

5-22-2006

## Shades of Fine

Nicole McClelland  
*University of New Orleans*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

McClelland, Nicole, "Shades of Fine" (2006). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 359.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/359>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

# SHADES OF FINE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Drama and Communications  
Creative Writing

by

Nicole McClelland

B.A. The Ohio State University, 2002

May 2006

© 2006, Nicole McClelland

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would have been of a much lower quality without the help of Randy, whose attention to detail down to the sentence level is always motivating, informative, and daunting. I'm indebted to Lauren for humoring me, Carol Gelderman for exhibiting uncharacteristic enthusiasm for my work, and John Hazlett for being an amazing teacher. Many thanks to my thoughtful fellow workshoppers, my three unequivocal number one fans – Erin, my mom, and my dad – and Dan, my teacher, cheerleader, and pal, who is the coolest husband anybody could ever hope to be married to.

I would also like to thank the editors of *Orion*, *The Dos Passos Review*, and *Are We Feeling Better Yet?: Women's Encounters with Healthcare in America*, in which three of the following essays have appeared or are forthcoming.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
I	
Fifty-Two Pickup.....	5
Funky .....	16
Killing Yap.....	26
Toeing the Line.....	39
Giving Up the Diamonds .....	52
Sleigh Bed.....	63
II	
Strands of Grey .....	80
Finding Mandarinfish.....	94
On Love and Leachfields .....	106
The Trouble with Taylorwood.....	119
What You Do When You're WWOOFing.....	132
Shades of Fine.....	147
Vita.....	161

## Abstract

The following is a collection of personal essays that re-create and reflect on select events that occurred in my life between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.

## Preface

I used to think I was a fiction writer.

As a child, I considered myself a writer because I relished that time each spring when my grade school participated in the Diocese of Cleveland's Young Authors project and we were each required to write a short, self-contained book. I knew my teachers considered me a writer, too, as they sent me to represent our class in Power of the Pen writing competitions. I was consistently the best student in English class, and I loved to read, just as writers do. *Reading Rainbow* was my favorite show. And anyway, I sucked at math.

In college, I enrolled in a succession of fiction writing classes. I wanted to write, and write creatively, with scenes, and dialogue, and that was the place to do it. I found myself workshopping stories in which the characters were people I knew, characters who encountered the same conflicts as those in my real life, stories with scenes and dialogue. I wondered how much of the content of the other students' stories was true, whether Valerie, who always wrote in first person, was really cheating on her boyfriend with a Romanian single father, but only because I was nosy. I felt a little weird that my fiction wasn't more, well, fictional, but I wanted to write about real life, and so I did.

I made it all the way to my senior year before I took nonfiction writing. I had seen it in the course bulletin, but never considered it too seriously. I had vague notions of nonfiction as memoir, and even vaguer notions of memoir as quiet, contemplative, long-winded and low-action, very *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I didn't feel I needed the class – I had already been writing nonfiction, after all – but took it out of curiosity, and out of a desire to write a quiet, contemplative journal about my parents' developing divorce.

Little changed. I wrote the same kinds of stories, ones in which the characters were people I knew, characters who encountered the same conflicts as those in my real life, except that I left out the occasional flourish or embellishment or convenient fudging I often bestowed on my fiction submissions. The most significant difference was that I planned, if someone asked me whether the events were made up, not to lie. I liked it, owning up to the truth. I also liked the other students' true stories, which were filled with scene and dialogue, and were often amusing and action-packed. But when I decided to apply to MFA in writing programs, I still didn't give much thought to the nature of fiction versus nonfiction. Nobody could definitively tell the difference – who knew how accurate *Pilgrim* was, or *Catcher in the Rye* wasn't? – and the stories were the same, stories about love, about the loss of innocence, about the struggles with and triumphs of the self. I chose grad schools based on geography and compatibility with my husband's plans. I turned in two entirely true manuscripts with my applications to fiction programs. Only one school offered a choice between fiction and nonfiction, and I left the question blank until, after several minutes of consideration, I checked the latter box.

