of her to not travel with one, and I asked her where she had come from, where she had been traveling. Morocco, she told me, and I

wondered how on earth one travels by boat across the mass of the Sahara, but my husband unwittingly changed the subject.

You can borrow that, for the day, he told her, and he grinned, quite stupidly. I'm sure I shot him a look, though I didn't mean to. She was pretty and he was trying to impress her, I'm sure, but we had planned to do some sort of excursion after the visit to the villages, and I had hoped to read up on the area during the long drive.

Our driver will know where to go, Yvette, he patted my hand. He knew I felt a certain degree of discomfort traveling everywhere in the presence of this tall Senegalese driver, who admitted to having more than one wife, and often hinted at the large tip he would receive for his services. Everyone was looking for something for free out there, isn't that right? Anyhow, I thought of my father, moving around by train and boat, unguided by any book, and I felt a bit better. Yes of course, I insisted, borrow the book. We'll see you at dinner, won't we? The girl nodded and insisted that she needed to rest, she'd sleep most of the day and maybe take a swim later that afternoon, something I warned her quite harshly against, as the floating parasites could debilitate you in moments. She smiled kindly in the face of my warning, and thanked my husband for the invitation out to the villages (Imagine! He must have invited her out to join us before we met the breakfast table, upstairs in the bathroom of all places!) and she politely excused herself from the table. We both watched her climb the stairs, our precious guidebook tucked under one arm.

It was the last we saw of her. Thieves come in all shapes and sizes, I suppose, but my husband was the most hurt that such a lovely girl would betray us, even in a very petty way. That evening's dinner was to be our last in Podor before we returned to Dakar,

and eventually home. The boy prepared a marvelous dish of grilled capitane and roasted vegetables, with a green salad to start, and a sliced apple for desert, and I'm sure it was prepared well, but to me, the fish tasted of sandpaper, the vegetables were like mash. So, to answer your question, she did leave an indelible impression; she left us both incensed.



Nicole:

She wasn't scared, and neither was I. That meant a lot, in Africa, so we traveled together for a while.

I came here to help. I'd been working in a village, a very tiny little place in the slums of Dakar (not the slums, really, but East of the city and that meant poor by even Senegalese standards) and I had been there for 18 months with the Peace Corps, and I was about to completely lose my mind. I was undernourished, eating one or maybe two meals a day (the same Thebuidienne each after noon, a sort of orange, oily fried rice, always with fish but rarely with meat) and I bathed by bucket with the girls from the family home-stay. To make it even tenser, there were two wives in the compound, and they hated each other and they sometimes used me to fight between them, telling me their gossip and throwing stones at each other's dogs.

Some things, though, were quite sweet: like one of the brothers of the family taught me to ride the animal cart, and I collected water with the kids every day. But in general, life in that tiny little village was harsh. I'm from Oklahoma, so I'm used to hot weather, but in my village I couldn't wear shorts (I couldn't even lift up my long skirt to

my knees) and as soon as everybody got to know me, they didn't really explain things any more, they just expected that I'd know everything, like how to eat with my hands and where, along the river, I was supposed to crap. Peace Corps was paying me 200 dollars a month, and sure, my rent with the family was 20, but any time I went into Dakar for peanut butter or internet or anything, I'd blow thirty or fifty bucks. We didn't have electricity. It sucked.

The breaking point, though, was when all that money was stolen by the UNDP for my project. It broke my heart, if you want to know the truth. Everybody thinks the UN is corruption proof, but I'm here to tell you – Nothing in Africa is Corruption-Proof. We were planning on building a nursery school of all things, and the lady who supposedly gave us the thirty thousand dollars to do it actually stole the money and stalled us out. Everybody in the Country Peace Corps office sounded bummed about the whole thing, but they encouraged me to keep teaching kindergarten in one of the huts and leave the school project for the next round of funding, after I left. I know for a fact, the people in that village will never see that school, not the way we planned it out, and it just killed me. I couldn't go on, so I left. A year and a half on a project. Research, surveys, land negotiations with the community, I even hired the teachers for next year. But no. That lady at the UN kept the \$30 000 and I just lost it. I quit.

A few good things did come out of it, though. I learned Wolof, and that meant I could travel around Senegal really easily. And I made a lot of friends in the Peace Corps, and even though I quit and the District Commissioner wanted me to fly home right away, I held on to my plane ticket and was allowed to stay in the area, which is really rare. There are a whole lot of acronyms you pick up working in Peace Corps. Unofficially, I

was considered an ET (or early termination) because I quit before my two years was up, but because I chose to stay in the country, and I didn't want to completely ditch my village, they offered me an FS (or field separation.) I kept my little room in the family compound, I locked my bike and my few books inside, and I took off to St. Louis. I needed a break, some spaghetti, some new clothes. I had some money saved up to travel after I was done anyways, so I just traveled for a bit. I guess I had planned to go back, but I really didn't want to. I was full of mean, angry feelings about the UN stealing that money. And I was embarrassed that the school I had promised everyone wasn't going to happen. That just about wrecked everything.

According to Peace Corps rules, PCV (volunteers) aren't allowed to drive a car or motorcycle or take illegal drugs or get pregnant, even ride a bicycle without a helmet (which is totally absurd, in the villages in West Africa.) Anyways, I hadn't broken any of those rules so far (except the bike helmet, seriously) but I was really cultivating a very strong desire to break a few now, so when I got to St. Louis, I ate a huge meal of pasta and ham and cheese and cream sauce and got a bit tipsy on wine in the hostel with a French family and I ended up staying up late with a man from London, who drove me around on his motorcycle, no helmet, in the middle of the night. It ruled.

The next morning, I packed up my stuff and left. I didn't really feel that compelled to say goodbye to this London guy, so I paid for my room at six am (I was used to these very early mornings from my village) and I tipped the sweet lady with the polio legs who washed the sheets, and I walked all the way to the *gare routière*, way out on the other side of the new town. It felt cool and friendly. The mornings in Senegal are really active, lots of kids getting bathed by their moms in the doorways, and everybody

was really happy when I spoke to them in Wolof. One guy driving a horse-cart proposed to me on the way to the gare, we had this shouting, hilarious conversation. I felt really good, like leaving my village was the right idea. I bought some boiled eggs and bread and I had a tea on the way. Then I jumped into a *sept-place* (these old Peugeot station wagons with a welded a back-bench, they cram at least seven Africans into a *sept-place* for long journeys) and I got the bad seat, right in the back row in the middle, on the hump, but it meant we didn't have to wait for another passenger, and so we took off.

I was heading for the Malian border, but I was sort of loose on that plan. I didn't have a visa or anything. Or any places to stay. I just wanted to get moving, I needed some miles under the wheels. I so devastated about the project failing in my village, I just needed to shake those thoughts. This particular *sept-place* was fast, but the music was brutal, that sort of long moaning Islamic stuff I could never get into. We dropped off two passengers at the turn-off for Podor, and we got out for a tea and a stretch, the driver had to screw some part of the transmission back on, after it had junked out on him an hour ago. It was getting on to noon, and really hot by now. I had made friends with this guy from the back seat, a school teacher who was about my age, heading to Podor to teach, and he introduced me to this crazy French lady who owned a shop on the side of the road, by the turn-off to Podor. That's where I met Marlene. She was in this dirty, crap little shop, waiting for a ride east.

This French lady was so unbelievable, she was dressed like a Senegalese lady but with very blue eyes and missing teeth and that made her look really really old, and she shook my hand in a strong way, a Western way. She spoke to me in very basic Wolof, with a French accent. She had a son in America, she told me, and I looked around her

dirty shop and decided she must not talk to him much. All she was selling was basic Senegalese home stuff: cubes of homemade soap and old wilted peppers and tins of sardines and mayonnaise and bags and bags of peanuts. Nothing imported. She didn't even sell mineral water. Anyways, I drank from the jug in her fridge (by this point, my belly was full of amebas and worms, so a few more wouldn't kill me) and I bought a little pack of biscuits, and Marlene grabbed her pack and jumped in our *sept-place*.

Marlene and I hit it off right away. Except for the French family and the London guy, I had been out of touch with other volunteers and travelers, and I was feeling sort of talkative and she was too. She made a few jokes with the driver in French, which is pretty hard, because he was a very pious man, eventually she got him to change the music. We talked until it tired us both out. I told her everything, especially about my project, and how bummed I was about the funding thing, and then, right beside me, she fell asleep. She apologized later; she told me she was really exhausted from traveling the night before. It was sort of sweet, actually, she was like a little kid, with her mouth open, leaning on my shoulder.

Anyways, we traveled together for the next five days. We had a good time, she spoke great French, and with me and the Wolof, we made a lot of friends. The road along the Senegal River is one of the hottest in the world, and the towns are really bad, but she didn't care, she actually seemed to like it, all that scrub brush and fat, meaty baobabs with their seed pods hanging down like bats. I found it creepy. Goats everywhere, and sad skinny cows and their split-hoof prints between the thorns and pebbles of rock-hard crap. All along the road there were carcasses of cows but they looked dried up, like the buzzards had come and sucked out their blood. They called the area the Sahel, and during

the wet season it was supposed to be green grassland, but the dry season had cracked the soil and the dirt houses looked like they'd crumble, it was so hot. Black plastic bags blew along the ditch beside every town, there was a bit of shade under a mango tree and a couple of ladies selling piles of rice, maybe, but otherwise, the whole place was crap. The road went on forever, just brown and bush. We shared a room one night in Matam, at a squat little hotel called the Oasis, and we got air-con and ate this horrible stringy chicken with the pebbly gizzard still inside, and the next morning early we left for the border. It was only a couple of hundred miles away, but we took a bus, a horrible idea. The motor was burning oil, right beside the driver under a cracked plastic casing, and it leaked the fumes right inside. In an hour our shirts and faces were covered in soot. The sun came in on the other side of the bus, which was a relief, because the windows wouldn't open and it was easily a hundred and twenty out, no AC in the bus. We called it Hell Bus, which is pretty funny considering the driver and the apprentice seemed pretty religious. We stopped twice and they all got out to pray, which gave us a chance to stretch and buy some bags of water and some roasted cassava from the kids. I was pretty used to watching the men pray in public like that, but Marlene stood there sort of entranced as the men dipped their foreheads to the highway. It is kind of beautiful, I guess. It's important to see things like that with fresh eyes.

The bus was crazy-slow though, stopping in every single squat hut, and sometimes at a dust path into the thorns, with a dad waving down the bus from the side of the road and loading up his wife and a goat tied around the legs, or a sack of rice or baskets to sell, all of it taking five or ten minutes, and then we'd bumble a little further down the road until the next set of huts. They had half-buried rubber tires every few

hundred feet, I think to divide the property. Sometimes you'd see a goat on its hind legs reaching up for the leaves of an acacia tree. Otherwise, the landscape was pretty crap. A guy even said that to me, You're rich. Why don't you fly? This is crap. We laughed, and told him we wanted to check it all out, you know, explore. It was a pretty harsh bus ride though. We didn't get to the border at Kidera until six that night. A hundred degrees way past dusk. It was brutal.

That night, even though we were exhausted and filthy, Marlene said she had to try to cross the border before we could crash. To be honest, I was totally wiped out, but she told me that her passport was almost expired and that she needed to go across without a whole bus lining up behind her, listening and watching. She needed to cross alone. Borders are always confusing, and African borders are nuts. If you don't go and find all of the immigration and police offices yourself, you could pretty much cross undetected, with I'm pretty sure is exactly what most Africans do. They just cross.

For foreigners to get into Mali, you need a visa, and neither one of us had one, so we both knew we'd have to bribe at the border. I didn't know, at the time, exactly what her deal was, because (I found this out later) she didn't have a Senegalese stamp, and she didn't want her number written down in their ledger. She wanted to slip in under the radar, for whatever reason. Reasons I guess I understand now, but at the time, she suggested that we go up separately to talk to the border guards, and I reluctantly. We even took different taxis, which makes sense now, but at the time I wanted to save the 2000 Francs. My taxi guy stopped at the Senegalese immigration first, then at the Senegalese police who checked my entry-exit stamps for Senegal, then I went on to cross to the Mali side and paid the guard, an mediumly old guy with a paunch and a greasy

face. He asked for a whole 15 000 Francs, my whole month's rent in the village. But I paid, and he shoved the bills in his front pocket and then gave me a receipt. He told me to check in with immigration in Bamako within five days. Easy.

Marlene met me on the other side, but I had to wait a really long time, like almost an hour, and for me the whole thing only took twenty minutes. The other side of the border was rough, it was night, and the only places awake were the grilled meat places on the side of the road, lit up by lanterns and running generators for their fridges. Only really sketchy men, mostly truck drivers, seemed to hang around, and there were hundreds and hundreds of trucks lined up along the side of the road. Most had guys sleeping under them on little grass mats. I bought a coke from the only lady-vendor I could find, and paid the taxi-guy and I waited under a bare light bulb so Marlene would see me on the dark road. I got a bit freaked, and the lady didn't speak Wolof, and I couldn't figure out if there was a hotel nearby. She kept pointing at the bus office down the road, but I waited for Marlene. Even though you just meet people a few days before, you get this really strong feeling of protection for them when you're traveling like that. A couple of girls, crossing borders at night. I wouldn't have left her there at the border, no matter what.

Anyways, soon as Marlene showed up, she told me what I figured out, that there were only really sketchy hotels in that town, Dbouli, and we had no choice except to take the all-night bus to Bamako. I was so tired, but once we walked the short way to the bus office, I felt a bit better. We bought our tickets for the bus that left at nine. While we waited, we watched Venezuelan soap-operas dubbed over with French. Marlene smoked a lot, which made the men around us stare at her even more. As soon as we took our

seats, she told me she didn't even get stamped. The Malian guy had let her in for 30 000 Francs. No ledger. She seemed really relieved. We'd be in Bamako by morning.

An all-night bus in Africa is something pretty special. In some ways it is like a slow ride towards death, with bumps in the night and nothing but fumes to breathe, but in other ways, it shows the integrity of people who have a whole lot less than anyone else on earth. Africans, in my experience, have a remarkable threshold for discomfort, and they stay chill, under some really grueling circumstances. The babies on the night-bus, for example, were just the sweetest ever, no crying, no wailing like American kids would. All the moms on the bus, big ladies most of them, sort of signaled for us to sit in the middle by them, and they formed a clump in the seats around us, to stand guard over us while we slept. Most of them had babies strapped to them, and they all loved treats, so we tried to buy them all kinds of stuff from the vendor kids, working all night on the sides of the highways. We ate little stale cakes and biscuits and drank bags of water, and at around two we stopped at a concrete roadside place and I ate a giant mound of couscous with goat sauce with a fried fish on top like a crown jewel. The fish was hard from cooking so long in such bad oil, its mouth was fried open. I slept after that, the whole way to Bamako, a weird sweaty daze.

It was morning when we got there; I woke up at the check-stop right outside of the city at sunrise; driving into the capital felt amazing. There were these wide boulevards with leafy trees, and the air was sort of foggy from the pollution; it gave the city a pleasant haze. I was so excited for a shower and a real breakfast, to get off the Hell Bus for good. We took a taxi to a chill little lodge that my friend recommended, with 12

000 Franc rooms and a shady patio and a little pool. I slept most of that day after a cool shower. Clean, in clean sheets.

It was a great week in Bamako. We met a couple of French guys at our lodge and we went out dancing every night. Bamako has the best restaurants according to the Peace Corps volunteers, Chinese food and a really good upstairs pub owned by a Lebanese family that serves amazing pizza and salads and draught beer. The next morning, I woke up feeling great—I had the clerk at our hotel wash all of my clothes, and they finally lost the smell of the village, all that palm oil in my sweat. We walked everywhere, even though it was crazy crazy hot, to museums and pizza places and around the hippodrome. I finally called my mom, and I summoned the nerve, and told her I quit the Peace Corps. She wasn't even that mad. She sent me money for a flight, and I booked my ticket back to Tulsa for three weeks away.

I was relieved and afraid, both. That's one thing I talked about with Marlene a lot, how scared I was of going home after a year and a half in Africa. First, I felt like I had failed at my project, and that everyone at home was going to ask about that, and I didn't know how to explain it to them without feeling sad. Because I loved Senegal, I just hated the corruption, but people have a hard time making that distinction. Also, I realized that I had really adjusted my life to being there, to the noise and the people talking at you all the time, and the energy and the language. Oklahoma suddenly seemed so distant and empty, everybody driving everywhere, worrying about things that seemed shallow to me. And there was no hint of Africa in Oklahoma. By this point, I was dreaming in Wolof. People kept asking me, Are you going to teach people in America our language? And I was so scared to tell them, Nobody cares, nobody in Tulsa wants to learn Wolof. I was

afraid, too, of all of the pressures at home: looking for jobs and applying for grad programs, all the things I was expected to do when I got there, things that don't matter in Africa. People are trying so hard just to live, all of those first-world pressures seem petty.

Anyhow, Marlene and I talked about that a lot. She said that it freaked her out her too, the idea of going back, and she had pictured it many times, the door opening into her big empty house and like a ghost, she said she could watch herself in her old life, drinking a glass of wine alone, eating another dinner in front of the TV, driving on the highway, filling out forms and slips and selling things at her shop, in her free time planning dinner parties and going to the gym and going on all inclusive two-week vacations. We laughed about how far away that felt now, but I was going back to it. I was afraid, most of all, that no one would see what had changed inside me from my time in Africa, but that I had a whole new world of me now, I had seen and learned so much about how to cook fish and collect water and enter a house and greet an elder, all of it was useless in Tulsa. I only had three weeks to enjoy it, so me and one of the French backpackers organized a boat-trip to Timbuktu. I wanted to really fill those last three weeks.

The night before Marlene left to go down south, before the Frenchman and I sailed up the Niger, we all went dancing the Pirate Bar, a place usually full of hookers and old white men, but that night we loved it. Marlene made friends with this hilarious group of Bamako kids, really good dancers even though they were teenagers, and we bought them cokes and they taught me some words in Bambara, and I danced all night with a really cute one, who never tried to kiss me or anything, just wanted to dance.

After she left, the French guy told me who he thought she was, and we checked online, and yup, it was her, but I didn't care. I mean, she seemed really happy to be in Africa, she was really comfortable there, and her life at home sounded so lonely. I guess what she was trying to do was harder than I thought at the time; crossing borders with bribes, hiding from cops, all that. But she was quick to make friends and play with babies, and she took time to make me feel better about my project that didn't work out, and now I think about it, I never heard her complain. We had some hot, dirty, scary nights and we both sort of liked the experience. The saddest thing is that she died over it, over Africa. That's the part that is so devastating, really, because people remember that, and they think Africa killed her, but that's not the way it is. Africa loved her, from what I could tell.



Adama:

She came to me in Sikasso, where I work as a driver. We spoke, but slowly, carefully. I don't speak very good French. My French is very bad. Also, I don't always work as a driver, I'm usually a mechanic. I'm twenty-four years old. I have a son and I'm expecting a daughter. The mother of my children is not my wife yet, but we plan to have a wedding soon, once we've saved the money and she's old enough. She was only fourteen when I first met her, but she looked older. She is a very big girl. Now she's sixteen and her mother says that she's ready, so I'm planning the wedding. To have a good wedding in Mali, you need to put up a big tent, roast a goat, you need a whole group of musicians, some nice clothes. I'm saving my money now, but I expect it'll be over a hundred

thousand Francs, plus the bride-price I must pay to her mother. Too much for just a mechanic, so I work as a driver when I can, whenever my boss offers me the work.

That woman, the woman who you are describing, she said her name was difficult for me to pronounce, so I should call her Mimi. I liked that name so much. For that job, I drove a light blue Mercedes that belongs to my boss, the owner of the mechanics shop, who does work for Monsieur Tapernac, who works in mangos. I believe it was Madame Tapernac who arranged the trip for this woman. She had a very keen idea as to what a tourist should do in Sikasso, and when I picked the white woman up from the Hotel Tata she was nicely dressed and waiting for me. She had a firm handshake like a man. She spoke to me in slow French and even tried a few words in Bambara, which made her laugh more than anything I said. She was very tall and wore a scarf over her hair but when we started to drive she removed the scarf and I saw she had a very strange haircut but a nice wide smile.

I drove her for three days, and she paid me 12 000 the first day and 15 000 the next two days, of which I kept about 4000 per day and the rest I gave to my boss. She also paid for the diesel which I believe came to 18 000 Francs.

The first morning, I first drove her to see the Lebanese doctor at the private clinic on the west side of Sikasso, and I waited under the nice mango tree in the clinic's courtyard while the doctor consulted with her in his office. It took about half an hour. I don't know what they discussed. While they talked I had a conversation with the nurse, who was taking care of a few chickens. We were talking about how much she hated to kill them but she needed to do one that very afternoon.

Then the white woman and I drove to the market so she could buy some fruits, and then out to the Portes de Soudan, a very large cliffy rock formation outside of Sikasso. She was most impressed when, with the help of a local boy, we explored deep inside the cave there and found a man who had been inside praying for three years. The local boy brings him food and the man is inside praying for peace, I told her, and she turned very solemn. The caves are like a mosque for the local boys, and we removed our shoes and I was happy to kneel beside a white woman, who prayed silently inside the cave for a long time.

On the way home that day, I felt a strong desire to tell her of my situation with my first woman. I thought maybe this white woman would assist me after she returned to her country, as I've heard they sometimes do. She causes me so many problems, I told her. She had my baby and now she wants my money, and she tells lies about me. The white woman laughed and said, You have a good job. You should support your children, no matter how many you have. I turned on the radio then, and we started listening to some nice Malian music. White women think they have all the answers. At first, I regretted telling her about my other child, but she was kind about it, and told me not to worry, that if I keep working hard, that God will reward me with a nice, big healthy family. Like I said, my French is not good, but I'm quite sure she said that thing, about God. It stands out, because so few white people love God at all.

The next day I picked her up at eight and we drove to a nearby village to see a family of hippos that very few people ever get to see. I have only seen them once. You must first drive sixty kilometers down the highway towards the border with Côte D'Ivoire, and then into the village, where a local man leads you on his bike (while you

drive behind him in the Mercedes) to a giant rice field. In the middle of the field, you park the Mercedes under a nice tree and the local man takes the white woman into the marsh in his dugout canoe. She didn't have a camera, which was strange. I thought that was the entire reason for the white people to see the hippos, to take a good picture.

When the local man climbed into the back of the canoe, it almost tipped, and she yipped like a pup. Then, when he pushed her away into the reeds and I thought for one second, I hope they come back!

Later that day, I took her to see the waterfalls that were a few kilometers' walk through the smallest of villages. You could hear the children as we drove past their huts and through their fields, singing out Tubabou! Tubabou! Which means white man in Bambara. She waved at all the children, like a sort of star.

At the waterfalls, she decided to swim, and I would have joined her, but I would sink to the bottom like a rock. My mother always told me there were horrible monsters at the bottom of those rivers, and it was evil to swim in them. Now I can't swim, but that is one thing I wish for my son and daughter, to be able to swim as beautifully as the white woman, with long strokes across the top of the water. I admit, I snapped her photo when she was emerging out of the water in her underwear. I'm not sure she noticed. It was a very popular picture between my friends at the shop, but my girlfriend found it on my cell phone one day and erased it. She scolded me for a long time. I had to give her 8000 Francs to make it better. She may be young, but she is tough and big. That is what you need in a good girl.

What was supposed to be her last day, I picked the white woman up at seven, and she had a small bag with her belongings. The owner of the hotel waved goodbye, and I

drove her down the same road we had used the day before, to the border with the Côte D'Ivoire. The border is a very busy place, full of trucks and busy with vendors, mostly Malian. Sikasso is a green place, perfect for farming cassava and corn, and the city is nice and with trees and gardens. But Zégoua is dry and dusty, nothing but roads and trucks and huts. They haven't bothered to plant very much there, and it gets too hot. That's why most people who wish to cross the border travel early.

It wasn't much more than an hour to get to the border driving fast, and I dropped her there next to a vendor with buns and Nescafe for her breakfast. I said good-bye and collected my payment, and shook her hand, again like a man. An hour later, after I had returned the car to the shop, I received a call from a telephone with a Malian SIM card, something she could have picked up for 2000 Francs at any of the bus stations.

On the phone, she told me that she needed me to come back to the border. At first I didn't understand her, my French is really that bad, especially on the phone. That is another thing my wife and children need, to study to speak good French. I couldn't finish my studies because my father died and my girlfriend's father is dead and somebody needed to pay for things. Good French can get you a job whereas working as a mechanic only pays you so much. Maybe 2000 Francs a day. And you have to pay for food and clothes for your family. Obviously, when the white woman offered me an additional 5000 Francs to come and get her, I did. She was very angry on the phone, her voice was high and very upset, but by the time I had arrived and I called her, she was sitting on a bench in the shade with another white woman and they were laughing and eating biscuits, and she told me the Côte D'Ivoire is having problems, the border is closed, and the other woman started making fun of the Mali border guards, saying they are thieves and I didn't

exactly know how to respond so I said nothing and put their bags in the trunk, and we turned around and drove back to Sikasso.

The next day, they phoned me from the same number, and the white woman and her friend asked to meet my girlfriend. They wanted me to drive them to the family compound to look around, and speak to my girlfriend for a while. I didn't know why she would want to talk to a girl who doesn't speak French, who is a big smart girl but after all she is only sixteen, and I told them my girlfriend wouldn't have much to say, but they didn't agree. She said she wanted to meet her anyways. So I took them, early the next afternoon I drove them in the Mercedes to my girlfriend's mother's house. At the time, I admit, I didn't know if I should feel ashamed or proud of the place where I live.

My young boy came to greet us when we first entered the compound. He is a strong boy and looks very much like me, but he's only a baby. Mimi, the taller white woman, lifted him up and wiped his nose and said words to him in English. He is a big heavy boy, and I'm very proud of his fat legs and fat arms. I pinch his arms to make him run around me, saying the word for father in his baby language.

My girlfriend, at first, was very shy. She was squatting over a cooking fire in the corner of the compound, and only put out her hand to meet them before she looked back to her blackened pots. Her mother was a big brave woman though, and soon enough she hoisted up her big fat body and started bossing everyone around; the younger girls had to take the washing off the line and the boys had to go out and find some chairs for the white women to sit on. Then, she started showing the white women around the compound. We were followed by six or seven children, most of whom are my girlfriend's sisters and brothers. Her father, like many men in Mali, had taken two wives, and the one

showing us around was the first wife, and the boss. Once a woman gets to be older here, and has worked hard making healthy babies and food for her Husband, she is rewarded with a long rest, when the second wife takes over and does the cooking and cleaning around the compound. Most often, in the period between wives, the oldest daughters do most of the work, which is why my girlfriend, even though she is only sixteen, is so strong and knows everything there is to know about babies. She has cared for her brothers since she was very small.

My girlfriend's step-mother, or her father's second wife, is not the favoured woman in the compound, but a helper of the first wife. That makes it much easier. If the second wife is favoured, and she is allowed to start a business selling goods in the market, she is not around the compound to do the work of cooking and cleaning and collecting wood. That means the first wife does not get any time to rest until she dies. In my girlfriend's case, her step-mother is not much older than my girlfriend, and she has become very close to the family. She is from a small village, far from Sikasso, and even though this compound is outside of the city, along the river, it is closer to the city life, and was very intimidating for the new wife. She too is expecting her second child, which means the first wife is no longer responsible for making babies. Now she has done her hard work, and she can relax and go into the city to sell a few things in the market, and in this case, she can take the whole afternoon to visit with some curious white women come to visit her compound.

My girlfriend's mother surprised everyone when she started speaking French to the white women. Everyone was relieved, and the white women told us that neither of them spoke French as their first language either, we were all using a language that wasn't

ours. We all laughed, and made a few jokes about the French. Then the white women made a game of learning all the names of all the children in the compound, and then the mother made the children sing a song they had learned in the primary school down the road. Afterwards, the children showed the white women the monkey my girlfriend had bought in the market and tied to a string in the corner of the compound. These white women were very amazed by our little monkey. Then, my girlfriend bravely approached us, and asked in the largest voice she could muster, and in very calm, smart French, if they would like to join the family for our daily meal of groundnut soup and rice. I was very proud. She will soon be my wife, so I can say this, she makes the best groundnut soup in all of Mali. The white women went out for a moment with a few of the children, and they returned with two big bottles of juice and some bananas and three large packages of biscuits, and we shared these European things with our Malian food, the rice and sauce we all share in a large bowl in the center of the room. My girlfriend, shy at first, taught the women how to roll their rice in their hands, and squeeze the sauce out with their fingertips.

We shared a very nice meal. We had some smoked fish in the groundnut soup, and we ate some vegetables the white women did not know the names of. Sometimes, everything you do with white people is like school, you need to teach them so many things, and they ask so many questions. They didn't even know how to eat out of a communal pot. We showed them the technique, and we ate in small rounds, first me and my girlfriend and her mother and the white women, and when they ate their fill, the boys of the compound went next, and then the children. They asked so many questions: Where do you buy your fish? How do you decide who cooks? Where does the leftover food go?

Do you really only eat once a day? There is a fine line between being embarrassed by questions and enjoying talking about yourself.

After our meal, it was almost dark, and the men were returning home to their compounds after working in garages or out on the street. The women felt the urge to say goodbye, but our goodbyes lasted nearly an hour. They talked some more, and the children tugged on their arms, and we told a few more stories and they gave my girlfriend a surprise: a new little pair of pants for our boy. She was so moved, she wouldn't speak, and pursed her lips like she was going to cry. I told her: Say thank you, and she did, very softly. It was very nice.

When I drove them back to the Hotel Tata, they spoke to each other in English, and I couldn't make out what they said about my family. I had some very strange feelings about the money. I wasn't sure what to charge them for the driving, and for the afternoon. It was, in many ways, my work day, and I needed to bring something back to my boss for the use of the Mercedes. I didn't want to ask: please pay me for taking you to meet my family, but the moment came, I had to say something.

Luckily, right when we pulled up to the hotel, the Spanish woman patted my shoulder and said, Thank you Adama, that was very nice, and when her hand lifted, there was 10 000 Francs underneath. I was relieved, and then shocked. In Mali, that was over a week's wage. Is that what it is worth, seeing my girlfriend's family I promised myself I would buy some nice food for my girlfriend's mother, and a few new things for their kitchen. I felt proud again to make such a good amount of money from working with the Mercedes. I said goodbye, and told them it was a pleasure working with them. They left

Sikasso the next day. Like most travelers passing through Sikasso, they wouldn't pass through again.



Soledad:

My mother was a whore. A Spanish whore. We were both of us born in Malaga where sailors and tourists pass through every night. My mother is a pretty woman who had my sister and I very early in her life and we went to school during the day, and she would cook us dinner and put us to bed and then late at night she would service these men.

Mira— I don't know the details. I was at home, I was only a niña and then a teenager and by the time I really knew what was happening, she had quit. My sister and I had a nice childhood, pretty dresses and good rich food everyday for lunch and dinner. Later in life, she spat it back in my face. She told me, Look what I had to do for you! And you throw it all away and turn into a puta gitana! She was full of shame about the direction I was choosing, and that made me angry. One night when I was in my late twenties, we had a vicious fight. I yelled: I never asked you to whore yourself out to strangers! And she cried and I called myself la hija de la gran puta. The truth, though, is that I never judged her for working the way she did. It was hard work, I'm sure it was. She is a difficult woman to get along with now. Her attitudes are very conservative, considering the things she must have seen.

I haven't been home to Spain for three years, and around the time I met Sandy, I was working my way towards Madrid. I had this image of what it would be like to surprise my mother and my sister, and I still think it would be something very special,

popping in on people who think I'll never be back. I think my mother would cry. I picture that most often, my mother bursting into tears. I'm still planning on going home; in fact I'm on my way there now.

I used to be a receptionist, with tight little dresses and painted nails. I worked in Madrid, and I would go drink wine on Saturday nights and I would dance and wear high heels. During my twenties, I thought that was enough for me. I rented a small apartment with my older sister, who worked in an office too, and organized the job for me. She was not such a bitch back then. She would dress up on Saturdays and we would go to the clubs and eat in cafés and it was fun. I was getting chubby. All people do in Spain is eat. I was one of them, ham for lunch, and omelets and calamars and wine and pastries every night. That was really it, not much excitement, just getting a new dress and painting our nails and answering phones and occasionally saving up enough to take the train down to Malaga to visit our mother.

When I met Beto, at a party when I was in my late-twenties, my sister liked him at first and I backed right off. He was a hippie, with his curly long hair and a string of leather around his neck, and he had just been to India and we were all sitting around smoking his new hash. It was an exciting party, I smoked a lot of my sister's cigarettes and she got mad at me, so I moved into the kitchen with two other girls I know, and we danced on the tiles in our high heels and we smoked. Beto came in to the kitchen to get a beer and he brushed next to me and asked me my name and I knew the other girls were listening so I made up a completely fabricated story. I think I told him my name was Veronica and I was an exotic snake dancer. Something like that. It made him laugh, anyways, and the girls shrieked and said, I bet you're a hell of a dancer! But Beto ignored

them and reached around and grabbed my ass and I kissed him. Right there, in front of those girls. Hostia, he fell in love with me then, and a few weeks later I had quit my job and I was driving around in his van, traveling from summer festival to festival, selling the things he had bought in India.