I don't know if I hesitated because I had been a literature major and had read almost exclusively fiction for my undergraduate coursework; I don't know if I still in some way associated nonfiction with the place in the library I went to when I was writing history papers or completing social studies projects, if I wasn't giving nonfiction its due as its own kind of literature. Or maybe I just didn't think the difference was substantial enough to matter.

Indeed, the University of Washington admitted me into its extremely selective program with what I knew were fictionless writing samples. But accepting the University of New Orleans' invitation into its nonfiction program ultimately led me to recognize the important difference between the genres. I was right all along in thinking that the two fields often shared



much in common – thorough characterization, carefully-created prose, compelling themes – and that many works blurred the line between them. Indeed, my own influences lay as strongly in fiction, which taught me to try to be as graceful as Barbara Kingsolver and as biting as Lorrie Moore, as they did in nonfiction, where David Sedaris set the bar for funny, and Annie Dillard the one for smart. Though it was often difficult to say how many of the events in my first literary hero's books, which I pored over on my parents' bed when they weren't home or weren't looking, really happened, Anais Nin showed me that one could be outrageous and poetic at once. But as I wrote memoir, travel narratives, personal essays, and research essays throughout my graduate career, I saw that the difference was in the extra poignancy actuality lent to stories about love, about the loss of innocence, about the struggles with and triumphs of the self. Nonfiction can capture the same sentiments, only with the authenticity of actual experience, which makes it, to me, an even more remarkable art form. To construct characters and invent plot lines that ultimately reveal truths about us and our world is human. The ability to recognize those truths in our own lives and craft them into nonfiction literature seems divine.

In the sixth grade, my Young Authors submission was a story about adventures with the microphones and drum sets in my parents' basement. As an undergraduate, I wrote about an ill-fitting pair of spangled underpants I received one Christmas, and a long-term relationship with a boyfriend I couldn't be faithful to. I've always been better at seeing things for what they really are than imagining how they might be. I've been endlessly inspired by the actual world unfolding around me since before I even realized it. I have always written nonfiction. And it is a genre deserving of its own distinction. It is a genre that gives us the opportunity to use truth to discover and share deeper truths. It is a powerful genre, one that I have embraced, and that has helped enable me to create the following pages.



## Fifty-Two Pickup

The first time Mitts asked me if I wanted to play fifty-two pickup, I smiled wryly. Where I come from, fifty-two pickup is something you screw your little sister into because she doesn't know better. Not this fifty-two pickup. This card game got you completely fucked in an hour.

I watched from my chair near the door as everyone crowded into the few feet of space around the folding table in the middle of Mitts' dorm room. Though it was Sunday night, there were five people ready to play. There were no classes on Monday – thank you, Dr. Martin Luther King. Mitts spread a deck of cards out face down in the center of the table. I pointed to the fifth of Absolut vodka in my lap when Rachel, who didn't often drink with us, asked me if I was going to participate. I didn't miss a game, but I never played. You just can't down eighty-proof liquor like you can beer.

Mitts prepared to go first because it was his room. Mitts loved to drink. Lots of afternoons I wandered down the hall of our freshman dorm to say hello after I got back from class. I always checked my watch when he looked at me at a break in our conversation and said, "Well. I should bong a beer." I couldn't stop being surprised when it was only two o'clock.

Mitts drew a nine of diamonds. If you drew a two through a five, you had to swallow that many mouthfuls of beer yourself. If you pulled a six through a nine, you could give them out. You could divide them up among the other players, give them all to one person, or if you were feeling really adventurous, take them alone. Mitts pointed at Tony, who I knew had been drinking since late afternoon. "Drink nine, fuckface." Tony laughed at him, finished a beer, and promptly whipped the can at the door.

*He's gonna get sick, I thought.*

Everyone knew Tony was a virgin. When he drank too much he came into your room and sat down and said, “I’m a virgin. Did you know that?” Like he was confessing something, like maybe you’d be surprised. I remember that a few weeks after school started that year, he came stumbling toward me as I returned to the dorms after a camping trip. “Hey!” he said. I was looking for the little Ohio-shaped sign with my name on it that my resident advisor had placed on my door. “I took your sign,” he admitted. Wet shredded pieces of it hung out of the corner of his mouth; his hand still clutched the remainder of the chewed state. I forgave him because he was so pretty. I wanted to have sex with Tony, but for some reason he didn’t want to recognize that he wanted to have sex with me.

“That’s seven for you, asswipe,” Slaughter commanded in Tony’s general direction when he drew a seven of clubs. I didn’t know why they were picking on Tony that night. Slaughter thought it was funny. I knew he was doing it on purpose.

Slaughter’s last name wasn’t really Slaughter. It was Schlotter. Like shlong, my father once said. No one called him that, though. A lot of people didn’t even know his first name. Slaughter always brought the same smell when he came sauntering into my room to tell me how drunk he was on school nights. I came to believe that he was the only person who drank more often and in larger quantities than Mitts. He was usually too fucked up to walk back to his own dorm, which was across campus. “Sure you can sleep in my bed, Slaughter.” He always slept in the same thing. A pair of shorts over boxer briefs. In case something fell out, he said. He took his two shirts and glasses off and lay on his back, watching the Cartoon Network. I lay next to him with my hips facing him, my lips barely resting on his shoulder. His skin smelled like some sort of cologne that had rubbed off his sweater, a pack of cigarettes, a blunt or so, maybe three forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor. Always. It smelled exactly like Slaughter should have

smelled. I worried about him a lot. I often wondered what was so wrong with him that he needed to drown himself in chemicals like that. I never asked him. He probably wouldn't have told me anyway.

Dick drew a jack of clubs. Dick smelled bad. He weighed three hundred pounds and had long fingernails. His roommates always complained to the hall director that she should make him do something about his lack of showering habits, but she was just as squeamish as they were. She never got around to it.

Jacks were rules. You got to make up some absurd law that had to be followed for the rest of the game. Rachel had already made the rule that you couldn't address anyone by his or her actual name; no one came up with anything but insults to substitute. Rachel was the postergirl for remarkably average eighteen-year-olds. I never saw her wearing anything but jeans: not tight, not baggy, with a colored tee shirt and maybe an Abercrombie and Fitch vest, brown leather shoes, nothing controversial or important to say ever. I had to give her props for the relative creativity of her rule, though. Dick decided, "You can't say drink, drank, or drunk, or you have to drink three." I thought about the impending disaster for which the rule was bound to be responsible, though it of course didn't apply to me. My liver cringed sympathetically for everyone else.

The game went around the table a few more times. Mitts drew a queen. Queens were my favorites. You had to ask the person – generally, a male – to the left of you a question, and he wasn't allowed to answer. He had to immediately ask the person to his left another question. It seems difficult to screw up, but intoxicated people never cease to do amazing things.

"Did you take my beer?" Mitts asked Slaughter. Slaughter turned to Tony.

"Did you ever get that tampon out of your ass?"

Tony to Dick: “Do you eat yams?”

Dick to Rachel: “Did you know Tony’s gay?”

Rachel had gotten distracted by the psychedelic screen saver on Mitts’ computer and hadn’t been paying attention when the round of inquiry started. “No!” Everyone looked at her. She realized she’d answered Dick’s question. “Fuck!” Homosexuality was a big topic when it came to the question category of the game. Variations of “Did you know so-and-so was gay?” included “Why are you such a fucking homo?” and “Is it true that you like being fucked in the ass like a little bitch?” Calling each other queer is so funny to inebriated, insecure straight people.

“Drink two, retard,” Slaughter said to Rachel.

“And that’s three more for you for using the ‘d’ word, asshole,” Mitts told him.

Slaughter didn’t care. “Fuck you. I will happily imbibe three.” He drank while his use of the verb impressed me. He drew an ace.

Aces were waterfalls. Whoever picked up the card sent the waterfall to either his left or right, everyone stood up and tipped his beer, and no one could stop drinking until the person before him in the line stopped drinking. Basically, whoever ended up last was fucked. Slaughter sent his waterfall in the opposite direction of the one that would make Tony first. I knew he was going to get sick.