My sister was furious. I hadn't left her enough money for the apartment, for one thing, and our mother was moving to Madrid soon and that meant she would have to move in with my sister. Also, I think she really had liked Beto (who's real name was Humberto, a very stoic name, if you ask me) and she was jealous. Anyways, it was me that Beto loved and when I started living with him in his van I started meeting some wonderful people, hippies and Indians and Israelis and sadhus, women who made jewelry and printed skirts and I bought their flowing hippie clothes and listened to all kinds of music, folk music and Indian music and punk rock, and we made friends with the other vendors and laid out in the sun and spent time selling Beto's things to try to save cash for another trip to India. We drank wine every night. A Japanese girl taught me to cook food on a little camp stove, Japanese noodle soups and steamed vegetables. My skin turned brown and I lost my appetite and I got thin from dancing so much. When we drove on the long highways between festivals, through Andalusia and Aragón, and through the whole País Vasco, he would tell me about India from North to South, the full-moon parties and hot springs and the holy men with their long beards. It was a warm and exciting summer. For my thirtieth birthday I took acid in a field of little flowers by a farm, where we ran around naked and were nudged awake in the morning by the farm dog sniffing under our blankets. I looked young. I think I felt a bit afraid and that's what kept me going.

All that summer, as my hair turned lighter and my legs got strong from lifting boxes and hiking in the hills, we were really liking the hash, smoking it every day. At first it was just giggles and bright colours and heart-racing fun, but after a few months it was making me moody, and I was getting grumpy with Beto and the van. By the fall, most of our friends on the festival circuit had moved down to Morocco, and I was feeling lonely and a bit cramped. One afternoon, we accidentally bumped into my ex-husband on the street in Sevilla, and I had to explain to Beto how we had met in school and fallen in love when we were very stupid and young. René looked nice, but he was a bit fat and dressed in a boring shirt and tie. Beto didn't care that I kept it a secret, my getting married, which surprised me. René (that's my first love) didn't look like he could win back my heart now, and Beto even invited him to the van for a beer. It wasn't until René refused that Beto was sore, and called him a pussy to his face.

By the time the weather was getting really cool, and the summer was definitely over, I had one terrible night, shortly after I found out I was pregnant. I had told Beto the news, and we weren't panicked or anything, we were feeling silly about a baby joining us in the van. I was eating a lot of the soups and greens that the Japanese girl had showed me, and I was feeling very healthy except for my bad moods. We had just finished working a street market in San Sebastian, and we had driven to the outside of town to sleep for the night in a campground owned by a mean French couple. A lot of vendors stayed there but I hated the place, the courtyard was plain and the beer was expensive. We ate thick German schnitzel that night with fried potatoes. There were a few French vendors around, all men, and I went to bed early with a terrible cramp. Later, after Beto had drunk enough beer to put him to sleep, I woke up with a gut-wrenching pain. To put

it plainly, I aborted the baby into a waste-paper basket. Beto wouldn't wake up; it was like he was dead. I cried until morning. A pitiful thing really, bleeding all over a van in the middle of the night.

After that, I was sore. I started to want a few showers and nice meals. Beto felt so bad about losing the baby, he found a place to leave the van for the winter, and he booked us one-way flights to India.

Then things turned wonderful. It was the first of six trips, but that first visit to India, that was completely enchanting, right from the first minute. I had never left Europe before, and I remember landing in Delhi and the madness and heat and smells and crowds of people just outside the doors, even in the middle of the night. Beto was firm with the drivers, but had a lot of connections from his previous trips. We took an old fancy car to our hostel in Paharganj and the clerk woke up and saw Beto and ran to him and touched his feet. It was the first of many times I would see that in India, people really respecting Beto for the money he would spend and the way he treated the locals kindly. We didn't stay long in that wild neighbourhood, but long enough for me to see the banyan tree filled with ribbons and a holy cow painted underneath. It was out of my childhood fantasies, a magical tree and a painted cow. It seemed an omen for a great adventure.

It is hard for me to keep track of all our trips to India, where we started and ended and spent long periods of time. That first visit, we arrived in October and the weather was turning crisp in the mountains, the passes were closing up in Ladakh, so we moved east, and followed the mighty Ganges from the source in Gangotri, where we soaked in the hot springs and stayed in the little wooden rooms hanging off of the cliffs of the Himalaya. Then we followed the autumn weather down to Rishikesh where I started to

learn yoga in an ashram. I remember New Years in Rishikesh, with a group of foreigners, a lovely German man and a couple of Nepali guides on vacation, and we snuck into the Beatles old ashram and climbed up to the roof and played drums and chanted until very late. It was a cool, green forest all around us, full of quiet. We stayed in an ashram on the Ganges, it was one Euro a night, and we ate on the banks of the river and I started to learn to play harmonium and sing classical Indian music. Then, we moved on to Varanasi, and while Beto was out most days buying old saris and drums and instruments to ship back for the summer markets in Spain, I would study music with a distinguished old composer in his studio beside the ghats. The studio was cool and smelled like garum jalub and other sweets the shop downstairs would cook up and sell. I remember getting chubby again in Varanasi, every day stopping at the sweet shop and drinking cup after cup of sweet chai on the ghats. Most of our time in India was that sweet. No real itinerary, just staying long enough to feel comfortable and make a few friends, then moving on to a new city, shipping back what we bought and looking for little artifacts or dresses that would work for the Spanish markets.

I still have the harmonium I bought from that old composer; it's at my sister's apartment in Madrid, where she lives with her boyfriend and her two children and my mother. I call them once every couple of months, and the children sound very nice on the phone, one of them speaking in long articulate sentences, and the other sort of gurgling a few words here and there. A baby boy and an older girl. She emails me their photos sometimes.

Beto doesn't email me any more though, not after the last blowout we had. It was our sixth trip to India, and I needed a break. We had been in Goa for a few months, and

Beto had found this swami with a whole truckload of mushrooms, and so we bought an entire pound and started doing them in little cups of tea, in chocolates, in honey, any way we could think of. The effect was quite serious on my moods, I was smoking too much, and the party scene was just getting started in Goa, the Israelis were pouring in for the big beach raves. I started to feel very paranoid, so I retreated to my friend's house up the coast and tried to meditate and play music and practice yoga, just to calm my head, but it wouldn't stop. I had a sort of buzz, and voices, they wouldn't go away. I quit smoking, and for a while, I was meditating with a crystal on my forehead, then this glass pyramid contraption Beto picked up from a swami for way too much money. Nothing worked. Finally, I bought a train ticket to Dharamsala, where I could visit the Dali Lama's temple and meditate for ten days in silence. For the train ride I took a valium and slept all the way to Pathankot, where I waited only an hour before climbing on a bus up to McLeod Ganj.

It was like medicine, the cool air of the mountains, and all of the Tibetans quietly smiling and letting me go about my business, instead of the Indians always following and asking me questions. I checked in to the mediation center and went into silence. It is only ten days, but I really believe it helps you find your center again. It was a powerful place to sit, and just as I expected, I felt refreshed and healed after the ten days. No drugs, and no Beto, and my mind had cleared.

When I called Beto from Dharamsala, though, he was furious. I hadn't told him exactly where I was going, and he thought I had left for Spain. I cried into the phone: Of course, I told you, I was sick! And he called me a liar and a thief for stealing his money and leaving without telling him goodbye. He must have been very messed up on drugs, I

told him, because I came to him in the morning that I left and told him exactly where I'd be. He hung up on me, and I was devastated. I caught a bus back to the train line and booked an overnight sleeper back to Goa.

When I got there, it was morning, and I had been traveling for a few days, just eating rice and subji on the train and drinking plastic cups of chai. I was exhausted, but still feeling refreshed and calm and almost numb from the ten days of silence. The meditation had taught me not to react, and that troubles pass over us like a storm, and we should try to be peaceful in the face of adversity.

Well, when I walked into our little house in Goa, the place I had picked out with the bougainvillea around the door and the outdoor kitchen, there was another girl there making tea. A young English girl, with long brown legs and little braids in her hair. I started screaming, and I threw the pot of tea from the stove across the kitchen at her. It is a very good thing I missed. Beto came home from the market in that minute and started shouting at me to calm down, that the girl was just a friend, but then the girl started crying and told me in English that she loved him, and I was furious. I was feeling so old and horrid next to this young girl crying for Beto, the worm that he was. *A la gran puta!* I screamed at him. I've only been gone for two weeks and you shack up with this little slut! I couldn't contain my feelings, even after the meditation had left me numb and feeling calm, this was bringing up a fire so bright I couldn't look at it directly. It consumed us both. You left me! he shouted. I love you! I screamed back. I gave you my life! I cried in a heap at his feet. A minute later, after she thought I had calmed down, the English girl tried to slip past me to get to the door and I reached up and tore at her hair. I would have

killed her if Beto hadn't held me back. By this time a crowd of neighbours had assembled in the doorway. Everything in India attracts a crowd.

It was horrible. No apologies, it ended with me storming around the house and picking up my belongings, and then taking a wad of Euros from the place where Beto hid his money and gems in his money belt, and I left. He shouted after me! You're a thief and a daughter of a whore! and other things that hurt because they were true. It was the hardest day of my life, leaving him, and I haven't seen him since. Seven years I was with him. I still think about him every living day.

After I left Beto, I started acting a bit wild. I stayed in India for eight months, way after my visa had run out, and I slept with a few men that I found attractive, even one who started groping me in a bus and I gave up and said, Fine, and he took me to the sleepers in the back and fucked me while we drove at night. They were dark times, I suppose. It is difficult for me to separate the insanity of India and my own shaky sense of reality. There were so many people around me at all times. It would become too overwhelming, so I would lock myself in a guesthouse room for a few days, and then the walls would start crawling and the voices would come back. So out on the streets I would go, and that would calm me down for a while. I had to quit smoking hash and I traveled alone to the ashram where I first learned yoga, in Rishikesh, where the Ganges runs clear. It felt good to stay there for a few months, eating clean food and meditating. I developed a relationship with a yoga teacher there, my first Indian boyfriend. He was skinny and egotistical though, and eventually, I spent the last of my money on some carvings and stones and silver jewelry to sell, a large package that would fit in my pack but would earn

me some good Euros back in Madrid, and I called my mother and she sent me the money to fly back to Spain.

Madrid had no surprises; it was boring, but very stable. By that point the festival season was completely over, and I didn't want to run into Beto at any of our old haunts, so I stayed on my sister's couch until the first of December and then I booked a table at the Christmas market and I sold every last piece of jewelry I had bought in India. It was amazing, like a gift from the cielos, and I made thousands of Euros, better than I had ever done with Beto. I gave a thousand to my sister and she was suddenly nice to me again. I gave a thousand to my mother too—it was the least I could do. She was looking really good that Christmas, and felt energetic and excited by the grandchildren and living in the city. We ate a massive dinner for the 24th, my sister roasted a leg of lamb and we ate prawns and white asparagus and drank several bottles of wine. At midnight, my sister stood up and recited a long toast to the family, and it ended with a cheers to me, about how my life was better without Beto messing me up, and I was so drunk and tired from working that I cried about him over the chocolate and pastries. The little girl came and sat on my lap to make me feel better but I was so upset I knocked my coffee onto her lap and she started screaming. Then my sister shouted at me and I yelled back, Fuck you! and my mother got very mad at me and left the apartment to walk the empty streets and my sister gave me the silent treatment for upsetting her toast. The next few days I stayed out in the streets of Madrid, looking for old friends, watching movies in the theatres. I flew to Bangkok on New Years Eve.

I haven't been back to Spain in three years, which is incredible, considering how many moments I thought: that's it, the money is too tight or I'm too lonely. Mostly,

though, I've realized that I'm never alone, I can look around at any moment and see that I'm surrounded by friends, that people are kind everywhere and love to help, just as I do.

So... Fast forward: From Bangkok, I traveled through Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos and then down to Indonesia. I spent half a year in Bali, then flew to Australia with the things I had bought and I stayed in Sidney for a while selling silver and batiks. The sales were low and the money wasn't good. I had rented a dirty little apartment with a few Kiwis, all selling in the same market. None of us did very well, and no, to answer your question, it didn't bother me at all that I was constantly surrounding myself with young people. I felt I really didn't need to act any particular age, and I look younger now than when I was doing all of those drugs in India. I'm like my mother that way, my skin has stayed taut and smooth. And I laugh a lot which keeps you spry.

After a year and a half or so, I flew back to Bangkok and spent time in Burma. It was beautiful, but tiring, the people so crushed under the regime like that. I stayed with a few families and helped out as much as I could but after all I'm just a vendor, and they didn't have much to sell, so I made my way back to Bangkok, which by this time was feeling like a sort of home. In Bangkok, I always stay in a Japanese guesthouse in Chinatown. It's cheap, and the Japanese guests are kind and quiet and less likely to come back drunk or try to break into my room. It was there in the courtyard, between a few scrubby bonsais, where I met the Israeli who had a racket of vendors operating in Japan. I couldn't imagine ever living in Japan, so I agreed to his scheme, though the money sounded pitiful, he guaranteed an apartment and a temporary visa, and all the girls selling his silver could choose where to live, Tokyo or Kyoto.

I chose Kyoto, and I stayed eight months. I loved it, even though I quickly ditched the Israeli racket and quit selling their junk jewelry. The Israeli didn't mind, as long as I gave up the apartment, so I moved into a very small studio with a hot plate and a microwave, and I started teaching singing and dancing lessons to Japanese girls. I sometimes made money in the streets dressed in a sari and doing some classical Indian dances. I was so thin, I felt fantastic.

Then one night, walking home late past a temple, I heard some very calm chanting inside and some soft stringed instruments, right on the city street. I stayed outside for a while listening, and a young Japanese guy, Tomo, came up to me and introduced himself and noticed my turquoise necklace as an old Tibetan piece. He had been to Tibet, he told me, after traveling overland from Beijing, he had tried to teach English there to young monks, before he was caught with pictures of the Dali Lama and he was asked to leave. Tomo and I made an instant connection. He spoke perfect English and had a short ponytail and freckles. So few people in Japan would ever dare to go to India or Tibet, we went to a noodle house together and ate ramen and drank beer and talked until very late about the various cities he'd traveled through, about India and Nepal. I realized how much I missed it, the chaos and the noise and the spirit in everything. I hadn't slept with a single man in Japan, but that night I went home to Tomo's house and we kissed for a while and I fell asleep for an hour on his single mattress. His apartment was very small but clean, with some gorgeously painted thangkas on the walls. When I woke up around two am, he was smoking a joint, which is very rare for Japan. Tomo was not ordinary though, and I thought of him like a monk or a Tibetan, so I trusted him. I smoked the joint and in a matter of minutes, the voices were back,

shrieking at me. At first I panicked, jumping up and scratching my head, trying to find the door to run away and leave. Tomo held my arm and wouldn't let me run out of his apartment in the middle of the night. Instead, he sat me down and carefully looked into me. He said he understood, he had received the voices too. Tomo took his voices to be messages from the protectors: he encouraged me to interpret their messages, and asked me to tell him what they said. Even though I cried and shook my head, I eventually relaxed enough to recite their words to Tomo.

Well, it sounds crazy, but I had never listened to the voices before. I had always tried to fight it and ignore the rage working up in me. But when I really listened, I heard the voices telling me about Africa. There was this huge hole in my heart, they told me, a giant place that had been calling me all this time. It was begging me to go there. It wasn't like Africa needed me or anything, it's that I needed Africa.

I calmed down after a while and drank some tea and fell asleep again on his mattress, but some strange spell had passed over me and I couldn't shake it. I stayed at Tomo's apartment for the next few days, not wanting to break the magic around me. I felt like everything had changed, overnight. I researched a bit, and found some cities that sounded interesting. Within a week I had given Tomo most of my Japanese belongings, I had sold my harmonium and all of the saris, and I was on a flight to Nairobi.

My life had been like this so far, not really knowing what compelled me to fall in love with a prick like Beto, or to move around the way I did, but I tried to listen to the Universe and only ask for things I need. Once, in Bodhgaya, a very sacred place in India for the Buddhists, I was walking with three friends down a street. One of them said, Oh it's so hot, I wish we had bicycles. The other said, I'd love to be riding a horse right now.

Within a few minutes, there was a boy renting bicycles, calling out to us. We hardly even listened to him, it was just another vendor yelling out to a group of foreigners, until an old man walked by pulling two squat little horses, asking if we wanted a lift. The third one of us said, Look, you both just got what you asked for and you didn't even notice! Be careful what you ask for, and pay attention! he warned me. From then on, I try to ask for things that I really need.

Well, that first night in Nairobi, I asked for protection. I needed it. I had expected the chaos of India or the fun banter of Bangkok, but I was not prepared for River Road. I took the CityHoppa, a local bus, all the way into the downtown, and though the poverty was familiar, the tin shacks and homemade gas stations and baskets floating on the ladies' heads, I wasn't prepared for thirty dollar hotel rooms in the shit-smelling brothels, with wires on the windows and mosquitoes around the drain. I walked for a while with my pack on looking for something like a hostel, and before long I had three men, all drunk, convincing me to follow them, deeper into the downtown, to look at rooms. Finally I landed at the SunnyDaze guesthouse, still twenty dollars a night and filled with Sudanese salesman. It was getting dark. The lady with the register wouldn't let me back outside. She said the streets are far too dangerous at night. She fed me a plate of goat stew and rice and locked me in my room until daybreak. I was terrified.

I stayed up very late that night, alone in that cement room, listening to the bar next door pounding dancehall all night, thinking What am I doing here? This is another planet! But I knew there was a reason the voices had been so loud, so I woke up early, and trekked around the city until I found a bus that would take me inland to Kisumu on Lake Victoria, one of the smaller cities. Soon enough, I had bought a little tent, and was

traveling from campground to campground with a very mellow Dutch girl who had worked as a guide all through Kenya, and knew some very lovely spots. Hell's Gate. Lamu. Navaisha. Masai Mara. It was stunning, all of it, and a deeper experience than my six winters in India, in many ways.

Fast forward again. Now, I've been in Africa for five months. I had wanted to travel over land from East to West, but I won't move through war. The Sudan, the Congo. Even I draw the line there. So, to get to West Africa I had to take a very expensive flight from the Nairobi to Lagos to Accra. As soon as I got off the plane, I could feel the difference between West Africa and East Africa. The people are darker, less Somali or Swahili looking and more African American, and they are quicker to laugh, and quicker to touch you. The weather turned sticky and humid, and I could move around the cities after dark, even though these countries were poorer and less stable, the nights were open to me again.

My first impression was Accra, Ghana, a sprawling mass of an Africa capital right on the ocean. At first, it was that same madness of Nairobi, the press of the markets and the buses falling apart on the roads, filled with the stink of humans pressed too close. But then, I started to talk to people, not just ignore them. Once I started to listen, I heard everybody on the streets was talking and joking with me, not pushing me for anything, just laughing at me in a good hearted way. The streets were full of energy, everybody pours out of their houses first thing in the morning and they just fill the streets, even if they have nothing to do there. It was getting so hot on the coast, and the women, some very big African women, loved to feed me, fried plantains and sesame sweets, and they loved to sell me their cloth to make into skirts. When I started wearing a few tailored

African dresses, the people warmed up even more. They called me Sister. They handed me their babies on the street just to have a visit. I spent a lot of time on storefront stoops, drinking sodas and eating peanuts and chatting with the vendors. Something about Accra was also very cosmopolitan; I saw movie screenings and museums. I stayed for two weeks in a guesthouse on the water, owned by a Ghanaian-British couple, who cared for me a great deal.

Then I started moving again, fast, for no reason except that I felt I should move. I bussed up through the center of Ghana, from Tamale to the border with Burkina Faso, and over into Mali, originally headed towards Dakar, in Senegal. Then suddenly, one night in Sikasso, getting ready to travel up through the Sahel, I had a strange feeling that, as things got more and more like the desert, the less I liked them. I craved the green of the coastline, the humidity, the music wafting along the beach restaurants. I was also getting closer to Spain, which I'm sure subconsciously affected me a lot. So that morning I just decided, No. I'm switching directions and traveling back down into the Côte D'Ivoire. I'm going back to the beach, to that feeling I felt when I first arrived in Accra.

That morning, after early breakfast, while I was finding the right bus in the gare routière, and waiting on the bus for the requisite hour before we got moving, I had very strange feelings. For one thing, the conflict in the Côte D'Ivoire had taken place mostly in the North, where I planned to travel. Also, there had been talk that week of delaying the elections, which always makes intense places even more emotional, and volatile. Mali and the Côte D'Ivoire have good relations, but you can easily get into trouble at a little border crossing like Zégoua. The fact that Zégoua saw so few tourists could work for a foreigner, or against her. They would be unused to basic tourist visa protocol, so they

could just wave you through, or charge the proper amount, or they could come out of nowhere with some ludicrous bribe, because the officer had no precedent. They just came up with some number. Anyways, as I was approaching, I was really building up my nerves, reminding myself of what I would say, and watching for a woman with kids who I could tag along with, as a sort of guide through the police checks and immigration.

It appeared though, when I pulled up to Zégoua in the bus, that there was some sort of problem. There were several buses parked on the Malian side, and a crowd of what easily could have been a few hundred people congregated around some sort of immigration office. That scared me, if only a little. That's one lesson I've learned traveling alone, you avoid big crowds, especially in politically charged areas.

After a good look at the crowd, I noticed another white woman, right near the front of the crowd. It was a bit of a surprise; there aren't many women just traveling, especially alone, with no obvious fixer or driver helping her out, so I assumed she was an NGO or UN worker in the area. She was having a fierce argument with one of the guards, and people were listening. It looked fiery, then the next moment, it looked like she was laughing. I noticed plenty of bored truck drivers hanging around the outskirts of the mob, smoking and chatting amongst themselves, in no obvious rush, looking like they'd been at a standstill for days. I asked a few men, and one who spoke a bit of French told me that that my suspicion was right, the border was closed. For how long? I asked, and they all shrugged. They had postponed the elections by another six months. All of the borders in and out of the Côte D'Ivoire would be closed indefinitely. They pointed at the other white woman, and I said, No, I don't know her. The man who spoke French translated for his friend: You thought you were the only foreigner crossing today? And I shrugged. I don't

know, I said back. She needs your help, the man said. And I looked at both of them, and saw the look on their faces was real concern. So I shimmied through the crowd towards her.

Her expression when she saw me was first terror, then relief. I am a short woman, with dark curly hair and I'm a little pudgy at the moment. Hardly intimidating. Her eyes flicked on and off me; she was obviously distracted. I'm having a very big problem, she shouted in English, over the crowd and loud enough for the guard behind her to hear. They have my passport, she said. She was very nervous. Her hands were trying to squeeze between the bars at the small Malian immigration office. She was going to grab the passport from the desk if she could reach it. I could barely see the guard in the dim light of the office. The crowd around her surged.

She was very tall, paler than me, with a short haircut obviously dyed darker than her natural colour. Her figure was lean, and she wore well-fit jeans and a wide-neck t-shirt with a tiger on it. Slightly punk rock, and very unlike people who work for the UN. People around her shouted in various languages at the guard, individuals who obviously wanted their passports or IDs back too, and the hold-up was causing a serious commotion. Someone pushed her from behind, but she stood her ground. I need my passport back! She shouted at them again, this time in French. If I'm not leaving the country, you can't take it.

The woman beside her started smacking some keys against the bars on the window, and the noise got a bit scary. The crowd pressed into her, and she looked at me then we moved aside, realizing things at the window could get tense very quickly. We took a few steps away from the window and the crowd and she relaxed a bit and we had a

quick conference about what to do, and even though we hadn't introduced ourselves, didn't know anything about each other, we decided she needed to bribe the officials. I convinced her that the guard would give her a quiet opportunity to do it, because they knew she had more money than the Africans. I had a feeling they were holding onto her passport for money, and for no other reason. I told her that, but I could tell she was very nervous and sweating and nearly crying. Her breath was fast. I know that feeling, how quickly things can elevate into a near emergency, especially when you're alone, you don't know if they'll throw you in jail and nobody would know anything about it.

It was hard to calm her down, but we moved to the side of the building and lit a couple of cigarettes and she paced around a bit and said she felt better. She said she was very glad that I had come up to help. She told me her name was Sandy. I told her my name and we snickered a bit about how we wouldn't be leaving Mali, and we called the border guards turkeys for taking her passport even though the border was closed. She didn't have a proper visa, she told me, which is why they had the right to keep it. That was a pretty typical scenario. They can't bribe you out of your money if you have done everything right, but if you do one little thing wrong, they can nail you. She started pacing again, really upset.

Then, another guard came around the corner and told her the Captain was ready to speak with her, and she looked at me and of course I followed her to the door around back. The building had only two rooms, one with the window facing the crowd, and a back room that served as an office. Their office had a dirt floor and was only lit by a blaring TV, a Nigerian soap opera dubbed in French; there were three other officers sitting in chairs made from rebar and plastic webbing, watching the TV. On the table in

the center of the room, three or four giant books laid open, covered with ink in organized lines, the few hundred people who pass through the border each day, their names and nationalities.

We put out our cigarettes outside, but in the office, two of the officers, in threadbare uniform shirts, were smoking. They all glared at her. You could hear the crowd in the front of the building still yelling through the window. The smokers in the back paid no attention.

Why don't you have a visa? the Captain asked. He was a heavier, lighter skinned man in acrylic track pants and a newer uniform shirt, undone to the second button. He was sweating around his brow. The tin roof on the office was making the inside very hot.

I didn't know I needed one, she said back. I think she was lying. She must have realized it sounded silly, because she added: At the border they gave me this receipt and said that was enough for thirty days.

You need a visa, the Captain said.

I know that now, she said. I'm terribly sorry. I thought this was all I needed— this receipt. She flashed a strip of paper and looked at me. There aren't any posters around here that would tell you what to do, I added.

Show her your passport, the officer told me. You have a visa, don't you?

I reluctantly unzipped my money-belt from under the waist of my skirt and pulled out my Spanish passport. He flipped it open and looked at a lot of my stamps and visas; that passport was nearly full. He eventually found my visa, it took up a whole page, but it was the real thing, a proper Malian visa I had obtained in Accra. It was official. He

nodded and showed it to her. You need one of these, he said, stabbing the visa with his finger.

I didn't know! she nearly yelled. How was I supposed to know?

The officer looked another one of the patrolmen and they shook their heads.

She took it as her cue and sighed, exasperated. Finally she spoke very quietly: I really didn't understand. I'm so very sorry, if there is anything I can do...

The Captain took one step outside the door and she followed. I saw him half clapping half brushing his hands together, which I took to mean, Now you can grease this situation, and she carefully slipped him a few bills; later she told me it was ten thousand Francs, something like 15 Euros. She had her passport back in less than a minute.

Then the officers became our best friends, just like that. One of them clapped me on the back and handed my passport back. They walked us outside and pointed to where we needed to catch a mini-bus back to Sikasso. Suzanne's hands were shaking a little, but she pulled out a cigarette and the Captain lit it for her with a box of wooden matches. Then she offered him a smoke and he took it. We said goodbye and shrugged away. My heart was thumping; I can't imagine what she felt. We heard the officers talking behind us, and one of them made a kissing noise over the sound of the trumpeting television, the crowd at the front window still calling into the office through the bars.

It took me a long time to calm down. As we waited for her friend, the driver to come, we smoked cigarettes and chatted lightly about what we had thought we would do in the Côte D'Ivoire, and what we would do now we were stuck in Mali— but under it all we were very nervous.

We needed to sit down, so we found a bench in front of a dry goods shop, a shack really. The day was getting very hot. The longer we waited, the more it looked like she was going to faint, so I bought her a small bag of biscuits and then a greasy omelette from a woman bent over some coals, with a few jars of jam and margarine in front of her. We were quiet for a while, until a group of young girls approached us, each of them with a tin tray on their heads and a few bruised pieces of fruit. We talked with these girls for a long time, I took their pictures and bought all of the things they had to sell. That's when she started letting me in on pieces of her story.

Over the next few weeks, we spent most of our time talking this way, frankly, with no reason to fabricate. We told each other everything. But unfortunately, to answer your questions, I'm not sure I can isolate one exact reason why she left her home. We don't work like that. Maybe she just asked the universe for a way out, and the universe just found it for her—I don't know. I don't know why we chose Africa. Sometimes I think Africa chooses us.



Phyllis:

I notice things. I'm a writer, and a friend. I'm a member of the Following too, but I've been reluctant to relay all of the details. In fact, I'm reluctant to write all of this down but I feel I should because I'm more observant than some of the people close to her. We were very close friends for most of my life. Since I met her, I noticed the energy around her would swirl like a storm whenever she walked into a room. The night I first noticed something was wrong, it had shifted into a full-scale squall.

The dinner party started promptly at seven o'clock with a long door chime, a row of black and silver sedans lined up between the snow banks. I had baked a tiramisu reeking of booze. Jane arranged the salad in the kitchen even though she should have prepared it at home, poking around someone else's cupboards for good oil. The hostess, my younger sister Liz, has a big garish house with a sweeping marble foyer and giant oak door. She likes to play music from the built-in speakers just a notch too loud. I'm a writer. I notice these things. The wind with its whistle, between the lonesome houses. Almost human, pathetically not.

That night, S--- arrived late, in her own car. Husband greeted her with a kiss on the crown of her head as she yanked off her slushy boots, and made a weak joke about the smell of lamb. Nothing is funny about lamb, Jane said. Jane was having one of those nights.

In the kitchen, Liz poured her a slopping glass of Chardonnay that S--- took into the den, where she chatted with the other husbands, assembled around the game in its final moments. Jane's husband, Frank, watched her lift her wine to her lips and smiled at her. The tray of puff pastries slowly emptied and the television stadium erupted in dim cheers. Finally, Liz stepped into the doorway and called us to the table.

It was when S--- lingered in the kitchen for an extra moment, that's when I heard Frank say to her: Let's get out of here baby. His voice was low enough he must have thought I didn't hear. *Baby*, he said again. I couldn't see her reaction, or how she wormed her way out. Back at the table, S--- sent me a look and then draped a napkin over her lap, both of us knowing that if she left with him, they wouldn't come back.

Just days before she left, S--- called me crying, huddled in the corner of her bedroom, a vase holding branches of pussy willows shattered around her feet. It is my fault, she told me. I kicked it on purpose. This was the closest I ever felt to S---, when she would call me on the phone, crying. This time, I knew it had been Frank. They were having an affair. Last night was proof. I just couldn't bring myself to ask.

According to S---, she had been standing there for ten minutes staring at the broken vase before she called. Even now, I can picture their master bedroom: the pewter-framed photo of Husband manning second base as a sophomore, hanging above the pussy willows. Beside it, his glove, the autographed ball, the uniform smudged and framed. A winner.

To be honest, I thought she was just overworked, those long hours at the shop and her spare time in front of the blinking screen, her unfinished catalogue of lingerie, Husband's publisher friend still waiting for her manuscript pages. I was reading some of the writing for her. It was very good. Very visual. Looking back, I realize it could have been any number of things. The house. The hormone shots. The nightly creams and temperature taking and ovulation days. They were trying to have a baby— I haven't told anyone that yet, I was too afraid they would blame everything on the hormones.

Maybe it's just time to redecorate? I offered. And she said, What? What! Which I took to mean, you can't throw away everything that is his: his baccarat paperweight, his stout oak desk, the vase itself, a wedding gift from his realtor-aunt from Maine, now in ceramic shards all over his walnut floor. Over the receiver I could almost hear her stomping around on it, grinding pieces into the throw rug, into the bottoms of her leather

pumps. You want me to come over? I offered again. That was when she hung up, and wouldn't answer when I called back.

I wish I were a better friend. I had hoped she calmed down on her own, or perhaps Husband soothed her frayed nerves that afternoon. I picture her there, even now, flipping off her high heels and lowering her body to the wood of her bedroom floor, those bits of ceramic poking into her chest, her hands. Perhaps Husband finishes his shower then, the sounds of drying off, but she's lying there. Her cheek cooling against the walnut. The vase has exploded everywhere — a pussy willow mess. And she's sprawled on the ground watching the invisible seeds from the pussy willows, squirming their way between the cracks in the hardwood.

Earlier that month, a particularly sad and sunny afternoon, S--- called me in another kind of panic. She had been in the supermarket, her basket full of fennel, camembert, blueberries, and a jug of balsamic vinegar. I only know because she repeated the list to me twice, her voice full of dread. Everything was fine, she told me, until suddenly, she was lost— staring at the rows and rows of crackers, the names of them getting muddled, none of them recognizable.

At that very minute, Husband appeared from behind her and skirted a hand around her waist, took the bottles and basket and set them on the ground. Hello Silly! he said.

She almost screamed. His tie was loosened and his face flushed from the cold outside.

Oh. You, she managed. He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she reached for his neck and he let her hang there for a second, swaying her back and forth like a

child. Thank God you came, she said eventually, actually giggling. It's the hormones, she told him, they make me so stupid.

Then he reached for a yellow box of crackers from the shelf and placed it carefully beside the blueberries, the cheese. And everything was perfect, she sobbed to me on the phone, the way he just lead her down the aisle, the way he laughed with the checkout girl and paid with his gold card, how his had his hand rested over the small of her back, guiding her out the sliding doors—

Grey grey morning.

Pots of English Breakfast at Jane's house with a chubby danish; one bite into the cherry and the whole thing fell splat on the floor. No tears, just Jane asking over and over what the hell could be so wrong. I think S--- was going to confess to her then that she'd slept with Frank. It was an ugly scene: the sky outside almost white, the naked trees and dirt-crusting snow in the yard, trampled with footprints and littered with the legs and heads of dolls, the kitchen table covered in crumbs from the girls Jane had just sent off to grades one and three. S--- dropped her head onto the table. I rubbed her back and waited. I noticed things: the television twittering in the next room, the package of meat on the counter defrosting, that lingering smell of spoiled milk.

Then, I looked at her from across the table, and I almost couldn't bare it. Here eyes said it all. There are so many ways to hurt yourself: starvation, deprivation, paper-cuts, whipping yourself with the hair-dryer cord, or something trickier, like water-boarding—you only need an inch of water, that should be easy enough—or free-basing, breech twins, rug burn, crawling over razor wire in pantyhose and a miniskirt, or you

could just leap from the Mercer Bridge, an undead Cherry Splat on the concrete below; you could get thrown in to the drunk-tank, get whiplash, or a stiletto heel through an eye socket, through a lung; rat poison, slug poison, or just go straight through to lobotomy, mastectomy, or overdose for Christ's sake, of all of the options by far the most satisfying, just that whirling buzz to blackness—

God Phyllis, she whispered to me, and Jane pulled the bottle of cognac out of the cupboard and poured three fat snifters beside the lukewarm cups of tea. The audience on the television purred. Jane wrapped her arms around S---'s middle, mumbling, It's okay honey, it's okay... But only saying the words, not comforting anyone at all.

The afternoon that Husband returned home from New York, I think that was what broke her. S--- was re-doing her bedroom, and she had decided to throw away the entire bed set, the duvet, the sheets, the lampshades, the throw pillows, even the mattress cover. I think this had something to do with her bad feelings about sleeping with Frank in her Husband's bed. She had been in department stores all day, finally landing on a classic burgundy and taupe rather than the cream eyelet set from before. She called me from the car on the way to the airport, she smoked four Marlboros out the window then spilled Dolce and Gabbana on the passenger seat to smother the smell. I suggested she rub concealer under her eyes to erase the purple circles the sleepless nights had etched there, and perk up her cheeks with bronzer.

But when he arrived! She told me she almost cried. S--- let out some small animal sound and threw herself around his neck and he laughed, and in the car on the way home shocked her when they'd stalled at a light. A pendant necklace in a long velvet box.

Tears sprang up so that she had to sniff and wipe her forehead for a second before she could drive. And he loved the new sheets, the feel of the room now she'd changed the colors. And he wanted to cook that night, some special ingredients snuck on his checked luggage, a giant block of Locatelli Romano and those Turkish red chili flakes from the deli they loved in New York, all laid out between his tousled shirts smelling of musk and meetings. And the way he slowly lowered her to the pillows and sniffed around her neck, her collarbone, so carefully pushing each button on her blouse through the slitted buttonhole, the tears streaming out the sides of her eyes and running into her ears now, and him just wiping them away with the backs of his fingers, kissing the thin skin over her ribcage again and again and then laughing at her tears, then pressing his mouth against hers, his tongue against her teeth, the whiskers curving over his lip like needles, suddenly too sharp, too many of them, too much—

I'm a writer. I project possible outcomes. I think of narrative arcs and motivations most importantly, climaxes. She didn't have to run away, really. There are so many other ways it could have ended.

Jane didn't know; it could have remained a secret. Or she could have confessed, and made amends, or branded the word Adulterer into the flesh of her ass just to be dramatic. She could have bought Jane a new car that said Sorry Sorry Sorry in its revving engine. She could have tortured herself, tying each of her teeth to the doorknob with strings, then slam the door, making herself toothless and unlovable by anyone. She could have forgotten the whole thing and stopped with the fertility drugs and just face it that she and Husband wouldn't make that perfect little second-baseman. Or worse: She could

have woken up a week after New York, after six unsuccessful meditation sessions at the local Zen Center, after three near-dead love-making sessions with Husband, and three sixty-dollar bottles of Malbec followed by bed at four in the afternoon. Pregnant. She could have woken up instantly with the knowledge. Nauseatingly. Parasitically. Little blue stick and all of that. She could have called the shop-girl to cover her and booked an appointment later that afternoon with the family physician, drifting in and out of the closet thinking: maternity. Thinking: finally, fantastic. This dress will work for a while. I'll need new pants. I'll have to start yoga. Fine. She could have called Husband twice and then both times hung up, then steered towards the burgundy bed sheets where she stayed for hours. Then, while he was in the shower: the pussy willow catastrophe.

That's when she called me, and swore me to secrecy. Of course, I had no proof about the affair with Frank, but it occurred to me, it could have been his. He did call her Baby. Baby he called her.

I haven't told anyone that information.

I knew, before she left, that she was pregnant.

I'll be stuck, forever, of that image of her, the day she found out. S--- sprawled out on the walnut floor of Husband's bedroom, watching the pussy willow seeds grow roots to push up and sprout. That whistle of the wind between the houses. Almost human, pathetically not.

The Following

Brassiere: Petal-soft. Hook and Eye. From the Old French word for ‘arm protector’. When the corset split into a girdle and a bra—invented a means to add shape, hide nipples. Making mountains out of mole-hills. Attached behind the back. Every boy took notes on the Creepy Reach-Around, release the beast, let them tumble forth. A political statement during the 1960s, burned in garbage bins next to pictures of slaughtered cows. The Push-Up. The Daisy Cup. The milk-maid overflowing her bucket. Creamy white cleavage. Double D. Filled to the brim with breast.



We were thunderstruck. Pregnant!

The questions on the comment boards started pouring in. Was she crazy? Was she going to stay? In Africa? Is that kidnapping? Can you kidnap an unborn child? Where was she now?

We didn't have much to go on at first, so we hounded our secondary sources for any morsel, any tidbit we could use to corroborate Phyllis' somewhat cryptic story.

It wasn't long before we struck gold. Our train of research proceeded as follows: first, the French woman, Yvette, blabbered about her missing guidebook, and gave us the crucial information that 1. She was spotted in Podor, Senegal, and 2. She had crossed the Senegal River by boat from Mauritania. That led us on a very stringent Google search in the area, where we spotted a blog from a recently exiled Peace Corps worker, Nicole. After only one email, she contacted us with the news, she had traveled with S--- from Podor to Bamako. She also indicated that S--- was moving South. We attempted a few Western Union Drops, hoping she would claim some money in that area, but it proved useless. After a few days of hunting, though, by placing telephone calls to various hotel

owners in Ségou, Sikasso, and Kayes, the owner of the Hotel Tata in Sikasso Mali informed us that a recent guest fit our description, and he told us to call the driver that had been hired as her guide to the area. That's how we found Adama, and Adama led us to the Lebanese doctor she had visited in Mali. It didn't take much (a hundred dollars by Western Union, and a promise that this was part of an official investigation) to get Dr. Fakih's official statement. His prognosis, though, came in on a very sketchy fax; a few of the lines had smudged out, and the whole thing written out in nearly illegible long-hand scrawl:

From the Desk of Dr. Hassan Fakih, MD

Clinique le Touban

12 Avenue Loury Sikasso, Mali

Dear Sirs and Esteemed Madams;

Attached is the official diagnosis for the patient Sandra Barn(sic....) This request would be under all (sic....) due to doctor-patient privileges. Upon (sic.....) official request however, I humbly submit (sic...) record for your investigation.

Test Results: Positive for Pregnancy

Symptoms: In conference, patient calculated last menstruation (sic...) morning sickness/nausea.

Prognosis: Urine test proved (sic...) second trimester, at roughly 14 weeks.

Recommendation: I recommended the patient immediately quit smoking tobacco as smoking often leads to low birth (sic...) complications. The patient indicated that at the beginning of her pregnancy she consumed low to moderate levels of alcohol but had discontinued (sic....) I recommended continued discontinuation of alcohol. Also, I recommended an obstetrician (sic.....) should she decide not to return to Canada for the birth.

I hereby claim this medical report to be true, and I am of sound mind and body, under God.

Signed, Respectively,
Dr. Hassan Fakih, MD

Despite the gaps, the reference to God, and the unclear reference to her first trimester, it was true. Our deepest fears, confirmed.

The site went wild. We hosted several forums: the first, The Pros and Cons of Giving Birth Abroad. The fundamental question was asked again and again: Why not come home? What woman would go to Africa to give birth in a country (any country in West Africa, just pick one!) with the highest natal mortality rates in the world? If S--- had the opportunity, at any time, to return to Canada for a free hospital birth, why would she stay?

Or, worse, if she was going to have an abortion, why Africa? Our second forum was titled: Will She Keep It? But our discussion flew in one direction, fast. We quickly decided she would be insane or suicidal to undergo an abortion procedure in West Africa. The medical services in Mali, for example, or Senegal were appalling, to say nothing of their backstreet abortion clinics. While all West African countries had illegalized the

procedure, virtually every city or even village had some questionable abortion service. From herbal concoctions to cervix opening pills, from voodoo to coat-hangers, West Africa was not the place most women would choose to have an abortion.

Meanwhile, on other forums, a borage of personal questions burst forth. The most obvious question, Who was the father? plagued us all. We had several men coming forward, insisting that they must have been engaged in a sexual relationship around the time of conception. On our forum titled “Who’s the Daddy?” we had narrowed it down to Daniel Levi (though S--- denied it, she was still not entirely trusted on that issue), Frank (who still hadn’t commented on his possible affair with S---), Fidel (who claimed he’d fathered nine illegitimate children already, and this was no big news) Jacob (who later told us they had used protection, but nothing infallible) and of course, the prime suspect was Husband. If Dr. Fakih from Sikasso Mali was correct in assuming S---was 14 weeks pregnant at the time of her appointment, it narrowed the period of possible conception down significantly. It had to be either Frank or Husband. S--- conceived before she left home. And then she ran away, pregnant.

This timeline was corroborated by Phyllis’ confession, but after her initial post on our online “confessional”, Phyllis Jean Webb, the writer, flew to Cuba and clamped up. What research we could dig up from her life was spotty, but consistent. Phyllis was a single, fairly unsuccessful artist and MFA graduate, with a few fiction publications in relatively unheard-of journals, and a job at a small environmental agency in the capital. She wrote copy and edited their bi-annual newsletters, and lived in a one-bedroom apartment above a cold beer and wine store in Hull. She was a rare spinster in a group of successful, married college friends. She had been to India with S--- but wouldn’t provide

any photos, or even comment on that time. Phyllis seemed though, to us, to be the only real friend S--- could have had at home, but sadly, she didn't get along with Husband for his right-wing politics, and was often left off of guest lists for group social events.

Despite our prodding, our insistent emails and telephone calls, despite a local news station showing up at her apartment with a camera crew, Phyllis wouldn't talk. Perhaps out of consideration for her dead friend, she clearly only wanted to publish her carefully rendered version of the events, insofar as she wanted to accuse Frank of the affair and reveal the pregnancy. Otherwise she was unavailable for comment. S---'s disappearance reportedly 'shook her to the core' and Phyllis gave her notice at the agency just three days after S--- left, and reportedly hired a house-sitter for her flat. She contacted us from Cuba. Very few people had heard from her since.

Meanwhile, S--- was not volunteering any information, choosing instead to plunge further into West Africa, with child. The facts didn't add up, so our forums overflowed with speculations and stabs at her possible motivations. Our headlines, and subsequent comments, read something like:

Forum Title: Why is S--- in Africa?

Comment: from skate7 (05/04/2010 at 10:09am)

She's too afraid to go home!! I mean, if I were Peter I would slam the door in her face!!!

Comment: from volacanogrrl (05/04/2010 at 10:14am)

Whatever... she could go home if she wanted to! Look at his face in this photo, he's like a puppydog begging for her to come back! What a hottie! I LOVE PETER BARNETT!!!! XOXO!!!

Comment: from sheila_row (05/04/2010 at 10:21am)

I took an African Lit course at UBC in 2001 and I'm quite sure she was in my class. ENG 229 We read "Things Fall Apart" and "Ambiguous Adventure" and "The Jehro Plays" and some other work I can't recall. I can vaguely recall a woman in my class who looks like her, asking a lot of questions. I've thought about her so much since then, and I thought I would share that insight. Perhaps she has always felt strongly for Africa?

Comment: from katscradle (05/04/2010 at 10:24am)

West Africa is probably the only place in the world without paparazzi. If I was getting hunted by photographers all of the time, maybe I would want to "disappear" too.

Comment: from lalpalooza (05/04/2010 at 10:26am)

I bet she likes big black dick!!! lol

Comment: from eunicebrown54 (05/04/2010 at 10:26am)

What a fearful and horrible misadventure she must be on. If I were her mother, I would launch a public appeal. All of this press could work for the family's favour, yet they remain silent. She could return to her parents' home and have a perfectly healthy child and all of these problems would eventually go away. Where is her mother now? What kind of parent lets their child run into the heart of darkness, carrying their grandchild? I feel for the entire family, but something must be done.

Comment: from katscradle (05/04/2010 at 10:32am)

I agree with Eunice. Where is her mther?

Comment: from skate7 (05/04/2010 at 10:33am)

@voclanogrrl: Yeah Right! She's already slept with like, how many guys? What husband is gonna be like, come on home?! No way.

Comment: from candicecameron (05/04/2010 at 10:39am)

ROCK AND A HARD PLACE.

Comment: from zztopless (05/04/2010 at 10:39am)

Scary!!!

Comment: from yappy747 (05/04/2010 at 10:39am)

@volcanogrrl: I know he's so hawt! She is retarded for leaving him.

Comment: from gracedevin (05/04/2010 at 10:39am)

Is Africa very safe to travel alone for a woman? I've never been but I feel worried for her personal safety.

Comment: from sahara_magic (05/04/2010 at 10:49am)

West Africa is absolutely full of wonderful warm people. My guess is that Sandra Barnett was so overwhelmed by how cold people have been to her in Canada, she chose to surround herself with the beauty and magic of West Africa. Family is important there, not fashion or publicity. I believe she wanted to return to the important aspects of life and find solace in the amazing culture and people.

The commentary went on and on and on. New opinions surfaced. New arguments. New sources. We didn't have any concrete answers, so we kept asking questions. Was it her fear of returning to Canada keeping her away? Was it something, or someone luring her south? What was the African connection in the first place? Why did she need to be there at all?

After much prodding and media fanfare, we finally coaxed an official statement out of Dr. Francis Everett, otherwise known as Jane's wife, Frank. We had him video blog his opinion of her disappearance, and his public response to Phyllis' accusation. We were so pleased with the outcome, we published a transcript online with a link to his personal website. The confession quickly went viral.

Dr. Francis Everett

Official Statement made Sept. 9, 2010:

This statement will be brief, and this will be the only time I speak publicly about the recently deceased Sandra Barnett. I am choosing to relay this information to you because

it is important that the public get the facts straight. In light of the recently revealed information by your various sources, I am being seen in new light regarding the investigation of the disappearance of Sandra Barnett. The truth is, I loved Sandra Barnett very deeply as a friend. The **one thing I would like to say is that I NEVER ONCE** took Sandra Barnett as my lover. I repeat, this is the only official statement I will make about this affair I'd like to extend my sincerest condolences to Sandra's husband, the Honourable Peter Barnett. I counseled Sandra; that is true. Regarding the information that Sandra Barnett was pregnant with my child, I must report that is completely unfounded and impossible for medical reasons. I send my condolences to her family.

Our numbers swelled. It didn't matter that he denied it. HE ADDRESSED IT, and that was what people wanted. Her name was gold. Nobody believed him anyways. Photos surfaced of the two of them at picnics. Several newspapers did exposés on Dr. Frank's medical credentials. One managed to find a photo of him posing with his wife and his two young kids on the manicured lawn in front of his Ottawa home. The press quickly calculated his address from the photo (all shrinks are unlisted) and three news vans parked outside for a week, looking for a comment. Meanwhile, someone at the Post got hold of Frank's PhD thesis, a treatise pedantically named "The New Hysteria; Cognitive Anger Functions and Self-Destructive Tendencies in the Post-Freudian Post-Feminist World." They published a few tidbits, and our resident psychologist analyzed his work. It was no wonder he was interested in S---. Judging by his formal research, he was deeply attracted to the kind of woman who publicly destroyed her reputation for theatrical purposes.

Other women came forward as his past lovers. Jane launched a self-destructive campaign of her own, perhaps to win him back.

As for Jane's breakdown and subsequent SEXPOSÉ of SANDRA BARNETT, many rumours spread among publishers in Toronto, but no one had heard of the research. At first, Jane wasn't available for comment after Frank's announcement, but soon enough, she had launched her own website, featuring any unflattering photograph or speculated sexual experience she could glean from S---'s past. This was all getting very very messy. And the public was only thirsting for more.

As for our site, our online confessions from both of S---'s closest high school friends, regardless of their accuracy, resulted in a new sense of authenticity. We were no longer considered a venue for shabby research. We were the preeminent source for updates on S---'s present situation.

Meanwhile, the number of members increased to over ten thousand anonymous individuals, ranging from 14 to 79 years of age. What people seemed to like about our coverage of her story were the disparate points of view, the various takes on S---'s motivation for leaving, her circumstances. Beyond forums, we hosted expert opinions, live chats with councilors and missing persons experts, and a very extensive photo gallery. Under every post of blog or interview, we enabled comments, and for every article, we received dozens, sometimes hundreds of notes from people concerned for S---. It appeared as if every single last one of us had an opinion, and we quickly realized, people needed some medium to discuss their various theories. Our site was the apparatus. These stories and confessions and photos were drawn to us, as if magnetized.

Meanwhile, back in Africa, her trail was digging up well. We had tracked down her driver from Mali, the doctor, Nicole the Peace Corps volunteer who wrote us from Oklahoma.

To begin with, Nicole was very honest, but she was initially very critical of our coverage. For example, she scolded our editors by making clear a few very crucial points. First, she insisted that S--- had never slept with her driver Alsaid as a means to cross Mauritania. Nicole was, in fact, quite angry that we had constructed the crossing the way that we had chosen to, by means of patching together a few sightings and presuming the rest. Like most travel situations we find ourselves in, she clarified, when approached for sex by a local man, S--- managed to avoid the actual act using her cunning and only a fraction of the force required to truly fend someone off. In general, Nicole told us, S--- would not have succumbed to a forced sexual encounter for a variety of reasons. First, it was true that she needed to continue to cross Mauritania by land, and this man had taken her half-way, and she did not have papers to be in the country. So yes, the stakes were considerably higher than a normal traveler in a brothel in the middle of the night being asked to perform sexual favours on her driver. But, that said, S--- could have easily found someone else to do the job, either from the hotel, or by wandering around Nouakchott. She had no pressing deadline to leave Mauritania, she just couldn't be caught inside its borders. Second, Alsaid, the driver, didn't hold anything against her that would make her feel 'forced' to perform the act. She was still in possession of her own money and all of her belongings. She even kept her own passport, and though she wasn't using it in formal ways, not having a passport at all was far riskier than only using a valid passport sparingly, for fear it would be spotted in Africa. Alsaid, the driver didn't take her

passport from her, as many would have, as a means to keep her contained. Third, and most importantly, she was pregnant. No respectable Muslim man would sleep with a strange woman if she is pregnant. His wife, of course, he would engage in sexual activities with when carrying a child, but in bedding strange women, most Muslim men tend towards virgins, and this woman was clearly not a virgin. A generalization, yes. But a kind one. It would be unholy of him to take advantage of S---'s situation.

We were humbled by her insight. We stood corrected. We posted a retraction on our Mauritania section, (where one of our members, a journalist by trade, admittedly had created a lusty narrative about how we had presumed she had crossed the country of Mauritania) but it didn't receive as many hits as the supposed sex section did, so out of respect, we took the whole country's coverage down. We left it as a giant black hole in our understanding of how she moved across the continent. She was in the trunk of a car, after all. It must have felt like a black hole to her as well. Meanwhile, despite our efforts (and largely thanks to our coverage too), S--- was developing a reputation as an easy woman. It wasn't hard to establish that fact, but strangely, it was much harder to refute it.

After scouring our site for other such discrepancies, and clearly finding many (we are a user-generated site, of course, not every source is the most reliable), our other sources played hard-to-get with the rest of their information. Our questions burned left unattended. Of great import to us now, was S---'s state of mind concerning her pregnancy. At first, Nicole wouldn't admit to us at all that she had even known S--- was pregnant, and only after much prodding by our interviewers, did she reveal to us she had known from the start. We were incensed! What other crucial information could she have kept from us?

As for further proof of conception, we needed confirmation from someone close to her, but no one came forward. We could find no family physician that could provide test results from before she had disappeared, nor did Husband choose to speak to us.

Poor Husband. At this point, Husband was wilting away from the public eye. He had suffered through a very long period of press silence, punctuated by one photo in a national newspaper, holding a giant salmon off the coast, and one appearance at a conservative party fundraiser. Since S--- had gone missing, his website had featured a few official statements, but they had obviously been crafted by his staff. He was saying nothing! He continued work through the calendar year, but about a month after S---'s disappearance, quietly resigned from the cabinet for personal reasons, and continued his job as an MP as a backbencher. The Prime Minister issued a statement accepting his resignation, and offering whatever emotional support he could muster. While the House was in session, Husband voted and attended committee meetings. On the social level, he remained very elusive and most likely, very lonely.

The pregnancy issue, though, stirred up a lot of attention. Husband's home, once again, was host to a swarm of press vans and reporters posed for live broadcasts, their cameras peering through the tinted windows on Husband's Audi. They shouted: Are you the Father? Are you headed to Africa? What are you feeling now? Producers quarreled: Surely he wanted to voice a public appeal, something to rope S--- back into his healthy home? But no. He did not. Husband hired a security agency to protect his empty house against intruders, and hired a very old, homely French Canadian housekeeper to provide him with meals. He quit rugby, his favorite game. He stopped serving on various

community boards. By the time S--- had been missing for nearly four months, he had retreated from life, nearly completely.

We were devastated. We loved him, we were drawn to him, and some of us even admitted to a legitimate attraction. We tried seducing him with our emails, some even admitted to knocking on his door late at night, or seeking jobs as interns in his office. Nothing. Husband was left to his silk taupe loveseat. A lingerie store he wouldn't open. His media box. Our national treasure had been reduced to a somewhat baffled, scorned, limp little public persona.

It was difficult not to watch. But we couldn't stop now, just as the gaps in the story were proving to be so scandalous, so fruitful. We needed to photograph and comment and analyze Husband's defeat as much as we needed to find S---. The more we published, the further he fell. This was no ordinary broken marriage; this was public domain.

We discuss it still, the effect our watching had on them. Because somehow, in the midst of the media circus, it hurt us, how profoundly we hurt them both. It confounds us to this day: how in loving a couple so much, we managed to destroy them so thoroughly, so completely.

Bamako, Mali

L'Hippodrome:

Here is S---, strolling around Bamako's Hippodrome, alone. The place is a dustbowl, a straggle of dead grass. Giant unfinished bleachers line the north side, the rebar dangerously rusted through the cracking pylons. This was the French's idea of a polo field, perfect for a country where people had so little to eat. They imported their own horses, exported slaves. All very civilized, to the nineteenth century colonist.

Around the giant dusty center, there is a track, where football teams run laps and perform calisthenics, where a boy on a bony pony trots along in the ruts. A middle-aged man with a paunch jogs along in track pants and fake Nikes, and nods at S--- and says Bonjour. S--- says Bonjour back. There are a thousand men out on the field. A field, but lacking grass, lacking goal posts and sprinklers and lines marking the yardage. This is Africa. Instead, there is a donkey chomping at a spare bit of wild hay. On the outskirts of

the track, a few gardens have sprouted up and a few families tend to the cabbages, carrots, salad greens. Beside the gardens are small shelters made of plastic and sticks, most likely a sleeping house for someone guarding the food at night. The gardening women won't look at S---. They're squatting on this bit of city land. They could get kicked out at any moment and there is a shame in that.

S--- decides to wander around the track. She's sipping from a tall bottle of mineral water, and the afternoon's searing heat is finally calming. This is the football hour, the same in every country across the world, when the afternoon is over and the sunset is about to begin, with its low warm sun angles and work-tired players. The men like to look at S--- walking past them, her stride very long. She's half a head taller than almost every man on the pitch. They all stand a little more erect when she passes. There are no lewd comments. No whistles. Just men stopping to look, standing tall.

The players are preparing for a series of matches. Some are bobbing between each other, others are squatting, others lift their knees in mock soldier drills. The Hippodrome was known for years as one of Bamako's classiest neighbourhoods, a place for embassies and nightclubs and the best Lebanese grills. During colonial times, this was the center of the ex-patriot social scene. She is the only foreigner here now. The Hippodrome has fallen back to the locals, to the thousands of ways that people can exercise in public places, bending and squatting and running around. S--- has almost walked the perimeter of the track, she's back to the crumbling bleachers, next to the stables where a few skinny horses shake their lips and hoof at the dust.

As she walks past them, off of the field, a very nervous, very beautiful Malian girl steps towards her. She is wearing long basketball shorts and a T-shirt. She is very shy. No

women in Mali wear basketball shorts. No girls participate in the daily calisthenics, or play on football teams, or even run around the track. That is a luxury reserved for men. Women haul water, care for children, garden. But here is this teenager, her hair brushed carefully back in to a ponytail, the Chicago Bulls emblazoned on her thigh. She's about to jog. Or stretch. Or play a game of back and forth with someone willing to be seen playing with a girl. A brave act, heading out there, alone. S--- gives her a warm smile but even she can't stop staring at her. Nobody can. The men's gaze has shifted from S--- to this teenager, about to start running around in the dust. The girl takes a big breath and starts off jogging, doing everything she can to ignore those seething looks, those thousands of eyes, on her.

Le Niger:

Bamako is the closest we came to finding her.

The first reason why our search in Bamako was so successful was our compendium of research. This time, we would be diligent. Bamako, the capital of Mali, is a city of nearly two million, but it is growing at an alarming rate. In fact, we learned that Bamako is the fastest growing city in Africa, and top six in the world. From aerial photos, it is surprisingly green, but its outskirts are made up of tin and mud and brick and twisted metal, running along the banks of a big brown river, nestled in the foothills of the Manding Mountains, between the hills of Badalougou and Magnambougou. There are no direct flights into Bamako from the UK or North America, but you can fly direct from Paris or Marseille. Mali was, of course, a large part of France's sprawling West African

colony; thus, foreigners must speak French to get around. Nobody speaks English in Mali.

To enter the country by air, you need a yellow fever vaccination, a visa, and an onward flight. Or you need to bribe your way in. Mali is massive landlocked country of eleven million habitants, reaching from the green south all the way up to the Sahara, the largest desert in the world. The desert is what keeps Mali so isolated. Even tracing back to ancient times, if a traveler could cross the Sahara, she could survive anywhere.

Despite these difficulties, Mali still sees many thousands of tourists every year, mostly French adventure seekers, or backpackers, looking to hike in the Dogon Country or sail up the Niger River to Timbuktu. In fact, unlike other countries sliced up by colonists, rivers shaped Mali. The Senegal River carves out its Western border, and through Mali's guts—and lending the landlocked country much-needed nutrients and water—is the dubious Niger River. The Niger flows for 4200 kilometers. It's a monster, wide and thick and brown and populated. For years, explorers didn't know which way it flowed as it starts in Guinea, shoots northward and then dives back south, and ends in the infamous Niger Delta, a place interminably dominated by war. The name comes from the Berber phrase "gber-n-igheren," meaning River of Rivers. If West Africa is the continent's heart, the Niger is its main artery.

To comprehend Mali's complexity is to look at our haunted, uneasy understanding of West Africa. Westerners have always viewed the history of the green, troubled corner of the dark continent as impossible to navigate. Most only see a tangled web of oral histories, with no large dynasties or empires, but rather a mess a tribal village cultures, constantly mobile, zigzagging across the landmass in a web of undocumented

migrations. But this is false! The empire of Mali was a powerful kingdom; taking advantage of the Niger's power to irrigate, they farmed and cultivated animals and built giant mosques from the earth that still stand today. The empire of Mali dominated the trade of gold and salt and slaves across the Sahara. And not long ago, in an unmarked warehouse in Timbuktu, thousands upon thousands of manuscript pages were discovered from ancient times. The Malians wrote and studied medicine and calculated astronomy and played incredibly intricate musical instruments. This was a massively organized people. And a sophisticated one.

Today, however, Mali is among the world's poorest nations. Bamako is flanked by slums, the average Malian makes around a thousand dollars a year. Bamako, a close friend to the Russians during the Cold War, has its share of socialist realist art in its main quarters: statues of Olympic athletes baring torches and muscular metal workers forging the future. The reality, though, is a bit drier, a bit hungrier. Eighty percent of the population is busy farming or fishing for their survival.

So it is no surprise that Bamako is such a confusing place, full of open sewers and tight little markets, long avenues and bridges and pollution and trees. It is a city that can hide a foreigner, for a while. There are Asian restaurants and fancy French food and Lebanese grocery stores and pizza. There is a boutique to buy tight jeans and a shop for designer eyeglasses. Some of the roads are newly paved. There are bank machines and a few ten-story buildings. But beyond the cleaned up diplomatic quartier, past Niaréla and the Hippodrome, this is still Africa. That's what people kept telling us during our search across Bamako: You think you can find someone, just like that? This is Africa, what do

you expect? Like its simmering geography is some excuse for the city's chaos, its havoc thinly disguised as growth.

Le Boulevard du Peuple:

Here is S--- strolling down the Boulevard du Peuple. Overhead, there are trees offering a swath of shade, their broad leaves creating a sort of tent over the nicely kempt ministries and banks. At one intersection, there is a monument to independence. In another, an elephant, long removed from the countryside by poachers, honoured here in concrete and plaster. This is one of the few sidewalks in West Africa, with a real curb and gutter, wide enough for several people to walk abreast. The road beside her is packed with traffic, and the noise makes it hotter, stickier, somehow. The sidewalk is abandoned though, by African standards. One man dozes against a fence topped with razor wire. A guard with a rusted Kalashnikov slumps half-asleep on a foldout chair outside the Ministry of Schools. It is very hot. A few vendors dressed in rags approach S--- to sell her a wallet or bible or carving of a giraffe. She smiles at them, but keeps her hands snugly in the pockets of her jeans. It is too hot to be wearing jeans, but women won't wear shorts in Mali, or even knee-length skirts. Shoulders and breasts, though, don't seem to matter, so S--- has chosen a lime green brassiere under a loose white tank top. Her hair is growing out on one side. Today she has the long bits swept to the top of her head into a bun. Her shoulders are tanned. Her belly is hidden under her shirt.

Now S--- is entering a bank. It is a large modern building on this wide modern avenue. The traffic is honking, boisterous around her. Thousands of motorcycles and scooters honk and scoot by. The air is plugged with smoke.

At the front doors, she greets each of the armed guards, and asks one of them a question. He gestures with his head, never removing his hand from his machine gun, and she thanks him. She proceeds upstairs, without entering the lobby with its faux white marble and water cooler and posters of attractive clerks in high heels and pantyhose. Instead, she is invited to the second level, to a secondary manager's office to complete her transaction. She climbs the immaculate white steps in her flip-flops and jeans, and shakes hands with the secondary manager, who invites her directly into his office. She seems surprised that she doesn't have to wait, and she thanks him warmly. He closes the door behind her.

Waiting for S--- in the lobby of the bank, on a row of plastic chairs against the wall under a dripping air-conditioner, is one of our members. A Follower. Mari-José is a French Canadian photographer who was tipped off that S--- might try the bank again that afternoon. The tip had come from a teller, a young gentleman named Solo, who had called Mari-José an hour or so after S--- attempted to cash an unspecified number of traveler's cheques that morning. He didn't know he was informing anyone of anything. He simply wondered if this one Canadian knew the other. Solo told Mari-José that S--- was unsuccessful in her transaction that morning because she did not have the cheque's receipts or her passport with her. According to our research, this is the only bank where a foreigner could cash a traveler's cheque in all of Bamako. Mari-José knows this too, and she hopes that S--- will come back, that very day. It is Friday, after all, and the bank will be closed over the weekend. The chances were good.