Half an hour later the game was over and a quarter of my Absolut was gone. Tony had finished a case. He started telling Rachel that Mitts and I were plotting against him and were far too powerful to overcome. If she didn’t join his side, she would be helpless against us as well. Everyone else was a good seven beers behind Tony. I felt sorry for him. Dick returned from the bathroom and ordered Tony out of his chair. “I called seat check, motherfucker.” Tony

reluctantly stood up and fell into the wall. He started cursing about what a bunch of conspiring dickheads we all were, told us he was going to take a piss, and exited the room with a final flip-off. For some reason, no one was concerned about him cracking his face on a urinal but me. I followed him.

I found him standing in front of room 510. There was a large puddle behind him, and I asked him what it was. He looked at it, considered, and shrugged. "Probably urine." He told me he was waiting for the people inside the room to open the door so he could get some spectacular magic, whatever that meant. When I informed him that those people weren't home, he called me a slut. "Come here for a second." He fell on me, pinning me to the wall. He buried his face in my neck, kissing my shoulders, running his hands around my waist. I was perceptive enough to notice how strong his hands were, how warm his skin was. I was too drunk to conclude that taking advantage of a virgin's intoxication was a bad idea. He grabbed my hand. "You always make me feel so filthy. I can't believe what a filthy whore you are."

Everyone knew I got laid. I had somehow become the token expert to all the virgin girls running around my hall. My roommate brought them in and they giggled and ate popcorn and asked me if it was important to trim, or how hard was too hard to grip a penis. I was happy to indulge them. I like talking about sex like some people like talking about soccer, or their kids.

Tony led me into his room behind him, turned and faced me. "You like me, right?"

"Sure, Tony."

"I mean, I can tell you like me." So keen. Everyone knew that I wanted to have sex with Tony. I had offered to deflower him more than once. He called me filthy again, pulled me onto his bed in full straddle on top of him, told me we were gonna fuck. I thought about how ridiculous the circumstances were for a first time. I could still remember what I was wearing

when I lost my virginity. I could also remember turning around halfway home the next morning to see if I'd left my underwear in a corner of the motel bathroom floor. What a lousy story it would all make when my kids started asking me about the miracle of life. I figured I should save Tony the same embarrassment. We were friends, after all. I reminded him that he was a virgin and didn't want to have sex unless he was in a relationship. He told me to stop talking and reminded me that I was a slut.

We kissed awfully for a few minutes and he started touching me incorrectly in inappropriate places. I remembered that I'd had a dream about kissing him a few nights before. When I'd woken up, I had been sad he wasn't there. I'd missed him all day. A few days before that I had been talking about how great he was and my roommate had told me that she thought I was in love with him. I reasoned that I wouldn't burn in manipulative whore hell for nailing a drunk virgin if I thought I was in love with him.

"I've got this six-foot erection for you," he said, and forced me to realize that I was doing the wrong thing. Tony wouldn't have said anything like that sober. Tony wouldn't have said anything like that even if he had only had twelve or thirteen beers. I knew he didn't really want to do it. I knew that if I left, he'd just pass out and forget about it. Or worse, if I stayed, he'd still forget about it. I stood, bent over and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, hon." He didn't say anything.

Back in Mitts' room everyone else was playing another game of fifty-two pickup, though alcohol already weighed heavily on their intellects and tongues.

"Gonorrhea."

"Syphilis."

"Fucking crabs, man."



Someone had evidently drawn a king. Kings were categories. I figured the category was sexually transmitted diseases.

“Herpes.”

Rachel thought for a second. “I don’t know.” She gave up. “I’ll just drink.” I noticed no one thought of HIV. This was no time for social consciousness.

“You just said drink, rugmunch,” Mitts said to her. “That’s an extra three for you.” They loved that rule. It never failed to fuck everyone. I couldn’t remember a game of fifty-two pickup going by without it.

“And that’s another three for you for saying it to her, monkey fucker,” Slaughter told Mitts.