As a means of trapping her, Mari-José has her camera, and is hoping to shoot several photographs of S--- using her passport to cash the cheques.

It is getting very tense inside the bank for Mari-José. The dripping air-conditioner has started to groan, and the water collected in the bucket below it looks as if it could overflow in a matter of minutes. She has told a clerk that she is waiting for a friend to arrive, but several people have approached her, wondering what they can do to assist. She has her camera, a very expensive long-lens apparatus, set on her knee so that she may take photographs inside the bank without attracting too much attention. Many people, though, have noticed the camera. She is beginning to wonder if S--- is coming at all.

Just then, another white woman, this time a shorter, bustier Mediterranean, enters the bank and plops herself down right next to Mari-José. The woman has a wide grin, and a dark tan. Her face is very friendly. She's dressed in a long broomstick skirt and tank-top, and she has a nose piercing and curly wild hair; she doesn't carry a purse or briefcase, indicating that she doesn't have any business of her own at the bank, though it is difficult to tell. Mari-José nods to her, and at once the woman starts to speak to her in English. This is crazy! She nearly yells. Look how many people waiting to speak to just one teller! Crazy! Mari-José looks up and notices that indeed, there is a long line-up, and only one clerk managing the crowd, a young, flustered woman she doesn't recognize.

It is busy, she mumbles. It is usually busy at this time of day.

Do you come here all the time? The woman seems shocked. Do you live here? In Bamako? The woman is nearly yelling, and Mari-José nods and tells her that she'd been living here for six months, adding a bit about her job as a freelance photographer and how she doesn't mind living in Bamako at all, despite the pollution, and the crowds.

Oh, we love it! The woman yells back. You are so LUCKY!

Yes, well, Mari-José mumbles.

We've been here for a week already, and we're staying in the best neighbourhood, with the good bars and it's so quiet! We love it. It is a very cosmopolitan city! And our neighbourhood is so... classy.

Niaréla? Mari-José asks, feigning interest.

Yeah! Yeah, that's the one, at this great spot by the Vietnamese restaurant. Oh it is so good there, have you been there?

Mari-José begins to say something, but just then, her friend Solo approaches from the front door. He's been on his lunch break with a few other tellers, some of them reluctantly heading behind the glass to help the growing crowd. Instead of moving to his post, Solo approaches Mari-José and she stands to kiss him on both cheeks, being sure to hold the camera by the strap. It occurs to her in that moment, if she ever attempted to have a Malian boyfriend, Solo would be a fine candidate. He studied economics in Senegal, he's clean and tall and well-dressed. Today he sports a fat tie and a pastel purple shirt, contrasted against the very black of his skin. Very good looking, clear eyes. Smells good.

Did you see her? he asks in French, and Mari-José shakes her head, and he points upstairs to a glassed in office, the blinds partially drawn to hide the goings-on inside. Mari-José can barely make out a bare of feet tucked under a chair, a pair of white feet in flip-flops. Her heart jumps.

Is that her? Are you sure? she stutters.

Both Solo, and the white woman sitting in the chair beside her turn to look at the window, at the white ankles tucked under a chair. No question: the feet certainly belong to a white woman. Mari-José gasps, an accident. The Mediterranean woman turns back to

look at them both, then returns her gaze to the office upstairs. Mari-José fingers the trigger on her camera unintentionally. Solo is the only one who laughs.

Another Canadian woman! he proclaims. If only she could be as beautiful as you, I'd be lucky to take you both on a date. Mari-José blushes and looks away from him, back to the plump white woman, in time to see the colour drain from her face. Without a word, Mari-José watches as the woman slowly stands and moves towards the front door. Mari-José doesn't know what to do next, so she takes the woman's photograph. She only manages to snap one shot before Solo stops her. You cannot take photos in the bank! he laughs. You could try to rob us later. As he says it, the white woman shuffles very carefully along the marble floor away from them, avoiding eye contact, staring at the front door.

Then suddenly, in a move as loud as her voice, she turns and bolts upstairs. Mari-José almost calls out. Stop! Stop her! The woman knocks on the secondary manager's office door, then abruptly lets herself in. Mari-José gasps again. A few people have noticed, but no one thinks it is strange. The blinds inside promptly snap shut.

Waiting on the lobby floor, the cool marble under her, Mari-José feels as if she could faint. She reaches for Solo's arm, and he steadies her. Are you fine? He asks, are you alright? Who was that? Do you know her too?

I think that was her friend, she manages.

Well, you should introduce yourself, he giggles.

She nods. Solo moves towards the front door to wait with Mari-José still chatting about what they should do on a date in Bamako. It is the kind of conversation she has been waiting to have with Solo, though at the moment, she doesn't know what he's

saying. She can't follow. Instead, she's staring at the door of the upstairs office, her finger poised on the trigger of her camera, ready to take at least one photo, one famous shot of the famous disappearing S--- so she may contribute something to this world-wide story, so that after six months in this God-forsaken shit-hole of a country she can finally say that she did *something*, that her time and energy were not wasted, that this whole leave-your-life-and-move-to-Mali thing was not a selfish pursuit but something of true journalistic value, a game-changer, a career-maker, worth something to someone somewhere—

Without her noticing, a guard approaches Mari-José from behind and taps her shoulder. She jumps. Almost screams. He points to her camera and says to Solo, she can't have that in here.

You have to put that away, Solo tells her.

But I'm a journalist, she says, and he shakes his head.

He'll take that from you. No journalistic stories inside the bank, Solo says, serious now.

But I... She says, and without thinking whirls the camera around and snaps a photo of the guard.

No! he says loudly.

But I'm a journalist! This is my—

You'll have to leave, the guard says to Mari-José.

Wait! She reaches into her pocket and pulls out five thousand Francs. Several people are watching now, people bored with waiting, enjoying the small scene. The guard

shakes his head, more adamant now. No! he nearly yells. You cannot bribe us. You have to leave! Go! GO!

Beside her Solo tries to calm him, but the guard has his hand on a machine gun, and she's still not used to the guns at all. She's blushing scarlet now, her eyes flashing back and forth between the door upstairs and the guard. Her fingers must be shaking. She accidentally presses the trigger on the camera again, and the guard reaches for it. She yelps, and yanks it away. The guard's hand falls onto her shoulder now. She's getting pushed out the front door. Mari-José is near tears now, and Solo tries to help. He says something but both guards are shaking their heads, making the action of taking a picture, and speaking loudly in Bambara to Solo.

Mari-José nearly wails. Solo shakes his head and says I'm sorry. He hails a taxi and says something to the driver as the guard pushes down on her head and shoves her inside. Mari-José is beside herself now. That is a fugitive! She yells. Up there! I'm sure of it. A Canadian fugitive!

The guards say: Get her out of here.

Solo says into the window: Call me!

That rush of hot air around her now. The guard points to the Boulevard du Peuple and the driver bends the steering wheel in that direction, and she is moving. She is sobbing now, punching the back seat of the taxi. She doesn't know what to do with herself, she is crying so hard she can't breathe.

Then she screams: Stop! Stop!

Out the window she sees them. She screams, Stop! again but the driver drives on. She can barely make it out across the parking lot: two white women emerging from the

front door and climbing into a taxi. Stop! She screams again but her driver doesn't understand French, no matter how she jerks his seat and points and yells at him, Follow that car!

They disappear around another corner and are gone.

That fast.

The whole thing, over in a rush of hot air and exhaust and a crowd of scooters swarming them on the Boulevard du Peuple. Alone, in the back of a taxi, surrounded by millions and millions of strangers, Mari-José is devastated. Wrecked. An entire six months, for nothing. And then she remembers!

Niaréla! she shrieks.

And that, he understands.

Le Quartier Niaréla:

List of Objects left behind in a moment of panicked departure, as recorded by Mari-José LeBlanc the evening of April 29th, in the Coeur du Fleuve guesthouse in Niaréla, Bamako, Mali:

- One book, totaling 786 pages, titled "The Long Walk to Freedom." This is Nelson Mandela's autobiography, left under the sheet as if someone had been reading it in bed that very morning. Mari-José pockets it on the way out, promises herself she'll at least leaf through it. For research, of course.
- Four bottles travel-sized bottles, each 100 mL, all imported from Lebanon, with European brand names, the words on the back in Arabic. One shampoo, one conditioner, one face wash, one toner.

- One bottle of Banana Boat sunscreen, SPF 15, nearly-finished. The bottle still smelling of coconuts, of California.
- One bikini bottom, hanging on the towel rack in the attached bathroom. Mari-José pockets this too, even though she's three sizes bigger in the rear than the designated size six. After all, it is BCBG, a designer suit, or at least half of one.
- Seven crumpled receipts for seven very nice restaurants in Bamako, including: Le Campanard (cold duck salad, veal with wild mushrooms, chocolate torte), Broadway Café (two fruit salads and scrambled eggs, coffee, juice), Lo Mien (lemongrass chicken, panang curry, coconut rice, green tea), two receipts from China Panda, scrawled in Chinese except for the price, and two from the guesthouse bar, two fixed breakfasts (dated that very morning), and several glasses of pastis (dated the night before last).
- One nightgown, flesh-coloured, found as an afterthought under the bed. Size six, material a gauzy polyester. Mari-José tells herself this too is evidence, and takes it with her. She catches herself smelling it later, draping it over her pillow, wrapping it around her neck as she sleeps, so as to get it next to the skin.
- One high heeled shoe, red with sparkles, four-inch heel, the strap broken and tossed in the bin, size seven. Small clump of red mud on the toe. Obviously a cheap Chinese knock-off, purchased any one of the many street stalls or markets around Bamako, and worn once. Brazen in its colour and heel. Horrific in its abandonment.

- Nine empty mineral water bottles.
- Four over-ripe bananas, in black plastic bag
- Two empty packages of Marlborough Light cigarettes
- A half-finished, warm but still fizzing can of Coca-Cola

Koulikoro:

Mari-José was fuming.

Not only had she missed them by a matter of minutes (their twin beds left disheveled, the fan left on) but neither of the girls had left any clues! According to the guesthouse owner, a jovial chubby French woman with a very high-pitched laugh, the two guests, a Spanish lady and an American girl had checked out only half an hour before, much to her surprise. Quel surprise! she told Mari-José, They'd planned to stay the weekend! They even spoke of a concert they wanted to see that very night, and they told her that two men they had met at the museum would join them at the hotel for a drink first. Mari-José ground her teeth. In their hasty departure, the owner told Mari-José, they had even tried to pay for that coming night though they were leaving in the middle of the day; she only accepted half the night's charge, as the checkout time of noon had barely passed—

The woman blathered on and on, wasting precious minutes. Mari-José asked again: Where did they go? But the French woman had no idea. If Mari-José waited around, the boys could inform her of something, the woman suggested. A bus office was her guess, as the train was not scheduled to depart until Wednesday. The woman trailed

off and wandered away, leaving Mari-José to the empty room, the buzzing fan, the unmade beds.

She was beside herself. Not only was she livid about the fact that she had *just missed Sandra Barnett*, TWICE! she was so angry at these girls for enjoying Bamako so much more than she ever could. Mari-José had never been to Le Campagnard. Mari-José had never brunchted at the Broadway Café. Mari-José had never even been out dancing, especially in trashy red heels with boys she had just met in a city where cab-drivers wanted to steal from you, dirt bag ex-pats wanted to fuck you, poor people wanted to beg from you, hookers wanted to fight you, and boys in bars just waiting for their chance to give you their dirty diseases—

She started to cry. Again. It was the sixth or seventh time in the past hour tears had rushed to her eyes. She wasn't sure if she should taxi around to the various bus stations, or stay and wait for their friends, or just give up. She sunk onto the bed and dug her face into the pillow. Sandra Barnett had been here! Mari-José thought, and I scared her away!

She finally collected herself after a few minutes, gathered the little bottles from the bathroom and snapped a few photos of the room, the hotel, and the hotel owner. She passed on her phone number if the girls should come back, and she headed up to Point G, to one of the hundreds of bus offices in Bamako. Once there, she wandered around, past the bathroom with the little tiled hole in the ground and the piss-smell and the plastic teapot for washing your ass after you shit. Beyond the bus office bathroom was a small stand selling bits of hanging meat, buzzing with flies. The heat of the air choked her. Several women approached her with loads on their heads. One with a pile of avocados,

another with strawberries. She was rude to both. She tried another bus station, across the river and 3000 francs away. And then another. She asked a woman selling boiled eggs if she'd seen any white women that day. All she got was blank stares. She tried the next office down the road. Then the next. One clerk had sold a ticket to Ségou to a woman named Katia that morning at seven. Someone had seen a French couple, on the bus to Kayes.

It would prove a long, fruitless search. The sun so strong and so uncomfortable, her eyes puffy from crying, the taxi bills coming to almost 9000 francs, and nothing. Ending with nothing. She went home to change, and in a moment of S--- envy, tried wearing a knee-length dress and light shawl to cover her shoulders. She thought, Don't give up, you are a journalist! Her legs and neck and chest wet with sweat, she went back to the bus company offices she had missed, stopping this time to ask everyone, every girl selling water and mother selling cakes, Have you seen any white women today? A pair of them? At one point she wandered by a mosque just letting out after mid-afternoon prayers and a boy with a woven cap made as if to shoot her with a pistol formed by his fingers. It was probably the short dress. Still, it was terrifying.

She was defeated, but she could not stop. She took a taxi to the Destination Nord gare routière and when there was absolutely no clue, she did something reckless. She got on a bus to Koulikoror, 50 kms downstream, where the big boats leave for Timbuktu. As a river-port, it was busy with the coming dusk, but when she got there the big boats were still. Nothing left that day. The river was too low. Nothing but the pirogues put-putting around the dock.

Around the dock, a few boatmen were already kneeling for their sunset prayers on their mats, dipping their foreheads to the sandy beach. She tried to speak to a few of the men, to ask them about their passengers that day, but was overcome with fear. That happened to her sometimes, alone, in Mali.

So she just plunked down on wall looking over the port and sat there and stared over the river port in Koulikoro, unable to cry any more. So angry with the place. Even the Niger disgusted her that night, snaking its way through the dry useless Sahel, only reaching so far, only helping so many people. Like a snake, she kept thinking. As if she could feel the weight of the curse the Niger brought all of the countries it touched: the stink of war, the slow pace of famine, the spreading stain of disease.

She sat there for a long time, watching the pirogues coming in for the night, the grey blooms of laundry soap, the plastic water jugs and fisherman's nets and naked bodies dipping in and out of the Niger's fringe. And the smell—a mix of human and animal feces, hot algae, motor oil. The rainbow of slicks only visible by the one of the shack's lights, flickering behind her. Along the banks, the men had congregated for the evening chat, forming groups on folding chairs, leaning against trees, under a square of thatch. One mended a net. Someone cracked the shells from a pile of peanuts. The women finished hanging their clothing on the ropes strung between the tin huts and joined the men for a bit of talk, a clean lappa wrapped around their long legs. A swarm of children ran up to her singing Tubabou! Tubabou! then tried to touch her then ran away. Someone cracked up with laughter. A radio sent out some muffled static. Meanwhile, everyone stared at her sideways, not fully themselves, not fully comfortable until she was gone. It all filled Mari-José with a sharp, forlorn feeling she wouldn't shake for a week.

Her only relief was that night at home, in the cold shower in the one room attached to her home stay family's house, after eating another meal of rice and sauce the mother of the house had saved for her, she washed and conditioned her hair with S---'s small Lebanese shampoos. The suds calmed her. The scent of apples filled her little tiled bathroom. The power had gone out, and she'd lit a candle in a Coke bottle and placed it under the mirror, then she watched herself bathe by candlelight, watched the water splash from the faucet onto her head and onto the toilet seat and all over the concrete floor. Her reflection flickered: Almost. Almost. It was all so fucking disappointing. It all smelled so deliciously sad.

Sénou International Airport:

It didn't occur to Mari-José that afternoon to go to the airport. It seemed impossible that Soledad and S--- would have escaped Bamako on a plane. After all, there are only so many flights a week out of Mali, and S--- couldn't use her passport without an international scene, and she didn't have a proper visa, nor did they have tickets, and you can't just BUY tickets online. This is Africa! Only the UN workers or the President can just get on a plane and get out of there.

But, had Mari-José taken a taxi directly to the airport exactly one hour after the sighting in the bank, she would have snapped that dream photo. Her career would have been altered forever. She'd have her ticket out of Mali, for once, for all. But she didn't, she over-estimated Malian airport security, immigration. Mari-José thought small, and only tried the bus stations and the river port, and then ended up crying herself to sleep in

a too-small pink polyester nightie faintly smelling of apples, while S--- and Soledad flew off into the night, out of the country, away.

According to Soledad's report, months later, the girls didn't even really discuss their hasty departure. It was up to S---, who paid for, and organized, and orchestrated their modes of transportation, so they were swiftly swept out of the country, in a manner quite unexpected by Soledad, or Mari-José. The escape was fast, professional. It put S---'s runaway skills to the test. It was as if, the entire time she had been missing, she had expected this kind of showdown, and she was forced to calculate her quickest way out of every country she visited. Running away, after all, is simply a matter of **transportation** and **money**. In this case, all it took was:

1. **A Speeding Taxi**—From the UniBank on the Avenue du Peuple to the guesthouse in Niaréla (where they informed the driver to wait five minutes, as they would be leaving soon). During the five minutes at the guesthouse, they stuffed backpacks with their belongings, S--- threw **74 000 Francs** cash at the guesthouse owner to cover the bill, and, while attempting to stuff a few new purchases into a too-small pack, Soledad burst into a maniacal laughter, something akin to a teenage hyper laugh-attack. Then S--- started giggling too, at a nervous, crazy pitch. You weren't kidding, she gasped at S--- as they sped away in the taxi. They are really hunting you down! Total fare: **5000 CFO** (West African Francs)
2. **A Second Speeding Taxi**— Away from the Air Mali offices adjacent to the Boulevard du Peuple. They acknowledged the risk in returning to

that quartier, but in the back of the cab, they slunk down low, smoked out of the windows and asked the driver to play his music very very loud. They purchased the air tickets with **four hundred Euro bills** that S--- kept in her money-belt for just such emergencies. S---'s name on the ticket was Mandy Moore. It cost her and additional **5000 Francs** to keep her real name off the ticket. The Air Mali clerk had advised her to be careful at the airport. Traveling under a false name was a crime in the country of Mali.

3. **A Boeing 737 Jet**— Owned and operated by Air Mali, final destination: Dakar, Senegal with one stop-over in Conakry, Guinea. They flashed their tickets to the guards at the front door of the airport, and at the Air Mali desk, S--- slipped a note to the clerk with **5000 Francs**, saying she would prefer not to use her real name for the flight. Pas de Problème, the woman behind the desk told her, slipping the bill under her uniform, into her bra, but it's the Migré you have to worry about. She printed their boarding passes. Neither of the girls checked their bags. At the Immigration desk, while they waited, they watched a young Malian man with an invalid ID slip the female officer an unidentified sum of money to pass through. Soledad chose the male clerk, as her papers were organized, she had a visa and she was using her proper name. S--- approached the female clerk, and didn't even show her boarding pass with the false name. Instead, she apologized right away for not having the proper visa. I'm so sorry, she pleaded. At

the border, they told me this receipt was good enough! Somehow, there were tears in her eyes, and she was shaking, slightly. The female clerk tried not to grin. This is not a visa! The officer told her sternly, waving the thin receipt. She asked S--- to step behind the glass window, and Soledad could see into the little booth, with its handwritten leger and defunct computer, the drawers crooked, all slightly open. The officer had scary-long nails and a very nice weave, long black curls. Soledad could hear the whole conversation from a few feet away. Anything you can do to fix this problem, the officer said to S---, and she swiped her hands together in that same Pay-What-You-Can kind of gesture. Your flight leaves in an hour and a half. You don't have time to go downtown, she said, shaking her curls. I'm so sorry, S--- whimpered, and slipped the officer **20 000 Francs**, a massive sum. The woman shoved the bills into one of the drawers. Wait here, she said, and made a call on her cell phone. Two clean-cut men in Immigration uniforms slowly sauntered up, and Soledad could see S--- was sweating, even in the super-cooled hallway of the airport. Come with us, they said, and the two of them followed the men, their backpacks heavy on their shoulders, each of them very nervous, shuffling along the clean tiled floors in their dusty flip-flops. They proceeded up a flight of stairs, to a security check with a metal detector and an X-ray for the bags. They're with us, the guards told the other security officials, and the girls walked right through the security check. No X-Ray. No metal detector. They

could have smuggled anything. The kind officers escorted them all the way to the waiting room, and an hour later, the uniformed men flanked the girls as they walked across the burning tarmac, all the way to the stairs leading up to the plane. S--- touched their shoulders as she stepped up to board. Thank you, she told them. And they nodded professionally. We hope one day you will return to Mali, they said, and turned back.

4. **A Third Speeding Taxi**— This time, from the Dakar airport, to the C ap Ouest Hotel (where they booked an ocean view room for the night and dropped bags, the driver waiting outside) and then directly to the main port office downtown, Another **5000 Francs**. At this point S--- had purchased everything, so Soledad offered to pay the **45 000 CFO** for two seats on the German-built ferry down to the Casamance. Check-in was the next night, at five pm. They were exhausted but relieved. Nervous still, they decided on a simple Senegalese meal at a caf e far from the French Institute or Embassy quarters, where they could be spotted by any number of ex-pats. They each ordered grilled fish with plantains, but the caf e did not serve wine or beer. It was night now, and too dark to wander, so they caught the first cab they saw and rushed back to the C ap Ouest, where Soledad ordered a bottle of wine to the room and fell asleep to the sound of waves crashing on rocks, only half a glass finished from the bottle.
5. **The Ferry**— The highlight of their transportation thus far, the ferry was teeming with jolly Senegalese mothers and young Casamance rastas and

French backpackers chewing the sticks locals used to clean their teeth. The girls made friends with a couple from Estonia, who shared a small carton of wine with Soledad on the deck, and who invited them into the galley for the spaghetti dinner. They stayed up late, sitting outside on the benches, their cigarettes burning orange in the wind. Then they returned late to their seats. The cabins with beds had been full when they booked and they only regretted it now, the bottom deck packed with sleeping bodies sprawled out haphazardly. The girls had forgotten blankets, and the air-conditioning froze their toes and hands, the swell rocking them too much, the wine sloshing around with the spaghetti. S-- - hadn't drunk any wine, but felt very pregnant that night, swollen and a bit sick. Real middle-class Africa around them, with those mothers with tupperwares full of rice and sauce, old men in sweaters taking turns praying in the hallway, a few old couples, half-French half-Senegalese, cuddled under big blankets together. One army guy in the corner, snoring bloody hell. Everyone else giggling about it. S--- stayed up all night reading Foucault. It seemed appropriate.

6. **The Sept-Place** (AKA Peugeot Station Wagon with third bench-seat welded into the trunk)— From the port in Ziguinchor, it was a five-minute walk to the gare-routière. The air was humid, compared to the dry of the Sahel. The roads dusty, and even at noon the light was almost Caribbean. Palm trees, colonial pastels. Soledad bought a pineapple and expertly cut it open right there in the dusty car-lot, shared it with the

driver and the three other passengers. It was an hour, waiting for the sept-place to fill up to take them to Kafontaine. The fare was **4000 Francs** each, they paid up front. Some army guys around. Begging kids. S--- made a game of peekaboo with one of them, until he was shoed away by the driver. One more passenger arrived, a large man in a long green tunic and dark sunglasses. Fifteen minutes later, a young guy who worked for the Minister of Health. Finally the driver started trading money with an old man, a father, and soon they were off. The final passenger was a teenage girl, very small. She cried the whole way to Kafontaine, clutching a little gold cross. There were four army stops on the way. They asked all of the men for ID, ignoring the foreigners and the girl-teen. The region is thick with rebels, the driver told them between stops, the Casamance has always been volatile, we're trying to separate. That night, lying in bed in their beach cabin, the girls swore they heard shelling. It sounded far from their cabin, and they couldn't be sure; they were both so tired, they ignored it and fell asleep. The next morning over coffee the owner of the hotel told them, Those were rockets exploding in the jungle ten miles away, but don't worry, it never reaches as far as the beach. They didn't hear the noise again for two full weeks. But it thrilled them both. That first night, it was as if the Rebels were welcoming them to the Casamance by knocking the police off their trail. Later Soledad would admit, she had never felt safer than on that beach, despite the shelling, the army poking around, those Followers

chasing after them. No one would find them in an abandoned beach-resort in the Casamance, in the thick of the hot season, while the rebels shelled in the jungle. The tourists were gone. No one would suspect they'd gone *there*. It was as if their trail had evaporated in the wake of that larger crisis. It was as if, the more explosive the political unrest, the less it mattered that a pregnant girl had run away.

Grand total (transport): **One airplane, one ferry, three speeding taxis, two hotel rooms, four bribes, one spaghetti dinner, one pineapple, and one Peugeot Station wagon with a third bench seat welded into the trunk.**

Grand total (\$): **441 133 CFO* (West African Francs)**

**Otherwise known as 672 Euros, or 826 US Dollars, or 864 Canadian Dollars, approximate value, due to a somewhat volatile exchange rate at the time of travel. A small fortune by West African standards, but for two Tubabous looking to escape a country on a *dime, a very reasonable, if not inconsequential sum.*



Her time in Senegal was short, less than a month, but the middle of her time in Senegal, she approached the five-month point of her trip. She walked slowly, she spoke slowly. There was no denying her pregnant belly, her fading clothes, her deep tan. Something happens to us after five months abroad. It is a time of ruination or contemplation. Very few travelers, even contract workers, make it past five months. That's when friends at home no longer see you as a friend-away, but a friend-gone; you start missing weddings, births, elections, news stories. The political situation where you are has morphed into a far larger concern than that of your patria. Your stomach has adjusted to the spice, your sweat has that sour funk, you feel comfortable walking single file down a market road dodging puddles, beggars, goats and taxis. You don't even notice that herb-peddler shaking his monkey skull staff, or the naked child wailing from the doorway of a shack, or the muscled body of the lamb hanging by its hooves, the skin only intact around its dead little face. Something about the five-month mark makes the ex-pat feel finally at home, the homesick finally ready to leave, and the runaway feel, at least a little bit, home-free.

Very few foreigners reach this point, however, without a certain degree of exhaustion. Yes, the eggs are free-range and the grains are macro-biotic; the African eats only what is grown close-by or imported at enormous cost. But gone are the hot showers, the salads, the daily exercise, the cool night's sleep. Instead, there are mosquitoes, hundreds of thousands of millions of them, nipping at your ankles and neck, fiercest at dusk and while whirring around the ears. The white girl may triple-ply repellent, will sleep under a net, will sweat through stifling long sleeves and sweltering socks, all in an attempt to fend them off. But they permeate, they dominate. They also carry with them the killer of killer: malaria. Most Africans have had It, at least once. And It has slaughtered millions (So small! So fierce!) such that everybody has a relative who has fallen victim to Its fever, whether a child or old person, or someone suffering already from Typhoid, malnutrition, Sickle Cell Anemia. It comes in swarms, in waves. It spares no prisoners. Even our Tubabou fancy prophylaxis, our lotions and potions, can't stave them off. You get bit, you get sick. That's malaria.

Mosquitoes are only a few of the gazillion critters out to get you in West Africa: Besides the airborne killers, there are the mites and gnats and bedbugs that pick away at your pale skin. Such charming enemies, carrying such inventive maladies as River Blindness or Sleeping Sickness, or the silent but violent Dengue Fever. Then there is the heat, which in most of Senegal mounts to a suffocating forty-five degrees in the daytime with no respite, no clean water to swim in, no air-conditioning but for the banks. That usually results in dehydration, heat-rash, the obvious sunburns resulting in peeling and blisters and eventually headaches, prickly sensations across the body. Then there are the food-borne bugs: the amoebas and bacteria and trichinella pork worms. Darling little

fuckers. To say nothing of the Hepatitis in the veggies. The Cholera in the water. Beware too of the Bacterial Conjunctivitis, or old fashioned pink-eye, so easily transmitted, so pussy, so disgusting. And when swimming! How delightful to discover that your favourite swimming hole, such a welcome respite from the roasting afternoon, is home to Bilharzia and Schistosomiasis, some cute little larva that live dormant in snails, until they enter your skin via any small abrasion (or scratched mosquito bite!) where they proceed to your liver, reproduce, and live for eternity in your lower bowel. To say nothing of snakes. To say nothing of Rabies. TO SAY NOTHING OF MUTHERFUCKING AIDS!!!!

It is no wonder, so long ago, they labeled West Africa the White Man's grave.

But we know all of this. We know about the flukes in the feces that crawl up through the bottom of your feet. We've heard about the Tape-Worm. We can imagine the starvation. Thanks to television, a lack of literature, and very few, very grim eyewitness accounts, we know that the swollen bellies and flies-in-the-eyes babies are African, the monkey-transmitted gut-liquefying diseases are African, the stoned child soldiers in wedding dresses are African. But there had to be more to the equation for S---, an intelligent woman voluntarily running towards that chaos, towards the most poverty-ridden, unjust, disease-stricken area on earth.

After all, this was not simply a vacation into the third world. S--- was no B-List celebrity on a World Vision commercial tour, hugging malarial babies one minute, only to chomp down on lobster tails in first class the next. This was her fifth month abroad, and her fifth city, and she was going *deeper*.

It must have shocked the locals, particularly the Senegalese. How many villagers did she meet who's relatives had boarded boats to the Canary Islands, or hid in the tanks of water trucks, or walked! across the Sahara, only to arrive in Morocco shaken, thirsty, and ready to swim the Strait of Gibraltar, all for a job picking oranges or scaling fish, all for a few Euriots to send home. They were desperate. They were poor. And so they left their villages by the thousand and aimed for Spain or Italy, with its itchy rescue blankets, its holding cells, and very worst, its disapproving blue-eyed looks. If they even made it. If they didn't drown. One town Nicole visited in Senegal— just South of St. Louis— lost a third of its population in one pirogue destined for the Canaries. It sunk. They were stupid, too African, her taxi driver explained. They had to travel together because Africans fear loneliness, but to make it to Europe you need to think like a European. The taxi driver tapped his temple and squinted, as if seeing his own future. You must go alone. Be independent! he said, shaking his head. Why did you leave? she asked him. They kicked me out, he responded, but I'll be back.

Meanwhile, here was S--- moving in the opposite direction. It was absurd and it was voluntary; she was traveling south, away from Europe, away from the drier, easier provinces she knew and understood, into the wet, the green, the white-man's-grave. She didn't know then that her sixth city would be her last. It is possible that she thought she would live in her sixth city forever, raising her child the African way, owning a little house, carrying water on her head and buying her vegetables in the market, learning Krio, starting a little business maybe, but most importantly, disappearing from view. Because she was *choosing* Africa. She was rejecting Canada, for this.

Her death came as no surprise to her Following, considering how deeply she plunged into the belly of that beast. Looking back, we can see her path was in place. After all, she was heading to Sierra Leone, war-torn, poverty-ridden, un-policed, precarious Sierra Leone. It was there she would take her last breath. Destiny called. She couldn't just hide from its siren song for eternity on the beach. But she did take a whole month to ward it off, if only to read and eat nice French food and swim in the remote corners of the Casamance, in southern Senegal. It was a brief heaven, before her entry into that sweet chaotic hell.



Dakar, Senegal

Les Almadies:

It is morning, very early, and along the beach road there are a few white people and older minister-types jogging along where the pavement meets the dirt. The sun has that purple, dawn hue. The mist is heavy, but it will lift. The road drifts along a rugged, rocky coastline, through the diplomatic neighbourhood, past a few mid-range hotels and the Saudi Arabian embassy, past a surf club bar and the UN mission. Here, there is glass in the windows and gates around the villas, but this is still Africa; there is still the odd puddle of raw sewage, there are untethered goats nibbling weeds, there are no sidewalks. The construction projects use giant sticks to hold up the newly poured concrete floors.

In the ditch, a mother nurses her baby in the open air as she prepares a small fire for breakfast tea. Her house, if that is what a tin and plywood shack can be called, is a

squat on a bit of unused land, under a mango tree dripping fruit. She has tied a line from the tree-trunk to the curtain door of her shanty. There are a few baby clothes strung there. Not many. She must wash them every other day, but in what water, we cannot tell. Hers is not an official house— it doesn't have a number or a door. Unless she steals electricity from a nearby wire, she does not have light, and unless she ties into the garden hose from the mansion behind her, she must walk a great distance every day to fetch clean water. It is possible that a servant from a nearby consulate lets her fill her jugs from his kitchen pipes, but these services are rarely free. Even gathering wood for a breakfast fire is difficult; we are in the city. There isn't much to be had.

S--- walks by the woman with her hand on her belly and nods. The woman's face lights up. She waves S--- over and says something in Wolof. It is very early, and S--- has really just rolled out of bed, so at first she doesn't want to go. She's in her old, too-tight jeans but she can't do the button up any more, her protruding stomach pokes out over the woven belt she's tied to keep them up. Finally, she walks over to the woman and they smile, the mother just starts speaking to her in Wolof. S--- doesn't say anything. What can she say? Instead, S--- sort of hovers there until the woman pulls out a plastic crate for S--- to sit on, and pours her a tin cup of black tea.

It becomes obvious, after a minute of her talking, that the woman wants S--- to look at the baby, unabashedly sucking at the woman's breast. She is very small, the baby, and the woman is quite young, her hair kinked on one side. As soon as the baby has drunk enough, and starts sputtering milk around the mouth, she pops her nipple out and pulls a loose T-shirt over her swollen breasts. After a couple of light taps, the baby burps.

Then the woman passes the baby to S--- and steps inside her shack, still talking away, S--
- still not understanding a word of it.

It is the first time S--- has held a baby since she's become pregnant, though they are everywhere here, in Africa. This baby is beautiful, a little ponytail on top of her head even though she's little. Her eyes are wide, staring at S---, but she won't cry. It's like she willfully holding back her frightened tears.

A white woman runs by, her arms pumping. She looks at S--- sitting there with her swollen belly, holding this black baby outside of a squatter's shack. On the jogger's face is a look of envy.

Bonjour— she calls to S---. Her face is contorted into a kind of grimace.

Bonjour, S--- mumbles back. The woman jogs away, a mechanical thing.

Inside the shack there is some banging around, and the sound of the mother, jabbering away. The baby is perfect. S--- leans in to smell its neck, to rub its cheek against her cheek. The lady comes out wearing a darker T-shirt, but S--- can see her breast has been leaking, there is a slight spot on the T-shirt where it has burst through. In the woman's hands is a basket of bracelets. This must be how she makes money, walking the beach with her baby strapped to her back, selling trinkets to tourists. She holds up a thong bikini made of stretchy strings and bright blue beads. S--- laughs and pulls out five thousand Francs. The woman pulls six fingers out, and S--- pulls out another thousand. It's a good trade.

The woman, tittering away, ties the bikini (see-through really, just a few strings to form a triangle) over S---'s tank top as a joke. S--- makes a show of modeling it for her. Then the woman reaches into basket for a simple, black and red beaded bracelet, and puts

it onto S---'s wrist. S--- shakes her head, meaning No Thank You, but the woman laughs and pats S---'s belly and says, in English: Baby. It's a kind gesture, and S--- says, Merci, merci, more to the baby than anything, as the woman looks through all of the items in the basket, saying something about each one. Then, after a minute or two, S---- tries to hand her daughter back to her, but the woman goes quiet.

Baby, she says again, but she won't reach for it.

S--- doesn't know what to say.

She pats her own stomach and says, No no, I have my own. But the woman won't smile, and she won't take her baby back.

Baby, she says again.

And all of a sudden, S--- is scared. She rests the baby against her belly and reaches around her neck to pull off the bikini. Then she tries a final time to hand the baby back. Again, the young girl won't reach for her child, so S--- reaches down and places the baby on the dirt. She is too small to sit and so she lies there, not too close to the fire, and between S--- and the girl. She doesn't know what else to do, so she stands to leave.

The woman looks at S--- and back at the baby, and her face cracks: she starts to laugh hysterically, slapping S--- on the shoulder, then reaching for a high-five. S--- sort of smiles. Then the woman picks up the baby and is really killing herself now, chatting again and bouncing her daughter against her big chest and pretending to give S--- the baby then pulling her back. This is obviously hilarious to the woman. It takes S--- a really long time to get it, but soon enough S--- laughs too, glad the whole thing has melted into a simple joke.

There in the ditch, in front of the shack, they laugh. That's when the French automaton jogger peels back around the corner; she spots them with their arms around each other. S--- and this African shack mother-girl. Bonjour S--- says again, and the girl copies her in a high-pitched sing-song voice, holding up the baby and making it look like she's the one calling out: Boooooonjour! The French jogger won't even look at them. She stomps away. And as she does, S--- and the girl make a show out of mimicking her, their knees high in mock-jogging procedure. The baby is smiling too, held up like that, the morning mist burning off to reveal a cool sun rising over the city of Dakar.

La Place D'Independence:

The city that all other West African cities yearn to be— Dakar is large. Dakar is breezy. Dakar is many things, but it is not Abidjan's sky-scrapered ode to the future, nor is it St. Louis' ballad to its colonized past. Dakar is completely wrapped up in its present. In any neighbourhood, between its tangled roads and dozens of lego-block suburbs (all dirt coloured, with little square windows protected by bars) you can always find a few men sharing a giant bowl of rice and sauce, a couple of kids kicking at a ball. On the beaches, just wait an hour and a football team will show up to complete their daily squat-run-jump exercises. After they finish, there are always a couple of burly brothers practicing for the famous Senegalese wrestling matches. The monsters toss each other into the sand, then dive into the ocean together. They might even hold hands walking back to the bus stop side by side.

Dakar is a friendly place at times—a place where bankers and university professors can share a joke with the peddlers and street sweepers. It has its big-city side,

though. Ask anyone from the provinces, they'll tell you that Dakar is cold, Dakar is expensive, Dakar is very very dangerous. Walk around the Route de la Corniche-Ouest at night, they'll explain, and you'll get knifed by a mugger on a scooter! Snap a photo of the wrong street vendor and you get threatened with a stone through your windshield. Walk around that one corner on the Avenue Pompidou and a tout will beg you into his shop, until the moment you shake your head, or say Non, Merci, at which point he'll shove, yell, cry out, and then rob you for your pocket's entire contents before you can get away.

Then again, they'll tell you, Dakar is a city of class, where African men and African women wear suits, carry cell phones, drive SUVs. Dakar is not a mythical slum-dog paradise, nor is it unjustly wealthy, even in the ex-pat's quarters. Instead, Dakar is a city of incongruity, a capital whose cultural institutes and patisseries are nestled between hair salons and shwarma joints. The sandy roads could just as soon be lined with a vegetable hawker as an international bank. The zoning is outrageous; there are neighbourhoods where you are not permitted to smoke, for fear of upsetting the Muslim clerics. There are fly-infested shanties in which you may fuck a pre-teen boy or girl. There are giant USAID compounds where white families from Wichita share stories about their home teams, and there are gutters that, each night, occupy ten or fifteen boys from villages not far away, who each morning awake anew in search of a bit of bread, something to haul, something to build for a few measly Francs.

It's the kind of place where a girl like S--- could share a joke with a young mother living in a shack in the ditch. That same afternoon, S--- could rendez-vous with an unidentified gentleman, and after a glass of Perrier and a plate of coq au vin, he could

drive out to an airport on the Western-most tip of the continent of Africa, where he could sneak her onto plane headed for who-knows-where. Dakar is that kind of confusing.

Wait, you're thinking. Dakar is full of ex-pats. Wouldn't she be spotted? The answer is, yes, there is always the chance, but there are so many high-class bars and cafes and patisseries and hotels and lounges and restaurants and galleries where S--- could spend hours and unless her face were to appear on French Television, she would be relatively unnoticed. But then (you're thinking) she's going to get on another plane and fly out of there? No immigration checks? No security? But maybe she's traveling with someone *connected*. And, this is Africa. We've seen her buy her way through one airport, could she do it again? How many Francs? Is Dakar harder to cheat than Bamako? What about entering Sierra Leone? And— (you're really incredulous now) these men don't just materialize out of no where! You're thinking: People don't just invite you to Sierra Leone, just like that. It takes something special or totally sinister on his part, a fatal attraction or some motivation for him, because it's dangerous— He could get busted. She could lose everything, risking exposure and the chance she could get caught. Why wouldn't she just keep traveling over land? What was taking her to Sierra Leone?

Most of us believe it was her **Desire to Escape from Escape**.

* Not impossible, in a city so full of contradictions.

Kafontaine:

His name was Aamil. He was not particularly beautiful; Belgian, but his father was still in Lebanon. He was big and dark, with big Arab eyes and a long French nose. His job for the UN was to clerk for the Special Courts. He was a lawyer by training— a Boring Belgian Lawyer. His smile was bright white and he wore dark sunglasses.

He hated Belgium, especially Brussels. He loved Capetown, Jakarta, Beirut. He was an orderly man who was fueled by disorder. He was also an unlikely criminal. He exported illegal things. At the moment, it was blood diamonds to the Dutch.

According to Soledad, and later confirmed by the hotel worker Loella, they were all together in Kafountine for ten days. S--- and Soledad and Aamil. Kafountine is a rare Rasta town in the heart of the separatist state south of the Gambia. It's quiet. The resort where they stayed is not so much a resort but a collection of little huts in a palm grove next to a shallow marsh filled with birds and attached by a little bridge to a beach. The beach is long and empty, the water is warm. The sand is a muddy grey. There is also a bar in the middle of the compound, under a giant thatch roof. In the daytime the bar is framed by bougainvillea and the low chairs and tables stay cool. It isn't a dancing bar, but there is music. There is a giant log slashed in two that was painstakingly sanded and varnished, and that's where Francois, the hotel owner, pours all of the drinks. He knows everyone. He was the one who introduced the girls to Aamil.

Soledad remembers, looking back, that S--- was still a bit skittish. Her belly was swollen in earnest now; she was nearly at the seven-month point in her pregnancy. He was staying for a week, he told them. On a total shut-down from his real life. They were the only ones staying in the resort that night. It was inevitable they would become friends.

La Plage Longue:

The beach was slow and warm the next day and all the next days— they lay under a giant thatched umbrellas and read novels and ordered ham and cheese sandwiches on baguettes

to be brought out with cold cokes. The barman on the beach was named Vieux, but he was terribly young. After he ran back to the bar for their lunches, he would strip off his jeans and T-shirt down to a pair of short girls' shorts, and then he would hop into the surf to help a few boys pull in their nets. They were all incredibly strong and beautiful men. Their skin gleaming in the salt water. The girls whistled and catcalled to them as they ran out of the ocean. It was a great joke. The boys all bowed and came over and they all shared a few more cokes and a joint. S--- didn't smoke, but Aamil did. His eyes turned hazy and he started telling riddles to the boys in French. The days were long, but the sunsets still surprised them.

With Soledad, at night under their mosquito nets, she talked more and more about finding a small house and doctor. She still hadn't had an ultrasound or anything, but the baby was kicking. S--- was putting on weight. One morning, the two of them taxied into town to find the one stifling internet café, operated by an old Rasta with yellowed eyes and a crooked grin. They paid him a thousand Francs for an hour, and on keyboards loaded with sand, they Googled pregnancy and baby names and proper diets and stretches for an easy delivery. He turned a fan on the computers so they wouldn't overheat, but one of the ancient PCs shut itself down twice, in the middle of a search.

Afterwards, buying fruit and a few snacks from the MiniMart, S--- had told Soledad that she wasn't worried, but that evening, she made Aamil call his friend, a British trained doctor in Freetown. After a light greeting in English and a few words in Krio, Aamil passed the phone to S--- and they spoke for twenty minutes or so, S--- pacing around outside of their cabin and the two of them sitting on the little porch reading their books quietly, straining to listen to her questions.

When she came back she looked calm, happy. He's wonderful, she smiled.

Aamil said: Maybe that is another reason for you girls to come with me. Soledad and S--- stopped still and Soledad said, Hostia! Que haces guapa? And then S--- started practicing Lamaze breathing techniques on the porch, under her breath saying *SIERRA LEONE SIERRA LEONE* before slumping down into her chair, big smiles on everyone's faces.

That night S--- didn't drink, but Aamil and Soledad shared two bottles of wine and Soledad teetered off to bed around midnight. She kissed them both on the mouth to say Buenas Noches. Aamil started sipping sparkling water with S---, and they stayed up another hour. She ended up in his cabin. Soledad woke alone. By the time she stumbled back to the bar for breakfast, Aamil and S--- were eating eggs and drinking café au lait and planning their flights to Freetown.

This is going to fucking happen, S--- said, so excited about it that her face was really beaming. That sort of thing happens to some people. Their lives change fast and you can see it on their face. Soledad jumped up and down she was so excited.

Aamil took them into the internet café the next day in a taxi he paid for, and showed the girls the best flight to buy. They had the rasta put in a call to Dakar to make the reservation. They would all buy their own tickets to Freetown, about four hundred dollars each, but all three of them went on Aamil's American credit card, which he faxed with a copy of an American drivers licenses to an office in New York.

You're American too? she asked, and he said, I'm just a clerk, and he grinned.

She told him to put her ticket under the name Sung Lee, and that she would pay whatever it took to get through the gates. He raised his eyebrows at her, but he did what she said.

Lodge Kassala:

The next few days turned very introspective. S--- introduced herself to Loella, the gorgeous girl with the baby who worked in the kitchen, and Soledad started hanging out more with Vieux. They spent most of their time down at the beach bar and Soledad got more and more brazen with her tanga. It was a thong, really, and Soledad made a lot of jokes about that thong. She was a good dancer, and when they turned on the music she was never shy to dance around in it. Loella was also an amazing dancer, but she would keep it to herself, only dancing with her baby on her hip. There were hardly any other people at all on their section of the beach. There were beach cows. An odd four-by-four with an old white guy driving and a young black girl on the back. They mostly sat on the sand and read novels and Aamil would talk a bit about how long it had been since he had a vacation, and Loella did work all day in the kitchen back in the resort and Vieux would fish.

They thought about what it would be like to live here and fish that water every day and know the tides and the watershed and the birds. The men fished around a half-submerged boat, rusted and lying there in the swell. Vieux was amazing to watch in the water. Look at his dive, Soledad would point at him and marvel. Por Dios, she would say.

I've never felt that feeling, S--- said.

What do you mean? Aamil asked.

It was hard for S--- to explain, so she stared out at the men fishing around the carcass of the boat. It all becomes a comparison, she finally said. Like how is this place different than India, than Harlem. I'm always doing sort of a compare-contrast, like I see everything through a wide-angle lens. I can't ever get to know a place.

But what about your home? Aamil said.

She shrugged and sighed. Soledad rolled over and S--- rubbed some oil into her shoulders. That's a bit too romantic for me, S--- said. That day, S---'s tummy turned totally brown in the sun, and she kept rubbing oil into her stretching skin. She still looked fabulous in her bikini.

Ziguinchor:

Their last night in Kafountine, Francois the hotel owner had left for Ziguinchor and nobody came to the bar, it was just a dead night. Loella emerged from the back and sat with them a long time, and told funny stories about birthing her baby and sometimes washing clothes for the snobby lady next door. Vieux and Aamil played so many games of pool but neither of them really drank, in fact, Vieux only sipped a Fanta and Aamil had two small glasses of pastis. In the corner, the girls gossiped in French. It was mostly about Loella's baby, who everybody loved. They listened to the music very very loud, and danced a bit. S--- was dancing with her belly in front, in her short shorts and tank top. The boys couldn't stop staring at her.

Then they opened a bottle of wine and they all had one glass, even S---, even Vieux. It took them a long time to finish. They burned through two full candles and ended talking about God and Christians and heaven. Aamil and Loella were Christians,

Vieux was a Muslim, but an unmarried one. S--- was the only one who wasn't sure. They prodded her a little. Loella taught her a reggae song about God, but then even she admitted that she would more often hear her mother's voice calling from the dead than that special Jesus whisper. They all agreed about ghosts, even S---. Vieux told the story about his baby sister dying from a snake-bite. He leaned in and pretended to bite Soledad's neck to scare her. She shrieked. Vieux looked at S--- as he did it, snake eyes.

Then Francois called from Ziguinchor on Loella's cell phone. The shelling had started again, between the two cities, the highway full of check stops again, the military looking for rebels on the run. The guests, all of them, would have to wake up early to get there for the boat.

They turned off the music then and hugged good-night and all went back to their cabins, Vieux to sleep in his hammock in the beach bar and Loella with her baby strapped to her back, they could hear the Djembe drums a few kilometers away. They couldn't hear bombs, just drums. S--- walked with Aamil to his door. They said: seven o'clock, to each other before they kissed on the cheek and crunched off to each other's cabins. But she didn't go back.

Vieux was waiting for her in the bar.

He saw her walking up the little path, the moonlight on her. He waited, though, for her to come to him. She said, I left something here. She said, Vieux? He didn't speak, he let her walk to him, almost invisible in the dark behind the bar. Then he ran his hot hands down the front of her breasts and down her firm, pregnant belly. Then he pulled a tank top strap over her shoulder and then cupped both breasts in his hands and squeezed. It hurt a little. He shoved his mouth over hers. She could barely breathe. She didn't want

to breathe. It was only the darkness around them, the smell of candles just blown out. He very gently propped her up on the bar. Then she pulled her shorts down, and he picked up each of her ankles and kissed up the inside of her calves. Then he kissed around her belly and pulled her shirt up. Sucking on her breasts. The drums going, faintly. I want a taste of this white mama before she go, he said in English. And he licked her until she almost screamed.

Bar Lalonde:

After that, S--- was skittish. She was scared she'd be caught in Dakar, after the close call in Bamako. On the ferry, she didn't really want to leave her bunk. Aamil finally convinced her to come out for dinner, where they ate roasted chicken in the dining room, but she quickly retreated to her room saying she felt sea-sick. He and Soledad stayed up drinking beer and watching the French dubbed television. They all woke up around six and mumbled, Good Morning from their bunk beds, out the little window, the ferry was pulling into the port in Dakar.

She stayed edgy all the next day in the capital. They took a two-hour breakfast downtown at a high-class patisserie, owned by a Lebanese friend of Aamil's. It was the best chausson aux pommes Soledad had ever tried. Better than Paris! She told the owner. After two café au laits, after they had scoured the French newspaper and stashed their packs, they had time for one gallery, near the French Embassy. The photos hanging there were by a German woman who composed very intimate portraits of Senegalese and German girls. They spent over an hour going through her small exhibition. Then they spent the late afternoon in an old French bar across from the Embassy called the Bar

Lalonde, where the French owner smoked and watched French news all afternoon. They sat in a wooden booth and ordered steak-frites, and they all smoked many cigarettes, before and after the meal. It was the nerves. While they ate, a street-man came to the open door of the bar to ask for money, and he had a terrible cut down his leg, it was pestering, infected. He wasn't wearing a shirt or shoes. He looked rough. S--- tried to lean over the table to give him a few Francs but a security man, who was really just another street-man getting paid by the bar, started pushing him and chasing him with a stick. A horrible smell lingered in the bar after that. Like the man had shit himself out front. The security street-man came back after that and gave S--- a very stern talking to, scolding her and pointing his finger. She was doing a bad thing, giving street people money, he told her. Then he went to the bar and took the thousand Francs the French owner held out for him.

Monument de la Renaissance Africaine:

On the way to the airport, they asked if they could take the new seaside highway, just at sunset. It was a gorgeous modern thing that highway, with its wide paved lanes filled with new SUVs the palm trees and beaches and statues and a Radison with a waterfall out front, and some good street art along the walls. Many of the beaches along the road were full, and around one corner was a giant mosque and finally, past les Mamelles, they drove around the new giant monument to African emancipation. It is bronze, built by the Chinese and designed by the aged President, M. Wade. It's right on the way to the airport, right where S--- almost had a panic attack in the taxi and she started to cry, saying she couldn't decide whether she should risk it or she should stay. Aamil started

arguing with her but she quickly turned hysterical. She started screaming, I'm stuck here, I'm stuck. But Aamil rubbed her back and was quiet until she calmed down and then he pointed at the statue, hoping that would convince her. He reminded her that Africa was beginning again.

He said: Look at that, it is all so funny and serious at once. Then he reminded her that it was all planned out, and everywhere was dangerous for her, and she should look back to the feelings she felt on the beach, the place where all impulsive behaviour should be born— In a bikini, in the heat, on the sand. Then he reminded her that it was all about confidence, and with his UN ID and her cash and his connections, they would be in Sierra Leone in no time, ready to start her new funny African life. He liked her, he told her. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to her.

But I'm fat, she said, whimpering. The driver smirked. And I'm married. And missing. And pregnant, she said. How can you like me?

Soledad snickered in the front seat, but he was dead calm.

This is your dream, not mine, he said. Not a trace of humour left in him.

Aéroport International Léopold Sédar Senghor:

And then, it was the airport. Busy during an Air France arrival or departure, several Iberia flights every week, with its long lines of thick Spanish tourists. Today it was a flight to Madrid. Hostia! Soledad mumbled to S--- at the front door. Now I'm scared I'll get spotted here. They smiled. Their flight was three hours away, but this airport was swamped with the Spanish, touts, outside was full of taxi drivers and money-changers, calling out in French, Spanish, whatever worked. Even from the outside, the airport

looked to be more first-world than the airplane-hanger-in-renovations that was the Bamako airport. They politely refused a porter, and carried their own bags through the front door, where they showed a security guard their tickets. S--- was holding onto Aamil's arm now; they were going to act like Husband and Wife. Aamil was carrying both of their passports too. Neither S--- nor Soledad had a Sierra Leonean visa, and even with cash the whole thing would be difficult. At the front door, though, Aamil flashed his UN identification card and they all passed through quickly. The airport hummed with foreigners, old wealthy ones. Where have these people been? Soledad asked herself. S--- couldn't look at anyone. Her face was pale with a kind of terror.

They had booked their flights with Arik Air, a new airline calling itself the Wings of Nigeria. Their flight was to travel from Dakar, to Banjul, to Freetown, and then on to Lagos. Apparently, this flight operated five days a week, and business was going well. S--- and Aamil and Soledad were the first people to arrive to check-in, and they noticed immediately that the Arik Air desk did not have computers. That made S--- slightly more relaxed. Waiting for the desk attendant to arrive, they strolled by security to scope it out. It looked light. There was a metal detector and a few passport-checking booths. Only one was being used, but it looked like three other immigration control officers were about to begin work once the Iberia flight started lining up. She watched an older white woman walk through the metal detector wearing her purse and a fanny pack, and nothing beeped. That calmed her too.

Aamil had his suitcase wrapped in plastic while they waited. He told them about landing in Freetown, how often things would go missing from his luggage: Cell phones, an iPod. The locks get broken and the luggage will inevitably be rifled through, he explained. The girls decided that S--- would try to carry-on her small bag, and Soledad put her few things of value in there. Then she had her backpack plastic-wrapped too. Just in case. She noticed all of the Africans doing it, and so she agreed. The man wrapping the bags was so efficient, yet so grumpy for a Senegalese man. Too many tourists have treated him badly, Soledad whispered, and tried to give him the warmest eyes she could. Of course, it scared them a little that baggage handlers would rifle through their belongings. Landing in Lungi—where the Freetown airport is located—would be a bit scary, Aamil told them. They had to prepare themselves for that.

Finally a clerk arrived at the Arik Air booth, and he put out a sign indicating that Economy passengers should fill out a departure card before they lined up. They all dutifully filled them out, and Soledad went first to check in. The clerk was efficient and friendly. He was Senegalese, smiling, polite. He reminded her about liquids, and told her that she could face a large fine in Freetown if she did not have a visa already. She nodded politely and said *Merci, Merci*. He placed her bag behind him to be loaded onto the plane. He indicated with his hand that she should proceed to the security check ahead. *Merci Monsieur*, she nodded politely. Next, Aamil and S--- stepped up to the clerk. A couple of men in suits had already lined up behind them, and a Chinese couple with their luggage on a cart filed in next. The clerk took their boarding passes and Aamil's passport and UN card. But the moment S--- handed him her passport, his face froze. He looked around,

and then looked at her face, then back to the boarding pass. Before Aamil could speak, he could tell, things were going wrong.

The clerk stepped back from his desk, holding their passports. S--- reached for him and said, Monsieur, I'd like to speak to you about the flight, you see— but he had flipped open his phone and was calling someone. He wouldn't look at them. He took another step away, and another. S--- lost all blood in her arms, her face. She tried to turn to leave but Aamil held her arm so tight she couldn't run. The clerk said something into the phone and without abandoning his post at the Arik Air booth, he looked hard at S---'s face and then read something from her passport into the phone. Again, S--- tried to jerk away, this time pulling at Aamil's arm, but he was holding her so tightly, she almost yelped. From behind them, two of the officers from the Security Immigration appeared out of nowhere. One of them put his hand on S---'s shoulder, and he said, Viens Avec Nous. She nearly lost all feeling in her legs. When Aamil said, I'll come too. Wait. Stop. One of the men held him back as the other one led her away.

S--- could hear Aamil say, That is my wife! Where are you taking her? And then they led her into an office with the shades pulled down. She sat. Her face empty. Her face white. Soledad tried to follow her too but they stopped her outside the office. She started rapping her knuckles on the glass but Aamil grabbed her wrist. No scenes, he barked. Then he asked to speak to the Chief of Security. The officer shrugged and crossed his arms in front of his chest. That is my wife! Aamil pulled out his wallet and then looked around and marched back to the Arik Air booth to claim his passport. I don't have it, the

clerk finally told him, not looking at him, helping the suited man instead. They took it with the girl, he finally said. Aamil nearly punched the clerk in the face, but instead stormed back to the security office. Soledad was nearly hysterical when he got back. Someone just went in to talk to her, she said. The boss, she said, her face crunched up, her eyes brimming. What the fuck is going to happen to her? she asked Aamil, and Aamil paced for a second, then pulled out his phone. Shut up for a second, he snapped. Would you please Shut Up.

Inside the security office there were two rooms. The front room was simple: there was a desk and a few legers, two uniform shirts hanging on hangers, a plastic cup for tea, on the wall a poster of the president and a dead clock with Mecca in the center. Next to that was another room with only a wooden chair. That's where they left S--- for twenty minutes to sit and think by herself. She tried the door. It was locked with some sort of hinge on the outside. She probably could hear the radio in the next room too. There was a horrible odor of sweating body. It pulsed all around her. She put her hands over her stomach. She tried not to throw up.

Twenty minutes later, the Chief of Security walked into the first office, past Aamil and Soledad at the front door. I'm with the UN! The Anti-Corruption Committee! Aamil called out to him in French as he walked in to his office. He almost physically stopped the Chief, but he didn't want to press his hands against his chest; it would be too confrontational. He wanted to stay professional, as calm as he could, so he yelled: I'd like to speak to you about my wife! But the clerk inside shut the door, nearly in his face.

The chief took another twenty minutes in conference with the two other officers. They sat around the desk in the office, under the poster of the President and the dead clock, and spoke to each other in Wolof. S--- could hear them conversing on the other side of the door. She started to cry, quietly. No one came to check on her. Several times, the arresting officer entered and exited the office through the front door, past Soledad and Aamil. By this point, Aamil was nearly screaming into his phone. He was looking for his lawyer. He paced. He knocked again and tried to stop the arresting officer coming and going. Soledad was slumped onto a chair, her knees shaking. Then she tried to calm Aamil down, and then she got excited, and she knocked. Inside, the Chief and his clerk ignored them. The line-up outside to pass through immigration was growing, the Spanish tourists trying not to look as Aamil stormed around, as Soledad cried quietly, tears dripping down onto her shirt.

Finally, the Chief entered the little holding cell with the arresting officer. S--- flinched when the door opened. They closed it carefully behind them and she heard it lock. She flinched again. They looked at her for while before the Chief started to speak. Is he really your husband? the Chief asked. No, she answered. Good, he said. It will help if you tell us the truth. I will, she promised, and she nodded emphatically to prove it. You are in serious trouble, the arresting officer snarled at her in French. Yes sir, she said back, smiling meekly.

We want to know why you are traveling using a name that is not your name. The Chief looked at her from where he stood. He had his hands on his hips. She was seated in the only chair in the room and it creaked when she moved so she tried to stay very still. The chief was tall and broad-shouldered, his hair was trimmed close to his skull and under one eye he had an enormous dark mole. They both wore guns around their belts. The arresting officer was lighter and leaner and younger. He wore the newer shirt. And how did you enter the country without an entrance stamp. The officer scoffed. And why do you intend to leave without a stamp. The Chief was not posing these as questions—they were statements. S--- tried to look both of them in the eye at once. But, she couldn't answer. She just stared at them. Blankly.

What exactly were you doing while you were in Senegal? he finally asked. She took a deep breath and said: I was just visiting the beach. I am trying to— You are trying to move around West Africa undetected, he said. Yes, she said. And why exactly would you want to do that?

Outside, Soledad was no longer in tears, and Aamil had made contact with his lawyer. The plane leaves in an hour and half, he told him. The lawyer's voice buzzed into the phone. Then they started speaking Lebanese. Aamil ran his fingers through his hair, nodding, nodding some more. He said something curt and then snapped his phone shut. They'll be there waiting for us in Lungi, Aamil told Soledad. We won't have to worry about immigration on that side. He tried to peer into the security office, and then turned and kicked the wall behind him. Fuck. He nearly yelled, and a few Spanish tourists turned

to look. They were all almost through immigration now, their plane was going to take off first. Through the window they could see the Arik Air plane on the tarmac. His phone fumbled out of his hands and fell onto the floor and there was a plastic crash. The battery skidded away. Fuck. He said again, and scuttled over to retrieve it.

In the office, S--- tried to keep her voice very calm. She had the entire contents of her bag open on the floor, and her journals and clothing was strewn about, the arresting officer poking through it. So what you are saying, the Chief said, it that this a question of politics.

No, she said.

But you are a politician's wife?

Yes, she said.

And this isn't political? He shook his head.

I just don't want to go back, she said, and her eyes dripped more tears.

And I just don't want an international incident, he said back.

The only thing I can offer you is money, she said. Please, I'll pay. She opened her money belt and handed over six hundred dollars cash, five travelers checks for a hundred Euros each, and four US fifty Euro bills.

That is all you have? the Chief asked.

The man outside can give you more, she said. But that's all I have.

And how long to you plan to stay in Sierra Leone? he asked.

She started to sob now. Her pregnant belly shaking with it.

Ten minutes later, the arresting officer invited Aamil into the first office. He had calmed down now. He looked around at the dead clock, the spare desk. The clerk in the office shut the door behind him and without saying a single word, Aamil counted out three thousand US dollars out onto the desk, three piles of crisp hundred dollar bills. There is a thousand for each of you, he said to the officer at the desk. Is the Chief inside? The officer nodded. Aamil waited calmly, sitting on the desk, beside the three thousand dollars cash. The officer at the desk was trying hard not to stare at it. Finally, the Chief knocked on the second door, and the officer opened the little latch and the Chief walked through. He didn't seem surprised to see Aamil or the cash on the desk.

We're keeping her passport, the Chief said to Aamil. Then he nodded at the clerk, who scooped up all of the bills, and tapped them together in a little pile and handed them to the Chief. The Chief said something to him and the clerk rifled around in the desk drawer, finally finding an envelope and handing it back to the Chief. The Chief folded the bills once, and then placed them in the envelope, which he folded and tucked into his breast pocket.

Can you get her into Sierra Leone? he asked Aamil. Without a passport?

Aamil tried to wink. Of course, he said.

Wait here for fifteen minutes, the Chief said, handing Aamil his passport and UN identification.

Oui Monsieur, Aamil nodded. Merci Monsieur.

Send the Spanish woman through, he said to the clerk, and the officer stepped out of the office for a moment and said something quietly to Soledad. Her face was

bloodless, but she lined up behind the last of the Spanish tourists. The arresting officer and the Chief left the office then, and the clerk motioned for Aamil to pass through into the second room. Inside, he found S--- sitting in a daze on the chair, an assortment of clothing and her books spread all over the floor.

Pack this up, Aamil commanded. And S--- stared at him. Now! He yelled, and finally she jumped up and started shoving things back into her backpack. But there was no rush. It would be another forty-five minutes before the arresting officer would return to escort them to the plane. They would pass directly from the security office, out a separate exit, across the tarmac, to the foot of the stairs leading to the cabin. She would be clutching Aamil's arm the entire time. Both of them wearing sunglasses. Both of them drained. She wouldn't let go of his hand until she was buckled into her seat. From the little plastic windows, they would see the statue of the New African Family as the plane pulled up for take-off. Neither of them would speak. They would land in Freetown at five.

The Friends

Corset: From the Latin corpus, meaning body. A garment containing boning. Bits of steel and lace manipulated so as to mold the upper body into a more desirable shape. Ivory and cane running up the waist. Cinching there. Invented by the French, proprietors of whale-bone, shards sewn into the fabric, reducing a woman to twenty inches around the middle. Now commonly used by sadomasochists: the submissive a victim of “tight-lacing,” the dominatrix bearing the black straight set, ever the whipping dictator, the barking professor, the two-gun salute.



Zoe:

Typical uptight bullshit, if you ask me.

So typical. I came to Freetown as an aid worker, but to be honest, my job is totally bunk. I'm trained in 'International Relations' but I've never actually worked in my field before. In fact, this is kind of my first job out of University. I wanted to travel but my super uptight fucking mother would never give me money to backpack around Africa. But, when I told Daddy I was coming here to work he was all, My Zoe is Saving the World. What the fuck ever. I took his five grand, and I send them both photos of myself out in the streets with black people all around me, which Daddy put in his corporate Christmas card and which gives my mother a daily heart attack. Call me a sell-out. At least I get to hang in Sierra Leone, which is blowing my fucking mind.

True: My work here is with the Centre for the Prevention of Torture. Heavy shit, you would think. Especially if we were actually fucking DOING SOMETHING, but my boss is a British "torture expert," who's about fifty and totally useless. He holds all of these "workshops" and "seminars" with the big-wigs in Freetown, but anybody who is a big-wig in Freetown was either part of the war in a sketchy way, or wasn't here during

the war anyways, they were off in the US or the UK, and they're rich, so they don't really get it. The workshops are totally useless. The torture, if it's happening, is happening to 12-year-old girls showing up to clinics pregnant, saying: Please, I was raped by my huge mean neighbour, I'll be whipped by my father if he finds out I'm pregnant. And Doc takes her into the back room and does some crazy coat-hanger shit. That's torture. But we aren't allowed to even talk about that.

Oh, it drives me crazy. When I first met my boss, I was so into the way he talked and showed me around the city like he owned the place. Freetown is totally gnarly, and it helps when somebody's driving you around and showing you off. He's only been here a year, but he says hi to everybody and disgustingly, they say hi back. Probably because he's rich and white and bossy. He's got a monstrous ego. He arrives to our little office every day from his villa on Hill Station with this driver and the typical white SUV, talking on his cell phone far too loudly to his girlfriend, who is Sierra Leonean. She's a cute intelligent girl, and he speaks to her like she's his personal pro. He drinks beer during his fancy lunches at one of the three nice restaurants in town, and he stares at the waitresses and says dirty things to them, right in their ears. They all just giggle in a disgusting way, probably because he's very good looking for an old guy, but I've just had enough of looking at him. Especially after we slept together. That was the icing on the cake.

I've only been here for three months, but I can tell the difference between the old white men, and the kids like me that come to Africa to piss off their parents. For example, why do the old guys all take these local women to be their girlfriends? And why would you need a maid? And a driver? The traffic in Freetown is crazy congested, but I manage

to get around using the super cramped mini-buses (called poda-podas) or shared taxis and even the okadas, which is what they call the motorcycle-taxis—you just hop on the back and zip through traffic. People always wave at me when I'm on one of those, maybe it pleases them to see a white woman taking local transport, and I say, why not? It can't be more dangerous than driving in Montréal. But not my boss. He needs a driver, a cook, a clothes-washer, and an intern like me to do his paperwork. Like I said, more typical bullshit.

These old guys are the most perplexing, because they are the ones who complain about Africa NON-STOP. I mean, if you aren't into the way Africans do things, then stay in fucking Hampshire, where everything goes as planned. If you are so stuck on getting things done efficiently, the first-world way, why would you come to a place so tangled up with complicated tribal shit and lingering war criminals and rampant unemployment? This place is your nightmare! It's busy. It's hot. You take ten steps outside and your shirt is drenched, your disgusting thin hair is pasted to your skull. So you stay in your office just like the old colonial bosses (who were only kicked out of here forty or fifty years ago) never going up-country, never even going to East Freetown! And just like them, you're back to bossing people around all day, only to stare vacantly out from your office window every once and a while, blurting out, Poor Me! It is So Hard to get work done in Africa! These people are so disorganized! So lazy! What the fuck ever.

Everywhere I turn I see young moms doing hard labour, hauling water, cooking on coals and washing an entire household's clothing in a plastic tub with one cube of soap to last them the whole week. Lazy?! Look out there: see that lady selling stuff on the corner, a basket of bread or plantain chips (which she made from scratch the night before)

perfectly balanced on her head, a baby strapped to her back, reaching in and out of car windows, making proper change and reaching up and grabbing stuff from her head-basket and getting honks and people trying to cheat her, all in crazy midday heat on a dusty road in cheap sandals. FOR A DOLLAR A DAY. Yeah. What a lazy bunch of fucks. Especially compared to you, in your AC office, your UN truck, and your long hard day organizing WORKSHOPS. What the fuck.

You can divide the white kids here into two categories too: the ones who think they are “helping” and the ones who are just here for kicks. The helpers are annoying too, usually Christians or grad students or VSO volunteers, who come with this pre-conceived notion of what Africa needs, and they think that with no experience and a degree in history from a huge rich school, they MUST have the answers. The old white bosses love these tweakers because they complain to them about how disorganized Africa is, how everybody is always late, but they should feel good about this sacrifice, because one small success at a time, they are helping. Right. Of course nobody would start a business here, or actually hire an African dude to do anything but drive them around or clean the office. And the tweakers are the worst because they think everything is so SAD. Like the snotty kid in the market is SAD and the tin shacks are SAD. Yeah, of course, some deeply depressing shit goes down every day, especially during the war, but I don’t know if you noticed, but Sierra Leone somehow one of the happiest places on earth. Seriously, fuck Disneyland. I mean, your sister had her arm amputated by some crazed warlord, and you’re here on the side of the road selling some little scoops of rice, and you are maybe going to make a couple of bucks this whole week, and STILL you are fucking SMILING and JOKING and when the music comes on, you have the fucking energy to move your

hips and DANCE? These are deeply happy people to pull that shit off. They take a lot of bad and take just a little bit of good in return. And they fucking smile. But you are hard-pressed to see a white guy smiling in Sierra Leone; they're either too freaked out, or too bossy, or too fucking SAD.

It's weird. I've always been attracted to the Africans around me, maybe because of this really deep, internal smile. There are many many Africans in Montréal, and it is strange, when I tell people here that I'm from Canada, I get crazy responses. Yesterday, a clerk at the bank shook my hand when I showed him my passport. There is no racism in Canada! he pronounced. I felt so weird reminding him that even in a welcoming country like Canada, there are racist people, people who are closed minded, blah blah blah. He wouldn't have it. Black people are happy in Canada! He told me. He was going to get there one day, he confided, careful that his co-workers at the bank didn't overhear him. I had nothing to say, except to shrug and say Inshallah! Which is my response for most things lately. It means God-Willing. People say it all the time.

I didn't want to tell that guy that my own mother is racist, and she totally freaked out when I had a boyfriend from Burkina Faso in high school. I mean, he had lived in Montréal for most of his life, he spoke French, he was tall and black, he wanted to be a photographer. Totally funny, totally cool. But ol' Sylvia lost her shit with me over poor Ali. First of all, his family was Muslim. Big no-no. It didn't matter that we're Jewish, and we've been chastised for that shit our whole historical lives. No Way, says Sylvia. Find yourself a Jew. A Muslim is the opposite of a Jew, she tells me. And a black Muslim— That's like a death sentence. That's what she told me! And she sends me to this all girls

school with a bunch of bulimic bitches. Talk about a death sentence. More typical uptight bullshit if you ask me. I've been battling that shit my entire fucking life.

After that, I applied to get to Columbia in NYC, and I got in, thank fucking God. Even though it is real serious tuition, my parents paid for the whole fucking thing, the dorm in Manhattan, my liberal arts classes, my all-night hip-hop parties in Harlem, doing what ever I fucking please in New York City. I ended up in International Relations because Daddy straight up asked me one day when he was visiting: What the Fuck will you do with an English Degree? And I was all, yeah, I dunno. And he registered me in some Econ and Poly-Sci courses, and then I got this torture job, so it all worked out. One thing I learned at Columbia was that a fucking eighteen-year-old kid in the US can take out a hundred thousand dollars in student loans, all to study in a super fancy University how to "help" people in the third world, and in the end, they will be in more debt than anybody in the slums of Freetown could even imagine. And while they are maxed out on credit cards, wearing the same cords from 1998, cutting their own hair (badly) and quoting Chomsky to each other on the subway, STILL these tweakers are calling the slum-kids poor (and of course SAD). You would think their debt would humble them a little. Yeah Right. When they get to Sierra Leone, these tweakers act like they own the whole fucking country. One of them goes to the provinces to work in a village, and suddenly it becomes MY VILLAGE. Or they work on a gender-based violence project, and all of a sudden they are a fucking expert on the subject, they're all Rape this and Rape that. But in a casual way, like it doesn't fucking hurt anybody, they've got the whole thing calculated. They've got it down to a set of fucking stats.

Anyways, with me hating my ass-wipe boss and all the insipid tweakers I work with, I was happy to meet Sandra Barnett and show her around Freetown. It was obvious from the start, she was there for kicks. Yes, I knew immediately who she was, but I had zero interest in narking her out to some wacked-out group of Followers. I mean, I'm working with torture stories all day long, why the fuck would I care if some woman runs away from her douche-bag politico husband? In fact, we had a lot in common. Peter was way older than her, and when I told her the story about my prick boss fucking me in his office and then blowing me off, she was pissed. It felt good to tell somebody who wouldn't judge.

It was that creep Aamil who introduced us, but I don't mind Aamil, even though he's sketchy. He always knows about all the good parties, and he hooked her up with a pretty swank apartment in Cockle Bay. Cockle Bay is right beside the Aberdeen Bridge, and the area isn't exactly full of ex-pats, but there are a few richer ex-pats and NGO offices mixed in with the Sierra Leonean families. It is a nice combo, almost like a real neighbourhood, close to the good bars on Lumley Beach and it was pretty safe there at night. She came to Freetown with this HILARIOUS Spanish chick, who right away I loved. There are hardly any Spanish people here; it's all Canadians and Brits and Americans. The Russians are here to sell guns and drugs. The Chinese do big construction projects and the Lebanese own the restaurants, hotels, grocery stores, and other mercantile stuff. There are a few Indians selling electronics. I'm generalizing, but they do tend to stick to the same industries. I've talked to a lot of cab drivers about it, and they tend to agree.

So, the way it started was when Aamil called me up and was like, WHERE IS YOUR BOSS? And I admit, I had just finished fucking him at his big fancy place in Hill Station (for the LAST TIME! I swore to myself) and I was all, Actually, we just got out of a meeting, let me pass you the phone.

Well there was some posturing on both sides, and from what I could hear, Aamil needed a hand with the cops at the airport, something about getting the girls into the country. My boss wouldn't tell me the whole deal, but it was obvious that Aamil didn't want to call his pals at the UN because he could lose his job (which confused me to all hell because who is half-gangster, half-lawyer working for the UN? But that sort of shit happens in Freetown, I'm coming to understand.) Anyways, he needed a connection in immigration. And wouldn't you fucking know it my super-complaining boss, who bitches about corruption-this and corruption-that, suddenly knows the number of a guy who can help. The Minister of Foreign Affairs. For fuck's sake. So my boss gets the Minister on the phone and these girls get in without visas. What the fuck ever.

So, that night, Aamil calls to thank us, and tells us they've just gotten off the helicopter from Lungi, and did we feel like going for a drink at Roy's? And my boss says he's too pooped (from banging the intern doggie-style and ignoring torture all day) but he would send his assistant. C'est moi.

Man, I gave him some dirty fucking looks, but he begged me and said some super flattering shit and so I finally said, Sure, I feel like a beer anyways. But I'm taking your fucking driver. (To be honest, I had a mad crush on the driver too, Mohammed. On the way down to Roy's, I had a crazy conversation with him about how he doesn't believe in AIDS. It shook me up, but I still invited him to join us for beers, and to my surprise, he

said yes.) Anyways, I showed up with Mohammed, and if you would fucking believe it, there is Sandra Barnett sitting with Aamil! She looks amazing. She's tanned. And to top it, she's fucking pregnant. I hadn't really been following the story since I'd been in Freetown, because internet is very spotty here. Everything is spotty, lights, water. But when you only get a couple of hours of electricity a day, you do not spend time looking at paparazzi bullshit. It sort of weeds out the crap from your life, in some ways. But I did recognize her from when she went missing; I had read a couple of articles about her. Anyways, I didn't know she was knocked up, and I did not know she was in West Africa.

So, when I saw her, and recognized her, I didn't freak out, I just smiled huge and Aamil introduced me as the Torture Intern working for one of the most influential men in Sierra Leone, and I shook everybody's hand and introduced Mohammed as my friend and I sat beside Sandra and I ordered myself a Star Beer and then I turned to her and said, Man, I'm so glad you came here! And she got this crazy look on her face and I said, Don't freak out. Please. And she stood up and looked at Aamil and I said, Wait I know who you are but it doesn't matter, and she went white and her Spanish friend jumped up too, and I could tell they were going to bolt so I blurted out, I just let my boss fuck me doggie style!

Well, they both completely cracked up. And Mohammed and Aamil stared at me with their mouths open, and I said, They could send me home for that! I could get fired. And you can use that against me if you want. So there. She was really laughing now, so I started laughing too. I won't narc you out, I told her. Then she asked me how long I was staying for and I said, I don't know, and she said, When are you going home? and I said,

Never, and she said, Really? And I said, Inshallah! And everybody laughed. I think she trusted me after that.

The sunset was awesome that night over the beach, and after that we went to Aces, and played ping pong, and I got a bit drunk. Mohammed or Sandra didn't drink that night, I guess. They drank Maltina, which I think tastes pretty gross.

Anyways, it was totally refreshing to hang out with a couple of girls who were the opposite of tweakers; they were obviously not there to "help" anybody, they were just there for kicks. There are almost no tourists in Sierra Leone. I've heard the statistics. Something like 4000 tourists a year come here, and those are mostly wives of white people who are super-busy planning all their super-important WORKSHOPS. But white people who live here? Probably double that: there are at least 4000 people working for the UN. Plus Special Courts, plus VSO, plus World Food Programme, and the thousand smaller NGOs like the Nova Scotia Sierra Leone Friendship Society, etc, etc... Plus, there are a few journalists, and lots of churchy-types. So white-people abound, but mostly tweakers and ol' colonials. These girls, though, were all about the beaches, and going up-country, and they didn't want to talk about the war, or torture, or cannibalism, or rape. Thank God. I cannot tell you how many emails I've received from Sweet Sylvia about the warlords that tore out the hearts of children and ate them, back in the war. Good God, I'm not fucking any black men, I tell her. Just relax.

I never asked her why she left because it seemed obvious to me. If sexing Peter Barnett was anything like living with Dad or dealing with Sylvia, life in Ottawa was hell. I get it. Here I am, supposedly Zoe Saving the World. What the fuck ever. I'm just glad to be hanging out in such a crazy city with such hilarious people. After I met Soledad and

Sandra, I used the doggie-styling your twenty-two year old intern as great blackmail for time off. For those two months she was alive, we had a blast.



Frank:

I admit it, I was embarrassed. To be pinpointed like that, I was scandalized. Of course, everybody knows that I was close to her. Of course, I counseled her, I respected her a great deal. Of course it crossed my mind, I mean, she's a very attractive woman. But I was devastated that Phyllis said those things. And if you want to know the truth, I went to see Peter the night that Phyllis posted that load of balderdash on that silly website about Sandra. I had had a very powerful dream about Sandra the night before, and it seemed to me that she wanted me to address Peter, but he wouldn't answer the door, after numerous tries on the bell, so I mistakenly walked around the back of the house and got the key out from under the barbeque, just like I had when Jane and I looked after their plants on their trip to DC. I let myself in the back door.

He must have watched me come in. He was standing at the kitchen counter waiting for me. If it was a movie, he would be holding a gun, but in our circle of friends, that's outrageous. He was making a smoothie, actually. That's what it looked like. Peter is a good-looking forty-five years old, a rugby player and friend from college, and one thing that kept him sane with his high profile job was a healthy athletic schedule. He had an excellent physique. We go way back, and we had dealt with our share of trouble at King's and later, when he was in law school.

That evening, though, he had a very distressed look on his face. He was in a pair of basketball shorts and he looked like he'd been running, or sweating. He finished grinding his banana and his tofu, and he was careful not to spill on the countertop. In face, he remained very calm, though his words were very pained. Our conversation went something like:

Peter: Fuck you Frank.

Me: Peter. I'm sorry I let myself in.

Peter: FUCK. YOU.

Me: Peter, I'd like to apologize.

Peter: This is killing me.

Me: Peter. Please.

Peter: KI-LL-ING ME.

Me: ...

Peter: I'm dead. It's like she got on a plane, and as soon as she took off, a scalpel went straight for my jugular and has not dislodged since.

Me: ...

Peter: Don't I look dead? Because I sound like a zombie. I FEEL like a zombie.

Me: ...

Peter: I am a zombie. I am a self-loathing, asshole for a husband.

Me: You weren't a very good husband. That's true.

Peter: *FUCK YOU FRANK.*

Me: Peter wait.

Peter: Get the OUT OF MY--

Me: Peter this isn't about you.

Peter: ...

This was the point when I felt Peter's patience had waned. He had started pacing around the kitchen, pulling down the blinds above the sink. Locking the back door. He motioned at me to give him the key and he tucked it in a drawer which he slammed shut with his hip. I wanted to address a few of my fears, but I could tell, he was hurting. I reached out my hand to his shoulder, and he shrugged it off. I admit, this was the point things got a bit more heated.

Me: Look! This couldn't have been a total surprise!

Peter: Actually Frank, I don't know anything anymore. Everything is a surprise.
Everything lately is an EMBARRASSING SURPRISE.

Me: What is, Peter?

Peter: THIS!

Me: What do you mean?

Peter: THIS THIS!

He said this as he gestured around the windows, and then he opened the back door in somewhat of a manic fashion, and then slammed it again. He raised his eyebrows in the direction of the front of the house, in a gesture that I took to mean he resented the news crew parked out front, hoping to catch him for a statement. It is a terrible invasion of

privacy, being left in his situation, but I still felt he needed to articulate exactly what he felt. I admit, I kept pushing.

Me: Peter, I know you must still be upset that your wife left you.

Peter: My wife staged a complete disappearing act Frank! That the whole world is chasing her now. Do you get that?

Me: I understand why you're hurt.

Peter: And Jane! Writing that, that nonsense! A sex addict?! Really Frank.

Me: I'm sorry, Peter, I advised her—

Peter: **AND WHAT IS THIS SHIT ABOUT YOU SLEEPING WITH HER?**

Me: That's why I came here, I wanted to talk about —

Peter: With you! You!?

Me: Sandra's a very attractive woman Peter, it isn't that.

Peter: What!? Of course she's attractive! She's slept with all kinds of people **OUT THERE**, but she would never fuck you—

Me: Peter, I'm sorry.

Peter: The hell you are.

Me: It's true that I called her baby, that Phyllis overheard—

Peter: You've got to be kidding me. Did you start that rumour?

Me: No, Peter.

Peter: Who the hell would think that **YOU** slept with her?

Me: No Peter, I didn't.

Peter: Exactly my point. Don't tell me I wasn't a good husband. She could be in serious trouble and everybody is worried about whether or not she fucked YOU. What kind of—

Me: Peter, I know why you're upset. You must have heard, today, they came out with the news...

Peter: Shut up.

Me: You must have known that—

Peter: Shut up.

Me: —she's pregnant.

Again, I thought about how if this were a movie, he would have a gun. If this were a movie, this would be the moment he would push my shoulders or take a swing at my face. I suppose Peter could have done a lot of things, like thrown something at me or run out the back door. He didn't. He just stood there and looked at me.

Me: I knew you were trying. I'm sorry.

He wouldn't talk. He wouldn't move. He just stood there. I don't think that I was the one who told him the news, I mean, it had come out when Phyllis had pointed the finger at me, but as far as he could tell it could be another lie from her. But the look on his face told me, no, it wasn't a lie. He had known about this, or he had heard, not from me, but earlier. He started to shake his head.

Peter: Am I being selfish?
Me: No. No Peter.
Peter: Because I want that baby back? I mean...
Me: No Peter.
Peter: Oh. God.

You might think this sounds melodramatic, but his eye twitched with pain. This has happened to me before, during research, or counseling my patients, somebody buckling under the weight of their own tragedy. It is a very difficult part of the job, but you must be strong. I kept my composure. Peter started to cry, really, with his whole body, and we both watched as the pain bubbled up from way deep down. I knew what I had been saying was painful, but underneath it all, I was helping. Sandra had been gone six months. The pregnancy was close to seven or eight months along. He was, in the process of this very conversation, sorting through the six steps of mourning. I had watched him pass through denial, anger. I knew what came next.

Me: It has to hurt to let it go.

Peter: Get the fuck. Out.

But he wasn't ready. So I left. The next day I released my statement, denying the charges against me. Jane was incensed with Phyllis, with Sandra. Even with me, I suppose, because I had really wanted to sleep with her. I suppose I had made it so very clear. Phyllis, bless her heart, always had a flair for the narrative, and she always saw that spark

in my eye when Sandra walked into a room. But it was conjecture. Sadly, truly. It hardly matters anymore. But by God, she was beautiful. I'll say it here and here only, ... I often wish I had done it. I may regret that until the end of my days.



Joseph:

When Aamil called me, looking for an apartment for two of his white friends, I immediately knew of a place. I'm a fixer. That is the job for people who know their way around Freetown, or the provinces. When filmmakers or journalists come here, they can't just jump into the slums or into a village or a brothel and start asking questions. No. They need a fixer, somebody to show them around, to get them into people's homes. You need to speak good English, Krio, of course, and some Mende or Temne to speak with village people in the countryside. You need to know your way around on maps. You need to know a lot of people, listen for news, be friendly to all tribes, to all kinds of people. I've worked with filmmakers from America, the Dutch, I've run with stringers from AP, the BBC. They all need a good fixer. Look at the bottom of any documentary made about Sierra Leone. It might not be my name in the credits, but somebody's name is there, beside the title Fixer. I'm kind of like a ghetto version of a producer. I make people feel at home.

I don't tell the white people I work for about my life, although they ask. I certainly don't talk about my political aspirations, or our movement. I earn \$140 US a day working for the film crews, incredible money for this place. A lot of that I give to my mother, who lives with my little sisters, and I donate much of it back into our group,

which is just starting really, it's a fledgling thing. We're political. We're young. Some of us have left the country, maybe traveled to Ghana or Nigeria for jobs. Most of us lived in refugee camps during the war, and that's where we learned good English, and maybe a few skills, but not many. We were all kids during the war, you know, the war had nothing to do with us. Our fathers or mothers often had to leave the country because they made an enemy in the army or with the rebels, not because of anything ideological. In our case, it was because two of my brothers were kidnapped by an army officer, and he buggered them both and made them be soldiers. My father went crazy the day they disappeared, and he was furious, he started to look for them everywhere, making a really big scene our town and neighbouring villages. They were only fourteen and twelve. Imagine that. The army guy caught wind of his making noise about his sons, and he sent two men with AK47s to our house in the night. They pointed them at my father's head, right where he slept. They said they had a message for him: that he had to forget his sons and leave. They got him eventually. The war was a difficult time. Everybody has a story like that.

That was ten years ago. I've found one of my brothers, he lives with his woman in Bo City; he managed to run away after a year or so, around the time when the officers had to turn themselves in, when the RUF took control of the country. The coup was what shifted the tides for a while. My family, what was left of it, lived in Liberia at the time. Meanwhile, there were many Liberians coming to Freetown to hide. My brother, after he got out, he was broken. He wouldn't speak of the things he had done, what he'd seen. There were no good guys in the war in Sierra Leone, that's one thing I always have to explain. There was no ideology. There were only diamonds, land, power. They killed your parents and made you into a soldier. They made you do horrible things to your own

family, so that you would never go back. They made you rape in your own village, so it was no longer your village. They gave you a machine gun and that was your paycheck. Go pillage! They told the boys. And one of them started chopping of arms with a machete, and the BBC started putting the story on the news every day. The more amputations, the more news stories, so they kept going. They wanted the dramatic shots for the international news, so they dressed the boys up in costumes, and started using magic, and they gave the boys drugs. Both sides.

And you ask: Where are the politics? Dead. Even the political parties in Sierra Leone are tribal and regional, not ideological. The politics are growing inside of me, but so many people, they hate politics, they hate the idea of fighting at all. They just want peace. Peace is so important that they don't even question the government, the police. We are questioning though. It is important to us, to question.

So, I live two lives. I help the white people cover our stories, mostly growth and peace-time stories, and coverage of the Special Courts, and I learn from them about how to use cameras and technical journalism as a political tool, but I act like a fixer, someone without a message of his own. And then, in my other life, I meet at night with a cousin of mine, and a few friends who work in good jobs like insurance, or three friends who study at the FBC, West Africa's oldest college, when Freetown used to be called the Athens of West Africa. The other boys in our group have no jobs though; they have nothing. They are the most adamant. They are the ones who want action. We talk a lot, about direction, about movement. One of the boys' uncles was the one who wrote the RUF's manifesto, called "Footprints to Democracy." His uncle was a combatant, now he's a moneychanger on Siaka Stevens Street. He sold me a copy of the manifesto for 50 000 Leones. He

tucked it into my bag and told me to keep it secret, and I stayed up all night to read it. The 32-page leaflet made sense, but it was crafted as an after-thought, when the RUF needed justification for their assault. The message was not fundamental to their fight. Now, the RUF has been demonized, the ex-combatants are the poda poda and okada drivers. Their guns are hidden in graves, I've been told. At any moment they could dig up the grave for Mami-Jenkins or someone else, and there is their stash of grenades and machineguns, waiting. Some people think it come all come rushing back, any minute, and day.

I read an essay once, by Richard Kaplan, about West Africa, which he wrote right after the coup, when I was too young to know what losing our President meant, what Operation No Living Thing meant. A few years later, it was a white girl who showed me the essay and I wonder why it is always the white people who know more about our country and who's writing about it than we do. The essay is called *The Coming Anarchy*, and it is the only writing I've read by a white man that seemed to tell the truth about what he felt was coming. The whites are afraid here, I see it in their eyes, but when they write about us, it is always about their vision of a bright future for Africa. This Kaplan man, though, he was seeing our future as grim, horrible, terrifying. He said that we occupy "a run-down, crowded country of juju warriors, influenced by the worst refuse of Western pop culture and ancient tribal hatreds." He said we could only "find liberation in violence."

Meanwhile, the whites here live behind razor wire. Their Mende and Temne neighbours, living side-by-side, don't use guards or razor wire or dogs, their compounds are open to the sea breezes, there land is for cultivating a few cassava plants, their little

houses are open for the neighbours and children to run through. Side-by-side these buildings co-exist, a shack next to a villa, a house made of mud and scraps of tin next to a concrete fortress, its walls lined with broken bottles, its cool tiles and running water and gas stove and plush furniture all locked behind bars.

But I know that's where the white people feel comfortable. When these two white girls needed an apartment, I arranged for them to see a little tiled place next to the water in Cockle Bay, with a gas stove and a generator and two rooms with beds and mosquito nets, and a table outside on the terrace. It was horribly expensive, over a million Leones a month each, but Aamil didn't seem to mind. He said he would pay for their first month, and after that, they would decide what to do. The white women were very nice, one was very pregnant, and the neighbours all came over and introduced themselves to her right away, because they'd never seen a white woman with child before. One of the babies started to cry when she saw her, and I tried to explain that it was because the children think that white people have no skin. The white girls laughed, not insulted at all.

After I found them the apartment, I only saw them once more, at Aces Nightclub. I was there with a Dutch film crew, and I was playing pool with the director, and she and her friend, Soledad, came up to me and said hello. The bar was very empty still, they were there for a quick drink before it got too busy. She was the only pregnant woman in the room, but people were kind. She drank a Maltina and tried to play ping pong, but she was very slow. They chatted with the Dutch director about his film, and they told me they enjoyed the apartment very much, and that they planned to stay. The neighbour children came over once a day and she had bought them all books to read when they played there. It was a pleasant exchange. Then Aamil came to the bar and sort of insisted that she

leave, because it was getting busier and he didn't want them there without a chaperone. He was very protective of her, I could tell. They left shortly afterwards. I never saw either one of them again.

It is a bit shocking, now, to think of how our actions lead so directly to her death, but I couldn't have known any of that when I met her. She was kind and nice, yes, but no more special than any Sierra Leonean that dies here every day, from war, malnutrition, rape, violence, things that are avoidable. The problem is here we don't do enough to stop them. We die in the streets, we only get noticed when we chop off each other's arms. Meanwhile, a white woman who dies in our country gets so much more attention, because she is rich, and powerful, and somehow, that means her life is worth more. But that is the kind of thing we are fighting for, a little bit of dignity in our daily lives, so that our lives mean something too. Because really, how different is she than any one of us?



Marilyn:

It's the food that was killing me in Freetown. Honestly, I have eaten my way through Ecuador with their little roasted guinea pigs, or Cambodia, with the fried bugs and the rice porridge, I've even lived in China and I could wax poetic about some of the putrescent pork dishes I sampled there... but in each of those spots I could always find something to sate my finicky appetite. Freetown is different, though. Finding good food can be a serious, time-consuming challenge here. And that was how I met Soledad and Sandy. It was a Tuesday afternoon in Bliss Bakery, each of us guiltily gobbling down ten-dollar salads and avocado omelettes in our various corner tables, relishing in the air-

conditioning and filtered-water juices. Of course, we all felt a bit sinful about it, spending a week's salary on lunch, but we still met there once a week for a couple of months. Don't judge too harshly; I'm from London, and I simply cannot live without a decent meal now and again.

Strange, I rarely notice that Sierra Leone is really one of the world's poorest until I count the number of hours of consistent electricity, or try shopping for healthy, clean meals on a regular workers' salary, then I really feel it. Because Sierra Leone hardly grows or produces or manufactures anything since the war devastated all industry, and they import foodstuffs from Lebanon or Guinea, and it all costs a fortune.

For example, the Aberdeen Market, where Sandy and I regularly shopped for fresh groceries, is really just a few stands made of scavenged wood and covered with strips of tin; most of the market stalls are empty by noon. There is a skinny vegetable lady right in the front, but she usually only has a few piles of hot peppers, five or six near-liquid tomatoes, some limp greens and an eggplant (called a kitchen egg) or two. A larger lady behind her has a few more options, usually a range of potato or cassava leaves, bunched whole or chopped as small as possible. She also has plastic bottles full of palm and cooking oils, a basket of smoked fish, a few bags of groundnuts, and a stack of cassava roots. One lady sells scoops from giant sacs of rice, dried beans, black-eyed peas. A big fat lady has a small stack of pickled pigs feet, bright pink. She also sells milk powder and Parle G biscuits. The butcher is a man with a leg of goat hanging from a hook. He will wrap what ever amount you request in newspaper, after hacking it off with his cleaver. And the very old lady, the one we like best, has a strange assortment of herbs on her table. There are so few old people in the streets of Freetown—life expectancy is

42, and the old tend to stay in the villages, left to their rockers and radios. Not Mami-Mary. She never makes jokes about us or frowns or ignores us, like the other ladies would. She simply sells us little pouches of salt or garlic cloves or cubes of Maggi. And she smiles and pats our hands. She also sometimes has bananas, which we always try to pay too much for. In return, the old lady always gives us perfect change.

Downtown has better deals. For example, on ECOWAS Street there are ladies selling boxes of charity groceries from the States. Finding them a lucky break, because they somehow collect boxes filled with cereal and salad dressing and pasta sauce, things that the locals would never eat, but were ‘donated’ at some point, probably by a Church. The ladies who sell the stuff are quite sweet, they charge me according to weight, and the ladies make a bit of money, and I manage jar of jam or a tin of Ovaltine; real treats in these parts. Sandy used to indulge in boxes of Cheerios. It brought comfort, I’m sure, even mixed with powdered milk and filtered water.

You see, I’m a journalist, I’m covering the Truth and Reconciliation Projects, and the diamond mines and a few other UNDP projects, usually on the Human Rights angle, and I’m getting heaps of leads, some great material has come out of it. But despite all the writing I’m supposed to be getting done on rebuilding the country, eating has started to infiltrate most of my work. In fact, just organizing my food is a massive undertaking. For example, just wandering into the neighbourhood matriarch’s plassa shack for rice and sauce can be an adventure. My first pepper chicken experience was in one of these street kitchens, sitting on the bench between a few working men, the big Momma standing behind two giant pots. In her shack, a plate of rice and a small piece of meat costs you

2000 Leones; that's fifty cents. But horribly, that sauce can backfire; the 'cow's skin' in palm oil and potato leaf gifted me a serious burning gut for two days.

Sometimes, I can't help it and I break down and indulge in an upscale meal, like a croissant at the Crown Bakery or Thai food at Indochine, but it will cost me twenty quid after desert. The average dish in the ex-pats haunts is 40 000 Leones, and that's hard to reconcile with the work I'm trying to do. Shwarmas were at first a treat and now, could very well be a mayonnaise-tainted enemy: greasy bits of drumstick chopped into a bed of cabbage, loaded with ketchup and peppers, wrapped in the Lebanese pita and grilled. I nearly saw my last shwarma float across the piss-filled can in my wet little bathroom, ferocious and rotten. Since then I have abstained.

It was with Sandy when I discovered one middle-class place, a nearly impossible phenomenon considering the discrepancy between the rich and poor. D's Bazar, a gem in downtown Freetown, has a cheap-ish bakery downstairs, with fish balls and scotch eggs and meat pies, and upstairs you can order trusty rice and sauce, and watch the BBC on one of the few TVs not permanently fixed to a Champion's League game. On their menu, I suggest the groundnut stew with whole fish swimming between the bits of beef bone and grizzle, or cassava in palm oil, complete with hunks of goat surely machete-chopped off the leg hanging in the kitchen. Insert sigh here. In Freetown, we take what we can get.

In general, my diet has mostly been reduced to breakfast of Fulla Bread (a crusty baguette infinitely superior to the usual hot-dog bun variety found on most corners, in a box, under a scrap of towel) and a triangle of trusty 'Vache Que Rie', the friendly spreadable cheese imported here from Beirut. Lunch is usually a plate of chop, which is a mix of spaghetti noodles and cabbage and a fried egg on top (hold the devil-mayonnaise

and the slop of ketchup that usually drowns the dish) and dinner-time usually takes me down to Lumley Beach, where for a 10 000 Leones I can usually coax the reggae bar to fry up a fish and pair it with a green salad (again, hold the devil mayo-ketchup slop-on-top) or a little pile of fried plantains.

Despite my frustration with the food, or probably because of it, finding good restaurants and market stands and secret plassa shacks became a more than part-time occupation. After just a month in Freetown, I found myself writing about it constantly. Sandy and Soledad made excellent partners in culinary curiosity, because they too sought good, healthy food that was inexpensive too, because none of us was on a UN per diem. They were always good at taking chances; even though Sandy was quite pregnant, she would try just about anything. That was all we did together, was eat. We tried China house for chop suey, the Atlantic for burgers, the Senegalese African Restaurant for delicious half-chickens. I can't say she was a close friend, but I do count the day we ventured to Number Two Beach as one of my favourite meals in Sierra Leone.

In any other country in the world, it would have been routine. A trip to the beach for a lobster dinner. In a car, the trip takes 30 minutes down a bumpy road. For a group of white marms without an NGO jeep to whisk us off, the trip takes several hours. First, we boarded a shared taxi to Lumley junction, where we bartered for bags of water and a few oranges. After maneuvering through the vendors, honking taxis, open sewers and people's wares strewn on bits of cloth, we hopped on a poda poda, where we sat in neat rows until the whole thing was full to bursting, our knees propped up over sacs of rice to be take out to the country. The pregnant lady got to sit up front, next to the driver, but in the back our shoulders nudged into each other's with a familial closeness. We bumped

along for about five minutes before people started to request to be let off, resulting in some bums in faces and a few vendors running to the windows with bags of water to sell. This was a twenty-kilometer journey, dragged to an hour. Stop. Pay. Bums. Repeat. The road is wide enough for two jeeps but not two trucks. What little traffic happens to venture that way usually stalls behind any wide vehicle, but the trucks don't care, they just idle along, daringly skirted around by motorcycles and generally honked at by everyone else.

Then came the end-of-the-line for busses, at Lakka. That's when we searched for a few reasonable okada drivers and, bags slung over our shoulders, we climbed onto their motorcycles and held on.

Usually, the only thing to grip is the make-shift handle behind one's back (usually plastic bags wrapped in tape, strung around the seat) or around the driver's waist. In a heartbeat, the driver takes off; it is our job to slow him down. This is not a race!!! We shout, we tap their shoulders, and only the pregnant lady's requests are honoured. The rest of us are off in a cloud of red dust, zipping over strips of pavement and massive potholes, another seven kilometers to the turnoff. The drivers are usually ex-combatants who traded their machineguns for motorcycles, but callous, they are not. Their faces fill with glee when we're on the back. Scaring white ladies is a lot of fun, I'm sure.

Anyhow, this afternoon we arrived dusty, and laughing. We paid them a few thousand Leones each, and we arranged for a pick-up later. Nice boys really. Good fun. On the side of the red-dust road was a little iron sign to mark here we turned into the community. Along the side of the road, a squatting line of workers waited for a lift back into the city. Some of them were in ill-fitting dress shoes, no socks. Others were geared

up like basketball stars or B-boys. All of them possessed a bored, almost sedate way of waiting, as if they could gracefully let time slip by rather than forcefully moving through it. These men waiting on the road would never bother with the beach unless it was to vend some ware, to preach a sermon or encourage participation in a particular political association. Only on a Sunday, teamed with a posse of mates, a blasting radio and a football would they consider the beach. And so, that day, the place where the Number Two River meets the Atlantic Ocean was left to NGO jeeps and us, having got there the African way, but without the Africans.

The community operates the beach at Number Two, which makes it friendly and fun. We rented a table from Daniel, sweet Daniel, who told us about their new projects, the school and new cabins and what was on the menu. Then another man approached to ask us if we wanted drinks, and yet another asked what we'd be eating later that day. We ordered lobsters, grilled white fish on skewers, salad, rice, French fries and sodas. A feast for three, but it pleased Daniel that we ordered so much. We took the afternoon to swim, to wash the dust off, to float in the clear water and walk the perfect white sand. There were maybe three other people at Number Two Beach that day. We sprawled out and chatted and read our novels.

The only strange moment was when Jack, a standard British drunk, stumbled up the beach to sit with us and blather to us about his life story. He's a skinny one, with straggly hair and a deep tan, a few missing teeth. He looks as if he's been in Africa for a decade, and he told us as much. After wandering from Cameroon to Dakar, he married a woman from this village, and he's fixing up a house just down the beach, which sounds like a lovely pursuit, except for the fact that in one sitting, he downed a full bottle of

home-grown gin and the first time he attempted to stand, he fell face-first in the sand. It took Daniel and another friend quite a while to walk him home.

We decided among us that the craziest people one could ever meet abroad are certainly ex-pats, runaways and vagabonds like old Jack. Asia is full of these over-sexed white blokes, I explained, and Soledad told us that India is too. There, they call them the Passport-Burners, and they're usually of the spiritual orientation, or generally people who just want to hide away from their real lives and stay indefinitely in an inexpensive version of paradise. There aren't many societal rules for white men in developing countries, and old Jack can live in relative drunkenness without being judged too sternly by Daniel and his boys. We shook our heads, but I envied him slightly, no job, no pressure. Sandy admitted she was considering a similar pursuit, and she and Soledad had a giggle about Jack's sand-covered toothless grin. That'll be you in ten years, Soledad chucked her in the shoulder, though we all know Sandy's flawless face could never look so eroded, so glum.

Then lunch was served. The fish was perfectly bathed in limejuice and fresh fruit salsa and the lobsters were massive and steamed and served with garlic butter. We ate until stuffed, and then collapsed in the shade. We swam once more and dried off in the sun. And at five, we got a beep from the okada boys who were waiting for us at the junction. We paid Daniel a small fortune, we dressed, and we strolled up to the roadway for our trip home. It may seem like nothing, but it felt divine, the limejuice left on our lips, the little plate of fruit they brought as desert. It could have been the best meal of our time in Sierra Leone, because simple things connected us there. A little swim, an

adventurous bus, a bit of fish and a laugh with old Jack. It isn't so funny any more though. A week later, she was dead.



Peter:

I'm the father of that child.

She wrote me to tell me, from Mali, after she had been gone four months or so. It was completely casual. Infuriating, truthfully. She had the decency to scribble the news on a postcard, if you could believe that. Anyone could have read it, and with the number of people going through my mail at the time, it is shocking it didn't get intercepted. Another shock is that it even arrived, with the African mail so appalling. She wrote me after she had visited that Lebanese doctor in Mali who had confirmed the results. I have no idea why she went back for another test, she must have known she was pregnant when she left. In fact, it was a relief to hear Phyllis say that she had known, because I had my suspicions long ago. We had been trying, and she had started on a new type of hormone therapy, something I've looked into since she left. I suppose I was looking for directions in which I could point a finger, like if I could concretely blame the hormones or the pregnancy or an affair, it would take the blame squarely off of me.

I admit, after the postcard, I started to obsess over that child. For example, every time I read a post from someone who had traveled with her, and there was mention of a glass of wine, or cigarettes, I had this gripping at my throat, thinking, Why don't you care for our baby? And then I would spiral into an hour of research on low birth weight and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and I would stay up late picturing her coming back. She was

always very healthy, and I suppose it came as quite a shock when we didn't naturally conceive. We had been married for six years, and trying for two. The doctors had said it wasn't any real problem on either of our parts, it just hadn't happened yet. He told us to keep trying, and we did.

The postcard, I've destroyed it now, burnt in the fireplace one night after too much scotch and a particularly hard look at our wedding album. The words are etched into my mind, however. The opening is particularly hurtful. It opens with the word Darling. *Darling*. That's the way she would describe a piece of homely fashion in a catalogue. Oh look at this darling moo-moo... it was always a hint ironic, usually something she didn't care for at all. The insult was not lost on me then either.

After that the postcard was kind and informative enough. *I love you Peter and I'm sorry I took our baby away. I don't think I can come back, but you can come and see us whenever you like. I'll write again when I have a real home. Love,*

I picture it all the time; her coming back. I would be waiting at the airport, pacing, impatient, watching my phone every two seconds and gripping the dozen peach roses I've got at the ready. The flight would be a large, overseas carrier, maybe one of the new 767s, and I would have booked her first class. According to the photos, she hasn't gained too much weight from the pregnancy, and when I picture her walking through the arrival gate, she would be sleepy. Adorable. In my mind, she is always touching her belly and smiling in a shy way.

I supposed this isn't fair. She was never shy, and I can't make her out to be, now that she only exists in my imagination. She wasn't promiscuous though, I refute that. I don't believe that she ever cheated on me until she left. That, I can be almost sure of, but

the list of people she paired up with on her travels, that makes me uneasy. Old, young, black, white. It doesn't really matter I suppose. She wanted anyone, it seems, anyone but me.

The most difficult part of the postcard was not the double occurrence of the word LOVE, nor the apology, nor the invitation to see her 'whenever I like.' You must have guessed it, what stung most. *A real home*. This house, with all the furniture she picked out and the shop downtown and the friends she rallied to the capital after we moved here. None of it was real to her. What was real? Village life, beaches. Some African existence I certainly can't make sense of. I've never been to Africa. I was hoping I never would have to go.

I've gone back to sleeping full nights, and my position as an elected official occupies much of my week. My parents, lovely people stuck out in Sidney, Nova Scotia, have been kind and wonderful and supportive. I spend an awful lot of time at their house, when we're not in session.

I wasn't faking it either, when I was claiming my interest in New York or lingerie or my genuine attraction to her young, vivacious spirit. I was deeply in love with her. Six years of marriage, a healthy courtship. Twelve years did not seem a risky age difference, nor did moving her from New York to Ottawa. What seems terrifyingly neglectful on my part, now, looking back, was the fact I could ignore the fact that a girl can burn with so much *restlessness*. How could I have looked at her, night after night, and not seen her face twisted with pain? She nearly quivered with it. The desire to move. To be set free.

Escape is, to some, a deadly intoxication, worse than any drug. To this day, holding her that close for that long can be counted among my greatest achievements. It is a wonder, thinking about it now, that she stayed as long as she did.



Freetown, Sierra Leone

Thong: Between her old boss' incisors. Red dice melted into the first baseman's greasy mitt. Blues Explosion. Blackjack. The Russian they bribed into the locker room, black roots and a mole sprouting fine blonde hairs an inch below the ear. Motorhead. Dirty Money. Teamed with a torsolette, the scratch of elastic against tongue. Now they're bound by fencing masks, cocooned under gauze. Her old college roommate's polaroids tacked to the walls of the loft, who leant her those little metal balls for stimulating g-spots, who built a swing in the foyer. King with an Axe: Jon Spencer, Jack White. With a bright red bow above the ass, pretty as a jukebox full of quarters. Navel orange. So filthy he rolls it between her lips. Second-base, the fencing bout, posing for polaroids in a baby-doll and tights. D'Andrea Pickups. The Russian mole. Long live the Suicide Kings.



Cockle Bay:

Here is S---, out on the back terrace, her morning Nescafe and breakfast spread out on the plastic table: a buttered bun with jelly, a bowl of papaya covered in lime juice. She has been feeling big kicks all day, and it is so warm, she's been feeling faint. She calls Doc Thomas and he says, It is hot. Why don't you come down to the office for a cold drink. She does feel woozy. She asks if he'll be in around one, she needs her blood pressure checked. He agrees. One o'clock then.

Then, as she finishes her coffee and moves to stand up, she has a twisted bowel moment, like she could shit herself. A horrible feeling. She's by herself, but Soledad is only out at the market buying more fruit. Then she realizes what it is, and it feels good. Wrenching, but good. The first pain rushes around her face and she starts sweating. Suddenly everything is amplified. Sitting there, waiting for Soledad, the light around her grows to monstrous proportions. She suddenly feels a bit blind. She decides to call Doc Thomas again and tell him what is happening. First, she goes to her tiled bathroom and washes her face. Then she pours the leftover coffee down the sink. Another wave of pain washes over her when she steps back outside. She braces herself against the door. When it passes, she can hear everything: the water lapping up against the beach, one of the

compound's workers sweeping up after the goat with his little broom, the mid-morning news echoing across her razor-wired wall.

Aberdeen Market:

The fruit lady is never nice to Soledad, but it doesn't matter, she needs to buy some oranges and papayas and mangos now that they are coming into season. The fruit girl, dressed today in a loose bedazzled USA tank top and lappa-skirt, once revealed to Soledad a secret stash of apples, brought all the way from China. Two thousand Leones each, a fortune Soledad wouldn't pay. She's been grumpy with her ever since.

Strolling back along the side of the road, past the crowded internet café, and the bed-makers, and the jeweler with two silver chains in a small display, she would always smile and nod. But passing by the barber, she would half-wave half-avoid Ishmael, a sweet kid who asked her out every time she walked by. All he wanted was to ask her something, he told her. Just one thing. This time, she saw him from far away, waving and calling her name. He was difficult to avoid, and so she would usually stop at his shack and visit with him and whomever he was barbering. In the beginning, they would mostly talk about Spain, or other countries she had visited. Today, they take a few minutes to point at his new poster of various haircuts, tacked onto the wall of his barber shack. Soledad says her favourite is the flat top but the boys laugh their heads off at that. That one is out of style! They tell her, in their perfect, half-Krio English. Be real wit us, girl!

Soledad moves back down the hill towards their compound, telling Ishmael she'll see him tomorrow. Inshallah! He calls out behind her. And she wags her bum at him as a kind of farewell.

Siaka Stevens Street:

This is downtown, a twenty-minute cab ride from Aberdeen, in good traffic. This is the majestic home of the Cotton Tree, the judicial courts; this is a paved thoroughfare, the now defunct post office is here, the half-empty museum. Aamil is strolling down Siaka Stevens Street on his way to have a chicken lunch with a lawyer friend of his. He's walking beside the Electricity House, one of the few buildings in town over six stories. A vendor approaches him with a range of power adapters. Another comes up with a handful of newspapers, the Torch Light, the Standard Times. Aamil waves them both away with one hand.

In his other hand, he holds his cell phone to his ear. He's talking to his father in Lebanon and the connection is not good. His father is telling him about a gift he wants to give his younger sister, but it all seems irrelevant to Aamil. Aamil is nervous about a deal he wants to do with this Dutch lawyer, only in town for the week. He's also nervous about S---, due any day. He spoke to her that morning, and he'd taken her for pizza at Montana's the night before. After dinner, he'd given her strict instructions to go to bed. He didn't want to see her out in nightclubs and bars, even the beach, so pregnant. That kind of thing could be seen as a disgrace among the Lebanese community, among the locals too. He's thinking about how he caught her in Aces just five nights ago, dancing late with some dripping young kid, his black hands all over her backside. It makes him sick, in fact, it makes him so angry, he stops listening to his father on the line. Aamil! He shouts after a few moments, and Aamil says, Sorry sorry, you're breaking up. He stops to cross the street.

It's here: as he's waiting at a corner for the traffic to calm, with the podas coming though, all honking and waving at him to climb in, and a crowd of girl-students in smart school uniforms crowding the corner, and the vendor behind him tapping his shoulder and indicating that now is the time for him to buy a battered fish... That's when someone takes the cell phone from his ear. Something brushes his face, and then the sound of his father's voice is gone. Of course, it takes him by surprise.

It was him! The girls around him shriek. Aamil can barely make out a pair of bare feet, cut-off pants and a Manchester United jersey, sprinting away. The boy is gone in an instant behind a building before Aamil can do anything, even call out. He tries. Thief! He mumbles, He stole my phone!

A few people start to crowd around him, and the girls make a show of describing the boy to the strangers, and stunned, Aamil slowly moves in the direction where he saw the kid run, but it is over, he's vanished. Everybody starts yelling at him, the vendor tells him to go to the police. The girls re-enact the theft, laughing and slapping their thighs. A few podas have stopped, the passengers are eager to hear the story, and the vendor, animatedly describes the whole thing. Shaken up, Aamil moves away from the crowd, towards the restaurant where he is to meet the Dutch lawyer. The police won't help. He can't call anyone. And so, he just goes. He doesn't know what else to do.

Electricity House:

On the sixth floor of Electricity House, with an excellent view down Siaka Steven Street, above the battered fish vendor, the chicken restaurant, above the street corner where Aamil lost his phone, there is a television station, the only independent station in Sierra

Leone. ABC TV. Inside, there is a news desk, a few thrashed computers, two offices with wide tables for production meetings, and a real television camera, donated by an ancient network in Italy. At the moment, the ABC offices are abandoned, the network has been pulled off the air by its owner, the 'unavailable for comment' Mr. Shaw. He's been living in the US for the past few years, and though he's collecting cheques from the Voice of America, he's choosing not to broadcast at the moment. The whole thing seems like too much trouble.

Despite nearly eight months off the air, the office is still on the sixth floor of Electricity House, and the transmitter, the satellite dish, the news desk and the camera, all remain unused. About noon, around the same time that S--- is feeling her labour pains in Cockle Bay, around the same time that Aamil is losing his phone on the street corner below, around the same time that Soledad is flirting with the barber outside of the Aberdeen Market, a group of men are breaking into ABC TV's offices. They are silently opening the door with a key. They are locking the doors behind them, and then moving furniture in front of the doors. Although this doesn't appear at first to be a violent crime, it will be seen that way for years afterwards. This is political, the President will say of the act. They don't know anything about that yet. For the moment, they are very excited. Mr. Shaw hasn't changed the locks, and Moses, one of the boys entering the offices, used to be an intern at ABC. He shows the other boys around, like he owns the place.

These men are lead by the fixer Joseph Kamara of the group named 'The Sierra Leonean Party for Truth and Justice,' or simply the TAJ. This is the first time they've attempted any kind of social action. They are all skittish, it is hot out, and they are breathing heavily. There are six of them, and they're expecting a seventh. The one they

are expecting is a young woman reporter named Stella, a girl who studies journalism and politics at Fourah Bay College with Moses, and knows how to perform in front of the camera. The six of them begin by sitting around one of the wide production meeting tables.

You can probably tell already, this will end badly.

Aberdeen Creek:

On the way down the hill towards her compound, someone stops her. It is the older guard, with graying hair and a nice look, who usually opens their compound's big metal door with a salute. He is one of five who protect the three apartments, plus there are four dogs, who bark at any little movement through the night. Soledad still hasn't asked older guard his name, but she should, she will. She asks him how his day is so far, and how is his family. Oh, my wife is sick, he says this without looking at her, rubbing his stomach and saying, She has got the pains in the stomach. How are your children? she tries. Oh, he says, again looking away, I'm having some hard troubles. Three children, one very small and they don't have enough to eat, anything you could do to help us... He is still shaking her hand, in a limp, careful way.

Er. I'm ... I'm very sorry, I'm sure if you mention to Mr. ummm.... Soledad can't remember the landlord's name. A classic error. She always makes a point knowing who to point to for assistance or food, or she buys something or trades something with people in need, but she doesn't believe in just giving money. But how to explain it... how difficult, from this sweet old man, who no doubt hates to ask and needs it and...

He starts gently tugging her hand to the left, he's still talking, but she can tell, he's trying to lead her somewhere. Beside them is a construction site, what most likely will be another set of apartments hideously overpriced and reserved for ex-pats. More property this man won't own, more reason for him to disrespect her, and demand money from her, but here he is leading her into the dark of the half-built building. The site is empty, the workers aren't there today. He is pulling now.

Excuse me. She yanks her hand away. You'll have to speak to the landlord about this. I have to go and see if my friend—

Yes yes my friend, he says. He's reaching for her hand again, but she crosses her arms and moves down the hill.

Goodbye! she trills, as she skirts along the wall beside her compound and looks over the narrow bay, the mangroves, the low tide where Aberdeen Creek meets the ocean. She makes a point to knock very loudly on the giant metal door of the compound, and Desmond, the younger guard, opens it with a grin. Looking back, she can see the older guard taking long, measured steps away from her up the hill, not looking back. Her face is flushed. Her bag of fruit very heavy.

And then, a scream cuts through everything. Someone, unmistakably, is calling her name.

The Rooster:

A chicken restaurant with a small greasy window and a list of items. On the list: One piece chicken. Two piece chicken. Chicken and chips. Chicken and bread. Aamil greets the Dutch lawyer with a handshake. Aamil is wearing a shirt and tie, no jacket. It is very

hot for a tie, the Dutchman says. He is in a golf shirt and slacks. His forehead is moist. Aamil is sweating too, most likely from the nerves, the heart-racing after getting robbed in the street. He orders and pays for two cokes and two pieces of chicken for each of them and he points to a quiet table in the corner of the restaurant. The tables have been wiped clean and there is another suited man in the corner, most likely a civil servant, reading the Awareness Times. Aamil tells the Dutchman about getting his phone stolen, and how difficult that would make his next few days, without his phone numbers. The Dutchman asks, Does that happen often? And Aamil says, Only to other people, never to me.

The chicken comes to the table with a bottle of ketchup and a few slices of white bread. They pick lightly at the food with knives and forks, and continue the conversation they had started on the phone earlier that day. You understand, I met with him last week, and everything is arranged, Aamil says quietly.

The Dutchman nods and pops part of the thigh into his mouth, and then licks his lips. I still think we should drive up to Bo, the Dutchman says, if you have the rest of the day free. I'd like to meet him myself.

Of course, Aamil says. I'm free.

Good, says the Dutchman. We should leave right away. It won't be easy getting back by dark.

Wilkinson Road:

All along Wilkinson road, the women carry the loads on their heads, dipping in and out of the taxi windows, making change. Usually, Soledad and S--- try to buy something from

as many ladies as they can, but today, they are trying to rush. Soledad has hailed this taxi, which they have decided to charter. Cha-cha, they call it. They thought it would be faster not to share, and to go direct rather than let other passengers climb on with them. School has just got out for the afternoon, though, and there is a rush of schoolgirls pouring out of the giant compound by Congo Cross. The traffic is dead stalled. S--- gets a phone call. She expects it is Aamil, as she's left him two messages already. Instead, it is Zoe, a wild girl of twenty-three who hangs around them from time to time.

What the fuck! Zoe shrieks into the phone. You're having a fucking baby!!!

Can you find Aamil? S--- asks her, voice strained over the honking traffic.

Zoe says, Yeah! Totally! I'll try! Oh my God!

Their cab driver, a nice guy with a Yankees ball cap and an earring starts to holler out the window: Momma Here! Let's go! Let's go!

The girls laugh between S---'s pains, and they ask him to turn up the music and to cover the sound of S--- groaning in the back. Another big wave washes over S--- and Soledad nearly faints from the clench on her hand.

Then, one of the schoolgirls opens the shotgun door and hops in beside the driver without asking permission. Congo Cross, she tells him, and then turns to look at S---, her giant belly, then at Soledad's face. Oh no, the girl says. This ting coming now? Both Soledad and S--- nod solemnly, and the girl jumps out, terrified.

Kissy Road:

This one long lane in Eastern Freetown, Kissy Road (or Sani Abacha Street) is a mess of stands and honking cars and crowds. At one end there is a clock tower and the other end

is a poda poda stand. Girls peddle jewelry under the clock tower. Then it goes shoulder to shoulder the whole road long, soap packets and limes and locks with keys and electric fans made in China. Long African frocks hang limp on makeshift wire hangers. Peddler after peddler after peddler.

Aamil is driving his black Jeep through the crowds. There aren't many ways through this neighbourhood, out towards Waterloo. That's where the junction veers north towards Mile 91 and Bo. He is honking and honking but the peddlers and shoppers and throngs of people barely part for his car. Everyone stares in the windows at him and the Dutchman. A far cry from Amsterdam, the Dutchman says, chuckling, but on his face is a look of horror, like at any moment, these people could rip him out of the car seat and eat him alive. Someone bangs on the window and he jumps. Aamil shakes a finger at the vendor on the other side, and laughs. He wants to sell you a chicken! he says and points, and the vendor holds up the squawking bird to the window, its useless wings lightly whapping against the tinted glass.

The Cotton Tree:

A longtime symbol of freedom, the Cotton Tree was once where slaves could be bought and sold, and later became the rallying point for freed Nova Scotians and Maroons back in Sierra Leone's colonial days. Now, it's in the center of a traffic circle, the place where Siaka Stevens meets Pademba, where Independence Avenue leads up to the State House and the Ministry of Defence. It's loaded with giant fruit bats, and at sunset, they fill the sky with their fluttering wings and little screams. The Cotton Tree is older than Freetown.

Freetown was founded under the premise that a black man should never again be enslaved, Joseph begins. He is standing with the long table in ABC's Newsroom at his back, looking out onto the Cotton Tree as he dictates to the others what the opening of his speech will be. But we are slaves to this poverty, this government's corruption. Our demands are simple, he continues, as he turns to face his comrades. Behind them, the hills of Freetown are green and lush. The streets are lined with clapboard houses and a mix of a few, modern cement ones. At first glance it looks like a happy, bustling African city, with giant mobile phone billboards and trees filling the boulevards. From the sixth floor, he can plainly see the water, Connaught Hospital, the Big Market. We love this country, he says, and only wish for its—

A shot rings out, or an engine backfiring. They all hit the deck. Then there is a knock on the door.

Boys? Boys hello? It's me Stella...

They start to laugh a little nervously, but their agitation is obvious. Moses pushes the desk away from the door and tries the lock. He fumbles the key, taking several minutes to open the door with his jittery, useless hands.

Kroo Bay:

Slum in the center of the city. They had to tear down a few clapboard houses to put up the power lines. Then the residents of Kroo Bay tore down a few power lines to nick the copper. They'd been promised power since the Sixties; what was another year? Finally the president turned the switch, got one turbine working on the dam and Freetown got its lights. Spotty lights, though. About a third of the time. Kroo Bay still doesn't have power

yet. In Graham Greene's time, the huts in Kroo Bay were still laid out village-style. In Mary Kingsley's time, it was known as the African block, the immaculate village in front of a clear tropical bay. Today, Kroo Bay is next to the dump, in a malarial riverbed. The river can be a brown torrent, sometimes a trickle. The water stinks of shit. The slum is right there in the middle of the city, for everyone to drive through, and look down on from the bridge as they drive past.

From S---'s room, high above, in the private clinic, she can look down on Kroo Bay. They've just checked in at the front desk. Three nurses in clean white uniforms welcomed her, and she showed her up to the second floor, where a clean white room with a wooden bed and white sheets had been prepared. Soledad is running around, trying to phone Aamil, gathering S—'s things, mineral water to drink, clean towels. S--- is looking out the glassless window, her hands on the bars. She's looking down on Kroo Bay. What if you have a baby down there? she asks and Soledad says, You wish you could come up here.

Hill Station:

Zoe is at her boss' house again. She's just let him take off all of her clothes and he's fucked her on the kitchen floor. It wasn't uncomfortable, but cool on her back, such a hot day and his house so much bigger and more air-conditioned than her little apartment down on Pademba Road. He has a generator running full-time, he and the President. It is common knowledge that the houses on Hill Station receive five times the electricity as the rest of Freetown. Now her boss has gone off to work and she's digging through his refrigerator (a treat of an appliance in this town) for some sort of Western World snack.

She chooses a yogurt. She's not really hating him until she digs through his drawers and happens upon a few photos of his wife and two sons, both looking alien and pale and identical in this photo. He's explained to Zoe about them before, but she feels betrayed by the fact that the photos are under the underwear, not out in the open for his girlfriend, or her, to see. What a dick, she says out loud, and pockets the photos. Then she starts looking for cash.

She's in jeans now, having bathed (in hot water!) and waiting now for Mohammed the driver to come back up and drive her around the city to look for Aamil. She's also just spoken to Soledad, who told her that S--- is fine, it's still early, but they need Aamil to pay the nurses at the front desk and he's turned off his phone. She's moving fast, Soledad told her. Doc Thomas is already here. Maybe a few hours?

Zoe gives up looking for money, and goes back to the kitchen and opens a beer from the fridge. Then she drifts into his 'study', a spare room with a desk and a few books on a shelf, and a map of Sierra Leone on the wall. She flicks on the old television that came with the place. Her boss has paid for satellite so he can watch the insipid footie matches, and of course his patriotic BBC. She moves up the channels and stops at ABC, a station she thought was off the air. There is a montage from the war playing, child soldiers brandishing machine guns, and footage from Charles Taylor, horrible stuff. She turns up the volume and listens, tries to make out the Krio.

The man's voice says: Aw foh du? Nafoh bia nomoh. He repeats the phrase a few times and the visuals of the amputations and little kids with machetes flash by machine-gun fast. Gruesome stuff. By the third round, Zoe recognizes the phrases, she's heard them before in her 'field work' out in the provinces.

The question: What can a person do?

The answer: Just bear it, nothing can be done.

Ascension Town Road:

The room is stifling. A couple of hours has passed since S--- has climbed onto the clinic's clean bed and already she wants to push.

Just wait! says Doc Thomas. Hold on, you're not ready.

Once, S--- throws up from the pain. All of her breakfast, what was left of it, splatters all over the floor and one of the nurses looks offended that now, she has to clean it up. Soledad feeds S--- sips of mineral water from a chilled bottle, and has a wet washcloth for her face and neck. It is the hottest time of the day, no breeze. Outside the incessant honks of the traffic fills the room. Oh God. S--- is crying out, the pain coming back, Oh God. She says again. Soledad has her sitting and they try some breathing exercises together. Don't push don't push, says Doc Thomas from the doorway. She's panting. She's crying. Then S---'s face turns red, and then very white.

When the contraction passes, she turns and throws up again, a thin stringy bit of bile puddled on the tile floor.

Oh I'm so sorry, S--- whispers.

Hostia! Soledad says to her. Who cares?

But the nurse in the clean white uniform, with the mop and cold water in a bucket sends her death glares as she passes into the room. She slops water all over the floor and then obviously, like a child, holds her nose as she does the clean up.

Que Princesa, Soledad mumbles as she leaves the room. And the girl shoots her a look that says, Try me.

Below a siren screams past. Everyone ignores it the passing emergency. For now, it doesn't relate to them.

Waterloo:

The driving is that slow. Hours can pass just trying to leaving the city. You'll inch by Eastern Police, past the choked Cline Town and Fulla Town streets, crumbling into red dust gutters, where white grey water and plastic bags trickle down the roadside, a girl pisses out her front door right into the stream. It will be a rolling second-gear crawl past the old refugee camp, where the Chinese have built an aluminum factory, where they sell bits of farm equipment from behind a razor wire fence. You might speed up a bit, but you'll slow again at the Ferry Junction, a boat just getting in from Lungi and the passengers sprinting for the bus, and again at the Kissy Shell, where you'd catch a poda upcountry if you didn't have a Jeep to take you. Finally, here the road will unclog and you'll push into third, even forth gear. You'll pass Wellington, the turn off for Hastings. Things go by faster now, the road paved all the way to Bo, the tarmac a shining new black. Eventually you'll drive past the ancient train station at Waterloo, the wall riddled with bullet holes, but you'll be moving so fast, you'll hardly make them out.

The Dutchman and Aamil are negotiating as they drive and as they do, Aamil drives faster and faster. At Waterloo they veer west, towards the interior. They decide they might have to book a night at the Sir Milton Guesthouse, as getting back before dark could prove impossible, and driving at night can be sketchy. According to Aamil, the

greatest trouble comes mostly from unmarked cars on the road, less so bandits. They turn a corner and Aamil punches his brakes. The Dutchman jerks forward in his seatbelt. There is a girl in the road. She freezes, then drops her plastic water jug, and scurries the rest of the way across without it. The jug lies there in the middle of their lane, glugging water onto the newly paved road.

She was scared for her life! Aamil says.

Not the only one, says the Dutchman.

Aamil honks as he passes the girl, careful to swerve to avoid the jug. The girl waves back, brave now she's on the shoulder.

Connaught Hospital:

Now dusk is coming, the film they've produced these past two months is almost over, and it is time to start the live broadcast. Prime time. They have alerted a few of their friends with public televisions, the giant rooms with chairs in rows and a chalkboard outside advertising the football matches due that day. Arsenal vs. Chelsea. Man U vs. Everton. That sort of thing.

At six o'clock, the television operators have been instructed to turn their televisions to ABC TV, and they could choose whether to play the broadcast loud, or whether or not they wanted to charge a fee to watch. Things are happening very quickly. Six o'clock is coming soon. They've written their speeches, they know what they want to say, and the transmitter is humming along, under protection of Moses, who's cradling the only AK47 of the group.

The sun starts sinking behind Connaught Hospital. It turns from a yellow ball, to an orange one, to red. That fast. As it does, the final images from the war flash across the screen, with Joseph's voice over reciting a list of statistics about Peace-Time Sierra Leone. Now they have to start. Abdul flicks the switch on the camera. Yerie operates the board. He knocks on the glass when he presses the three red buttons to start broadcasting. He points a finger at Joseph; they're on.

Good evening. Joseph begins. *Good evening.* Stella says next. *We are the Sierra Leonean Party for Truth and Justice,* says Stella, hoping their name doesn't seem childish. Joseph, looking keyed up, his throat clenched and his voice thinner than usual, opens with: *As you know, our great country of Sierra Leone, once the bright star of West Africa, is wracked by poverty and corruption, despite the hundreds of NGOs here to help us.* (Stella adjusts her hair, just as the camera switches to her) *According to Amnesty International, seventy percent of our population lives below the poverty line, on less than one US dollar a day.* (Joseph's voice is still strained, but he's picking up the pace) *Meanwhile, the millions of dollars sent to our government in the form of aid (cut to State House, Minister of Defense's house) is not trickling down to help those in need.*

On the screens, the offices of several large NGO offices appear: Christian AID, UNDP, World Food Programme, finally finishing on the hallways of the Connaught Hospital. They're all a bit new at this. The editing is a bit shaky. *For example* (Joseph now) *there are 97 NGOs registered in the health sector in Sierra Leone, yet still there are only 64 medical officers in the entire country.* His forehead is wet, but he does not want to wipe it away on camera. He takes a breath. *In the district of Kailahun, there is one doctor per two hundred thousand persons.* (Stella now) *And yet aid money is pouring in.*

Who is receiving this money? (Cut to President's face, then a run-down building with clinic painted above the door) *According to one doctor in Freetown, he is lucky if he earns 300 000 Leones a month from the Ministry of Health, and doctors can wait for two years before they are paid.* Abdul, the camera operator, appears to be drifting to Stella's side, and Joseph clears his throat to have the lens back on him. *As we know, a 50 lb bag of rice is 120 000 Leones.* He and Stella look at each other and try to synchronize this part:

We cannot live like this any more.

Their timing is perfect. They've been practicing.

Congo Cross:

It is almost dark and Mohammed still can't get past the traffic circle at Congo Cross. The police have stopped the traffic, and one at a time, the officers are poking their heads into drivers-side windows and relaying some kind of message. It looks like, from this distance, they're slowing down the NGO jeeps and sending them back West. Mohammed is texting Zoe, telling her he'll be there soon, but two hours have passed. More. He honks, just another honk from the herd of unmoving honking cars lined up and stalled along Wilkinson Road.

He switches the radio station, but can't find any news, only music playing on the State-owned station. Mohammed pulls his white jeep over at a gas station, which is closing now under the watchful eye of an officer in blue. He steps towards the attendant holding two thousand Leones.

Brother! He calls out, first in Krio, then he switches to Mende. Let me keep this jeep here over night. Locked up tight. No problem.

The boy runs inside and comes out saying, Another two thousand for the boss.

Fine fine, Mohammed nods and hails a motorcycle. The okada driver that pulls up in a baseball helmet and T-shirt used to be a combatant, Mohammed can tell by his missing trigger finger and half-closed eye.

What's going on? He asks the driver.

Kids they break down the white-man office, he says, unsmiling. Troublesome, he says. We gotta pick up a girl, Mohammed tells him as he climbs behind him and props his feet on the make-shift pegs. Tell God Tinke, the driver says and zips up the sidewalk, away from the cops.

National Stadium:

The lights have flashed on in the National Stadium. From Doc Thomas' office on the top floor of the clinic, Soledad can see over much of the city, the traffic stalled along the thoroughfares, the few streetlights blinking on high on certain hills.

Two floors down, S--- is pacing around the room. She's having regular contractions now, but there could be something wrong.

She's not dilating, Doc Thomas said when they first went upstairs together. Now Soledad is looking out over the blinking city. She blinks too, trying to understand.

The water is not breaking, says Doc Thomas. Doc Thomas is looking worried. And the cervix is not dilating, he explains.

Okay, says Soledad.

We have a drug, Prostaglandin. But we have to watch her very carefully. Do you have a car?

No, she says.

If she should require surgery, we may have to do it here, he says. The Princess Christian Maternity Hospital is the place for the C-section, but the conditions...

I understand, says Soledad.

I recommend the drug, it dilates smooth muscles and could help with the delivery.

We should do everything we can, says Soledad.

You need your blood type checked. The nurse will help you on the first floor.

Okay, she says.

We'll ask her if she consents to the drug. It will be best if we ask her together. He says this while looking out the window, over the National Stadium. The lights respond by switching off. The city is darker now. He is visibly upset.

Okay, she says. She gives him a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

Aberdeen Bridge:

A crucial tactical site during the war, the Aberdeen Bridge is often cordoned off on such occasions as a parade, or when the President passes by. This time, it is the Minister of Defence. He is guided by an army jeep, driven by a female officer, in the front seat of which is a man brandishing an enormous automatic weapon. The lights and sirens are on.

Following the jeep is the Minister's SUV, the tinted windows are down now, and you can see the men inside are dressed in full combat uniforms. Again, the front seat is full of a man with a loaded weapon, pointed out the window at passersby. The brigade is

tailed by a third jeep—this one has no roof—and two armed guards are standing guard behind the driver, their berets half-cocked.

The traffic is stalled driving into the city, but the cops usher the Minister by in the opposite lane. This is official, they're driving fast.

If you look carefully, you can tell which one is the Minister. It is the old one, a little bit fat, speaking into a cell phone.

Unless you knew better, you would think that he was taking all of this very seriously.

All of the cops and stray officers salute as the cavalcade speeds by. They've got their orders. They all answer to Him.

Man of War Bay:

The kid still has pimples on his cheeks. His hair is short, shaved up the back, and he's getting a few early whiskers on his chin and under his nose. He's been listening to the ABC broadcast, but it comes as no surprise. In fact, Moses was his neighbour for a while, he's talked to him at length about learning to read, he's tried to convince him to stay in school. This kid can't afford it though. Instead, he sells shirts on ECOWAS Street with his uncle. Tonight, he's with his younger cousin, and he's taken the poda all the way West, to the nice buildings where the NGO offices are. He told Moses where he would go and what he would do. He's so scared though, he could piss. If his cousin wasn't with him, he would leave, but the kid is looking to him like some kind of hero.

So it is easy. A World Vision office, empty looking, five stories, one of the few places in the whole city with glass in the windows. There is a guard out front by the

vehicles, a dozing man listening to old time music on the radio. Not paying attention.

They move around to the dark side of the building, by a shack with a family inside. The boys can hear them speaking Mende, living in the shadow of the big concrete walls.

It takes both of them, with strong arms. First is his younger cousin, with a big stone in the lower window. They have to chuck it high, through the gap in the wall, and hard enough to break the glass. The second, in his shaking hand, is the plastic bottle full of gasoline. Just as the stone goes, he must light his wick. There will be a glass-crash, and a horrible sucking. Then the whipping of flames lobbed high in the air and into the window.

And then they'll run. Quick and soundless, along the pathways between the shacks. They won't see anything. They'll only get the sound of the panic, born from fire and smashed glass.

Bo City:

Aamil has checked into the guesthouse, exhausted. He speaks to the girl behind the desk for a while, leaving the Dutchman alone in his room. The meeting with his father's brother and the other businessmen went well, but he was distracted. Now he's starving. He jogs downstairs to see what they can cook for him in the restaurant. He's hoping they at least have a decent bit of beef, or a fried fish. He could always go next door to the Black and White for chicken and couscous. The dining area is empty but the door is open to the kitchen. Inside, there are three large ladies listening to the radio.

 Trouble in Freetown, one of them says to him.

 You from Freetown? He nods.

They got trouble, she says, and she opens the fridge and points to a bottle of Star beer. He nods, and sits down beside them to listen: *The entire block around the Electricity House has been cordoned off, gunfire has been heard and still the broadcast continues. The military has issued a curfew on downtown Freetown tonight, drivers are asked to avoid Siaka Stevens and Pademba Roads. The generator for ABC TV has been located and extinguished but the broadcast continues...*

Aces Nightclub:

Start with the stink of the dance floor—the air so thick and wet with moving. There is lots of space between the dancers, but they use it all, their arms swaying in front of the wall of mirrors under the DJ booth. Lots of glossy lips and shaved necks. Lots of bump and grind.

The smell is sour. Zoe buys a Star Beer for 5000 at the horseshoe bar in the back. Then Princess, the waitress, brings Zoe and Mohammed a stick of meat each and a half pack of Bond cigarettes. They step out back to the patio zone to look for Aamil, by the giant outdoor stage. On the wall, under a giant banyan tree, someone has painted the continent of Africa, the face of Bob Marley, the Jamaican flag and the phrase Jah-Make-Ya. The smell of skunk and smoke waft around.

There is a television in the corner of the patio playing an Asian war movie without sound. Someone is getting machine-gunned to death. The boys who don't have a girl to dance with are all scattered around in plastic chairs, watching the movie with dull stares. Back here, you can buy a reefer for 1000 Leones, about a quarter. Inside, the air is

molten it is so hot. Out here, you get a bit of breeze off the water. Zoe leans on an open window and blows smoke out into the night sky.

You've never smoked a reefer? She asks Mohammed, and he smiles and shakes his head. He won't, but he'll watch her. She flicks her half-smoked cigarette into the ocean and tells Mohammed to wait for her and she steps back into the club. The VIP room is walled in by one-way mirrors, and she pushes through the door to look for Aamil, then decides to go for a piss. Not many VIPs tonight, and there is an attendant asleep on a sheet of newspaper on the floor of the toilet. The girl apologizes and leaves. Sorry sir. Sorry.

When Zoe comes out Mohammed is waiting for her. You don't have to babysit me! she says. But Mohammed won't leave her side. They keep looking around: the ping pong table is being dominated by three Chinese business men (no girls), and the pool table is full of four overtly swarthy Russians (two girls each). At the bar is one lone Frenchman with a gap-tooth girl of his own. There are no Lebanese guys here tonight, no other foreigners. The bar is only half-full of girls and boys, dressed up in tight jeans and heels and dancing like it's their job. Pounding reggae, lasers, a giant screen in the corner for the music video.

Zoe is approached by Patricia, a very cute hooker she befriended a month ago. She buys her a Maltina and they chat lightly about Aamil, whether anyone has seen him. Patricia makes a call. They smoke a cigarette. Patricia shakes her head. Aamil is no where. They step back outside to the patio and watch the Asian war heroes blow each other up on TV. Mohammed won't look, though. His eyes flick around, anywhere but at the bodies getting blown up on the little screen.

White Man's Bay:

Soledad lights a cigarette. She closes her eyes. Then she props herself up on a wall.

Things are about to get gnarly, but before they do, sometimes it is wise to just sit and *listen*. Soledad tries it. She sits. She smokes. Before long, the sounds of the Freetown night start flooding towards her.

First, it is the chickens calling, always with the chickens, their scratching claws and little squawks and dusty wings, then there are slapping sandals on the road, and with them, children's voices, laughing crying singing, a simple but elegant tune. Then she hears the cooing pigeons, an outboard motor, the trickle of water through a broken pipe, a mosquito whine. If she strains, she can hear the grinding gears from the road, the honk of a passing poda poda, the hawker girls with their songs about bags of water or groundnuts or plantains or lemons or little battered fishes. A helicopter flies in low from Lungi, throbbing across the empty sky. That takes a moment to calm down. Then there are the bristles of a laundry brush against a board, if she strains, she can hear Sunday prayers across the water from shrill microphones; the clapping Christian Amens! that follow. Then the howling of a cat gang, the clang of pot against spoon. The sound pours around her: the crackle of a garbage fire, someone tapping a coin against the metal of the bars on the window, the pounding of millet, the sizzle of fat. From somewhere, the Nigerian tele-soaps with their canned soundtrack and weeping actresses. Behind her, the big modern building hums.

She turns and takes in the clinic, new and posh next to the clapboard houses that flank it. She looks up to the second floor at the perfect moment. Just as the electricity goes.

And the whole place goes.

Dark.

Aces:

Suddenly, the lights swirl to a dead blackness.

Music: dead.

Lights: dead.

A few voices pipe up. The club is black but for a few cigarettes burning. Some cell phone lights flash around, a starry sky.

It is in this darkness that Mohammed leans in for a careful kiss. Zoe nearly collapses. It is the softest thing she could dream up. The end of Zoe's cigarette is a pulsing heart.

It only takes a minute before the generator pumps back into action. Everyone is used to this kind of thing. Mohammed won't look at her when the lights come swirling on. The music stays dead though, people are filing out. She twists her foot on her cigarette. She puts her hand on his shoulder. Let's go, she whispers to him, not knowing what has happened, what is going on.

Electricity House:

They've pulled the plug, Stella says. They've got us.

Moses says in the blackness: Wait.

Joseph says: Start the generator.

There is a generator just for the transmitter. It is small and it takes a lot of gas. There is only a bit of gas left, but it is enough. They turn the cameras back on, with the help of the chugging generator.

Stella says: We are reporting live from inside the ABC TV newsroom, where we are currently under siege.

Joseph says: They're on the roof.

There is a battering ram against the door now. A deep sonic boom boom.

Abu opens the blinds for a very quick look out the window.

The ram keeps pounding: Boom Boom.

Stella: We'd like to express our love for Sierra Leone and its people.

Outside Abu sees the entire block filled with army. Inside, there is the chugging of diesel. The buildings around them are still. On the street, there are a hundred guns pointing up at the sixth floor. At them.

Ascension Road:

She is screaming. They are in the dark. The fetal heart monitor is dead. The bright delivery lights are dead. There are two candles lit but that is not enough. They cannot get the generator going because there is no gas. Someone has stolen the gas for the generator. No! shouts Doc Thomas. No! NO! Now a nurse comes with the news. The gas is gone. The gas stations have been closed by the police. Someone lights a hurricane lantern. Soledad's face flickering beside her. Then there is an emergency light, a nurse hold it over Doc Thomas' head. They can see some bleeding. The baby's head is crowning. She has pushed the head, there is relief, the eyes are open. But wait. Blood is everywhere, the

floor slippery with it. Doc Thomas is sweating, he is trying everything he can. She is very pale, she can't push any more, even though the baby isn't out yet. Now there is an IV drip. A nurse puts medicine into the sac. Doc Thomas pulls and then steps away. A nurse has run to get gas for the generator. She has gone on a motorbike. There is no telling when she will be back.

Lumley Beach Road:

Outside of Aces, Mohammed grabs her by the hand, but there is a swarming, people are leaving the club, hopping on okadas, jumping into taxis. The boys with fish ball sandwiches are gone. The hookers are gone. The footballers are gone. The DJ is gone. The candy-kids are gone. The grilled meat is gone. The Russians are gone. The Frenchman is gone. Patricia is gone. Mohammed has her by the hand and they are running now, past the parked cars and the guard-men out collecting change for watching them. The street lights are gone. The okadas are gone. The taxis are gone. The cars are disappearing. He leads her to the beach. Where are you taking me? she asks breathless. But where else is there to go?

The PZ:

Who is watching the broadcast? Anyone with a generator, anyone who is not sitting in the black. The Torture Boss. The barber, Ishmael. The vegetable lady, Janet. The small boys who crowd around the door of the television shack. They are paying two-block (that's two hundred Leones each) to watch the TV, with sound. There are gunshots now. The helicopters fill the sky. A tank drives up Siaka Stevens Street, the first time since the war.

Who is watching? The Minister of Defence. The BBC news. Aamil, from the Black and White club, on the patio, with a beer. There are reports of fire bombs, NGO offices, the Ministries. The streets are closed. The poda podas are parked around the PZ, and one of them has a TV hooked up to the car battery. They can hear the shooting. They can hear one military chopper over Electricity House. But they want to hide, they don't want to watch, but there they are, fearful, watching.

Electricity House:

Stella starts to cry. She can't concentrate on the broadcast, with the battering ram going Boom. Boom. Joseph asks out loud: what if we surrender? And they agree, please please. They take a white T-shirt off of Moses' back and hang it out the window. There is a splash of bullets. They fall to the floor. There is a crunching sound, the door is breaking. Stella is weeping. Moses shoots the gun at the door. Someone turns the camera on the door, so everyone in the country can see. The door bursts open. The bullets come. The transistor pops, and fizzles out. The broadcast is over.

Ascension Road:

The expected things happen: The baby is cleaned up by a nurse. A girl! she says. Soledad holds the baby in its perfect white sheets and the baby is alive. The baby is breathing. There is still no light, no gas. There is no incubator for the baby, not without electricity. The incubator sits in the corner, dead. And the mother— Now they have to operate, she is bleeding. Soledad's blood is brought to her in a bag, the nurse puts the needle in expertly. S--- tries to vomit. Now she feels cold. She is bleeding too much. Soledad is giving all

that she can. She is holding her baby. She is giving her blood. S--- is only half awake, but she wants to see the baby. There is no incubator for the baby. No ambulance. No electricity. The roads are closed. A nurse takes the baby from Soledad and tries to give it to S---, but she doesn't have the strength to hold it. There is no incubator for the baby. There is no ambulance. There is no blood bank. The blood doesn't feel good when it is going in. Is that possible? She can't make out words. She passes out. Doc Thomas is giving instructions to the nurses. They have to go ahead without the heart monitor, they have to try. He is scrubbing up. There are more drugs in the IV. There is nothing but blackness. There is still no gas. There is still no light.



The Following

Corset: Pretend we are peach. Raspberry. It needs to be like air through straw. His blond mustache and merino twin-breasted blazer. Camel filters, hot scotch candies in a box pressed against ribs. Something about that morning stepping onto the subway: the door-air that whooshed me inside, that stranger's hand skirting around my middle. Pretend we are plum. Panama City, with its bombed out buildings, clotheslines between the empty shell windows. The Merino Whoosh. The razor slitting down the center, then scales on the bottoms of our shoes. Air through straw. Thin fish blood. Flash-fried and served on the wharf on strips of Chinese newspaper. A blond mustache tucked behind a row of bottom teeth. That hand cinched around my waist— Pretend we are the Chinese Newspaper. The Hot Scotch Candies. Pretend we are Bone.



Now, looking back, we can see that the search for S--- was larger than ourselves; it was symptomatic of larger generational ills.

We are educated, female, first world. Most of us are between 29 and 39, a discomfoting period of productivity when children and career are meant to apex, our diets are correctly balanced, our cardigans range from proper grey to a bold red. Of course, we love our cherubic children, our fancy jobs. We wouldn't trade our own wedding photos in for any fling in Barcelona. But some small part of us sought her out, despite all the negative press, the scandals, her slow and relentless unraveling...

Maybe we were afraid we had missed all the fun. The Sixties belonged to our parents. The Eighties were ours— that wasted splash of neon and eye shadow, the Punky Brewsters and Alyssa Milanos, our vapid idols. Everything good and solid the hippies had built had turned to pop. California, that bastion of side ponytails and Malibu-pumped pectorals, was always our glittering goal. We bunched our watermelon gum into our cheeks and our families moved us to sugar-coated houses in the suburbs. Everything was television. They took away the creeks, the alleys, even the woods, and restricted us to plastic playgrounds, where all we could do was practice the French kiss, share walkman

earphones, whine. Winter lasted eight months a year and it still does. We never made it to California.

Instead we took our parents' money and moved into dorms on metropolitan campuses and by then we knew it was too late. We hadn't run away yet so we never would. Instead, we defiled the liberal arts by flashing our breasts at parties and seeking high paying jobs upon graduation. There was no one to fight, no war to oppose, no massive drug craze to unite us like the wild poets and vagabonds from our parents' books.

That's not to say we didn't medicate. By the Nineties, our teenage years, everything had turned to frosted-pink stucco under a Ritalin haze. We looked to spoiled white boys from cities like ours to sing grunge anthems to smoke to. And we drank—behind churches in parked cars; in living rooms recently deserted by vacationing parents; lying out in the grass of the ball diamond, our bare feet getting sliced by broken bottles, cherries of hash burning in crushed pop cans.

Somehow, out of this cloud of meager rock and downers, we fleetingly found each other. We formed 'cliques' of adorable blonds and tomboys and gymnasts and swimmers, and we'd stay up listening to our parents Yardbirds albums and twist and shout in the rumpus room and eat magic mushrooms with our families sleeping upstairs. Some of the girls did acid, scaring themselves to death falling off the curbs. But these girls didn't stay different for long: they waitressed, took longer to marry, it all ended the same: lonely dashboard cigarettes and new wrinkle creams on ensuite bathroom counters, dimly decorated cubicles at jobs we've always hated but people told us were just part of growing up.

It is almost as if we could descend, each of us, to the bottom of the staircase to the nadir of our generation and look up through all of the promises we made to each other, all the way up the social ranks, and we would see that we've cheated ourselves—that a tight yoga body and a double degree and two kids by mid-thirties—it isn't worth it, we traded too much. Our children will not swarm the woods in homemade dresses, they can't cuddle between us on pillows every sunny afternoon. They belong to daycares and grandparents. They watch television. We won't let them outside alone.

And though we bicker among ourselves now, homebirth vs. hospital, organic vs. fair trade, the only thing we can agree on is who to watch, these hours behind our various desks, popping our new anti-anxieties, anti-depressants, Advils and green tea suppressants, we continue to troll sites like these. Our fascination only grew, and it's no wonder we loved her: the one of us, from a generation of cripples, who managed to get away.

Asking ourselves: How could that possibly feel?

Zoe woke up to a grey dawn on Lumley beach, soaked with dew, curled up on Mohammed's jacket. He was a few feet away from her, reading the back of her small box of cigarettes. She blinked at him and he scooted over and put her head on his lap. He was warm and dry. Did you even sleep? She asked him. I watched, he whispered. She looked up at him and traced his lips with her fingers, she touched under his eyes, his ear. He shivered. It is too cold, he said, and she laughed. You are going to die in Canada, she said, and his face filled with an impossible joy.

Soledad wouldn't sleep, even though the police officer had sent her home. There is nothing to be done today, he told her. Doc Thomas had gone back to his villa. Shortly after S---'s heart stopped, Doc Thomas had collapsed in his office and cried beside Soledad. I'm so sorry, he said, and then he collected himself. He went to the next room and came back in a changed shirt and pants and Soledad just stared at him, and then he hugged her and said he was very very sorry and then he walked out of the clinic and drove himself away. The nurses looked very sorry too, they sat for a long time with Soledad and tried to explain the complications, the ruptured uterus, the lights had come on by now and they were cleaning up around the bed, and Soledad was just holding the baby thinking, What now? What now? The baby girl was very fussy, very small. One nurse brought a few packets of infant formula to be mixed with mineral water, and told her where to buy a bottle. By then it was past dawn. It had taken S--- all night to give birth to a baby and die, three hours later.

Then Soledad had gone to the police. She needed to report the death and send someone to pick up the body, the nurses told her. At the police station, she tried to calmly tell the story of her dead friend and the woman officer was kind and listened to her and nodded and then calmly asked her to file an official death certificate. That will be 12 dollars, the officer explained. You'll have to contact her family. And don't forget to collect her belongings, and try to find a last will and testament, they told her.

She still had the baby in her arms. Who can help her with this baby? She took a taxi back to the clinic, she tried to get in the front door, but it was locked. There was no one there listening to her knocks. Inside, were a pile of all of S---'s things, her cell phone,

the clothes she was wearing. That was what Soledad was thinking about, how the nurses must have stolen the things belonging to a dead girl.

She called her landlord, but there was no answer. She called Aamil, and of course, there was nothing. She called Zoe, who picked up, at first excited, but then she just listened. It was very painful for Soledad to say it: She's dead, the baby is here, I'm locked out, I need your help. Twenty minutes later Zoe pulled up in an okada, and five minutes after that, Mohammed arrived with the Torture jeep. Zoe held Soledad for a long time and they both cried and cried. Mohammed took the baby, and cooed and talked with it and he let the girls do what they needed to do together. Then he made a phone call. And another. He offered to drive them to the mortuary. That's where the body must be, he thought.

Soledad took the baby and buckled herself into the back seat. Then she realized she was starving, ravenous. She had been up all night. They stopped and bought things for the baby from a large Lebanese grocery store, a bottle, little diapers. Soledad bought cookies and juice for herself. The baby was perfect, awake, asleep, eating from the bottle. Soledad called her mother and asked her for advice. They talked for fifteen minutes, both ended up crying.

Then Mohammed came out of the mortuary and the body was not there. Zoe called her boss. The police have lost the body of a white woman, she told him. Her boss said that he could get the Ministry of Health on the phone, that he'd call the President if he needed to. But the Ministers were busy with last night's small rebellion. On the radio as they drove back to Soledad and S---'s apartment, the announcers on UN radio read the official report. The death toll: six dead in the ABC TV offices, no officers injured. Some

property damage done to the offices of World Vision, Christian Aid, the Ministry of Health, and of course, Electricity House. No suspects remained at large. According to the Minister of Defence, this was an isolated incident.

Once they got back to S---'s empty apartment, Zoe and Soledad discussed whether they should call the Canadian embassy. Zoe was against it. Soledad said, But what about the baby, who is taking this baby? The landlords arrived, bringing tea and samosas. Zoe called her father. It was late at night in Montreal, but he was awake. My God Zoe, he said to her. Are you kidding me? She started to cry. Call the fucking embassy, he told her. They decided to call the Embassy in Abidjan.

Then Aamil arrived. He didn't know anything, but as soon as he saw Soledad with the baby, he ran to S---'s room and found it empty. Soledad handed the baby to Zoe and followed him in. They stayed inside for a long time, almost half an hour. There was some crashing, some throwing things around. Once, a very painful wail emerged, like that of a wounded dog. Zoe and Mohammed concentrated on feeding the baby. Mohammed was very good at holding her.

Zoe's torture boss arrived next, told them the body had found in Kroo Bay, wrapped in a tarp, left there. Soledad came out of the room and heard about the body and the tarp and was furious. I never should have left her! What the fuck?! She was incredulous.

Zoe's boss told them it was a typical African mistake, it had been the police's messengers who had left the body in the truck and had come back and it was gone. Zoe tried not to look at Mohammed, who was looking out the window, listening. They were

only boys sent to pick up the body, and they boys had gone missing now. Perhaps they were paid by the press to leave the body there. Perhaps someone had heard it was a white woman, and there was some curiosity. Most likely it was a question of money. Someone, it appeared, had been bribed.

Then Zoe's father contacted Peter Barnett. It took a few attempts, but he finally got him on the line. According to Zoe's father, Peter Bennett was due to arrive in Freetown in seventy-two hours. Zoe's father had booked the same flight. I feel like I betrayed her, Zoe said, and Soledad nodded and Aamil was silent. He blamed himself. He wouldn't say anything, he just sat outside on the terrace and smoked.

A few more people arrived, Ishmael brought some oranges. Marilyn, the reporter from AP came next, and told them that she had read the news on the wire. She told them that she had already written a piece on the ABC TV invasion the night before. And no, she wouldn't report on S--- unless she was asked. After all, S--- was her friend.

Then the neighbour children came over to look at the baby. Soledad retreated to S---'s room to collect her belongings, to pull things together. S--- didn't have much, what could fit into a backpack: three dresses, some tank tops, a pair of stretch jeans, three novels and a journal. She flipped through the final pages of the notebook and found the few inscriptions from the Encyclopedia of Lingerie. She called Zoe into the bedroom and they sat on the bed together and she read them aloud, one by one. They cried. Then they fell asleep together on the bed for an hour, and everyone left them alone. When Zoe woke up, she flipped through the journal and found the inscription that read: If I die here, don't send me home.

She brought the journal outside onto the terrace where Mohammed was waiting for her, pretending to read a magazine. She sat beside him at the plastic table and read S--'s instructions aloud to the Torture Boss, to Aamil. She would be cremated in Freetown then, they decided, the ashes spread onto African soil. Aamil agreed, and Zoe's boss drove off to make the arrangements. The rest of them went on sitting, feeding the baby, sitting some more. They were sitting on the terrace when the sky broke. That's when the rains started. Thick and heavy.

In the middle of the rainstorm, Zoe's father called with the news: the photograph of her dead body had appeared on the websites of several of Canada's national newspapers. It was as if the shot was set up perfectly, he told her, the slummy streets behind her, the tarp. This is the shot they wanted so this was what we got: a missing woman reduced to a limp, dead body. Like that was what she deserved. Like that was what she was asking for all along—

She wasn't even political.

She didn't know that in 2001, upon signing the Abuja Declaration, every African government committed fifteen percent of their national budget to health care. We didn't know either. We didn't know that one in eight mothers dies in childbirth in Sierra Leone, but S--- must have known. She must have known that even when a doctor is doing his best, with the best technology at his disposal, his years in London training and his expertise— even he couldn't turn the lights on. Even he couldn't save her.

And thus, we died too. With her. Because in so many ways we had pushed her there, fiercely watching her escape instead of ourselves, languishing away in our lives,

following someone who could live the way that we could not. That's the thing about lingerie, we may look at the clothes, but we can't help but look at the body underneath. There is simply less left up to the imagination. It is as if her life was that small, fitted bits of cloth covering her and the rest left exposed, for us to scrutinize, analyze, until soon enough she could be wearing nothing at all, we've made up all the spots that we couldn't see directly.

Call us obsessed. Call us delusional. The ones who lurk on her site late at night, trolling old photos. Most of us, we ignore the truth and imagine her still living there, the small apartment, the growing baby girl wrapped around her back in a lappa. Because Husband didn't lay eyes on the body, she had been cremated by the time he arrived. And it is conceivable that her friends who loved her the most could have saved her.

After all, there have been sightings. One young woman claimed to have seen her in Accra, at a downtown bar. Another thought maybe she had bought a small house in the hills of Conakry, where so few foreigners could have spotted her. It seems impossible. But what is possible. Is it possible for someone to leave their perfect life, and then their child, behind?

When Husband arrived three days later, after the Sierra Leonean government expedited his visa, after he boarded the Air Canada flight to London, after a six-hour stopover in Heathrow and a seven-hour flight to Lungi, he felt he could better deal with the circumstances of S---'s death. It took him thirty hours to travel that far. It had taken S--- seven months. She wasn't being dramatic, he told himself, she had descended into a kind of madness. That's what the papers were saying: Depression, Anxiety.

What he couldn't reconcile was how she had run so far as to arrive in Sierra Leone, a country that, from the air, looked to be a giant mangrove swamp and on the other side of the water, a crowd of houses spread up and down some looming green hills. As they descended, they could almost feel the kitchen smoke in the rain clouds. Like stepping back in time. At seven pm, just after dusk, only a few speckled parts of Freetown were actually lit up. What a place, he thought, and he said this to Zoe's father, now his travel companion. She had wanted to live there because something about Africa was better than Canada, he thought. Better than me.

I can't understand these girls, Zoe's father told him, and they looked out the little plastic window. They knew they would be crowded by touts and press and people when they descended the steps of the plane.

But they couldn't dream up what came next. The helicopter ride. The swarms on the streets. They didn't anticipate that Husband would be presented with a bill within the first hour of his arrival, after placing his bags in the room at Country Lodge, and asking to speak with her roommates and friends. First, there is the matter of the funeral, the police officer said. The list of items required for a cremation in Sierra Leone: 2 to 5 gallons vegetable oil, 4 large tins of Ghee butter, 10 gallons kerosene, 12 pkts incense, 6 dried coconuts, 150 dozen bundles mango wood, 40 small bundles kitchen wood, 4 medium size fence sticks, 4 yards white poplin material, 2 yards red material and 1 small clay pot.

They didn't know the fee for the procedure was 2 million Leones, or 500 dollars.

The officer had been waiting in the lobby on someone's instructions.

They didn't know that the Torture Boss would shoo this officer away, and then pay for the cremation, the funeral in the Murry Town cemetery, her mother not making the trip.

They couldn't plan for the fact that they would both cry when they saw Zoe holding the baby. They couldn't know what it would be like for Husband to see that baby, still unnamed, that belonged to S---, that belongs to him.

But all of that was coming. What came first: how the smell of the place hit them. It was a new air, full of the stink of unwashed bodies, of ocean, of smoke and cloying flowers. It was the smell of a place: alive.



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