“And that’s a fuck you, Slaughter.”

“You too, bitch.”

I watched a few more turns and remembered Tony. When I went to check on him, he was vomiting on himself. My friends in high school never did anything like that. It was the kind of alcohol poisoning they warned you about before you came to college. I had never actually seen it in person. I helped him get cleaned up and told him that he needed to stay with me in my room. He didn’t want to stay in my room. I pointed out to him that he had thrown up all over his sheets. He pointed out to me that I was a dirty whore.

Ten minutes of arguing got him into my bed. I lay down next to him so I could make sure he slept on his side and didn’t swallow his own puke or need anything else. He talked for a few seconds about his balls itching and passed out. I tried to make myself comfortable in the cubic-foot space he had left for me. I thought I was almost cozy enough to fall asleep when he

rolled over onto his back. I remembered I wasn't supposed to let him do that. I leaned over him and called his name.

"You can't sleep like that, honey." I shook him. "You have to get up, Tony, you can't sleep on your back." His throat emitted a low gargling sound, and I tried to pull him over onto his side. He stirred, punched me in the face, puked on my chest and neck. He was choking. My jaw hurt. I kept trying to roll him over and couldn't do it. He wouldn't wake up.

I ran to the phone and called Mitts, half a dozen rooms down the hallway. I cried something that sounded urgent and he came running through the door. Tony hadn't stopped throwing up yet. Together we turned him over onto his side, and he puked in the toaster I hid next to my bed. And on my floor. And in my desk, on my printer, and on my alarm clock. Mitts had the paramedics on the phone telling him to keep Tony off his back. He still wouldn't respond to our yelling. Some guy walking down the hall heard it and walked right in, like he'd been patrolling the halls for vomiting action. "Whoa. Got some alcohol poisoning on your hands?" He watched us struggle from the doorway. "You should definitely keep him on his side."

Puke Police left with a cup and returned with it filled from the drinking fountain. I explained to him that he was going to have a hard time getting Tony to intake anything while he was so busy getting shit out. He ignored me. He asked us his name. "Hey Tony!" he said like he was talking to a deaf person. "Are you thirsty, man?"

"Yeah," Tony kind of said. He was talking. *Thank god.* Mitts hung up with the hospital that had been about to send an ambulance and a bad scene over to our entirely underage dorm. I got behind Tony and held him so he was sitting up. Mitts was somewhat absentmindedly singing the intro to a Beastie Boys song. It was Spanish. He substituted garbled English and types of

Mexican food for the real lyrics. Earlier that day he and Tony had realized that the number of syllables in the last line of the intro conveniently corresponded with those in the phrase “sucking my dick.” Tony recognized the tune, piped in.

“Burrito, hengliso smana SUCKING MY DICK!” Mitts laughed. I gathered from this late-breaking nugget of Tony’s comprehension of his surroundings that he was going to be fine. We sat with him while he sang for a few minutes. Puke Police started laughing.

“Man, he really creamed your toaster.” *Yeah, that’s fucking hilarious*, I thought. Tony saw it and told me he could clean it out, like I might be inclined to insert food into it, heat it up, and put it in my mouth with the knowledge that it had once been brimming with his vomit. He started to pick it up, and we tried to convince him that perhaps he should get a shower instead. He told us to fuck off. We told him that he was covered in puke.

“You are all about some puke, you know that?” he said to me. I managed to get him standing and started dragging him to the bathroom. One of his friends walked by and laughed.

“Thrown up all over yourself, huh, Tony?”

“You threw up all over YOURSELF, you fucking piece of shit,” Tony said. He got in the shower and I went back to my room. Mitts sat outside the stall and smoked a cigarette to make sure he didn’t hurt himself.

I made myself pick up my toaster and carry it down the hall to a large overflowing garbage can. I set it on top. *Let somebody else look at it.* I went back to my room and started scrubbing spew off my floor. My neighbor Emily walked in and pointed. “Look, it’s the sweet and sour sauce he had with his chicken strips at dinner today! Remember?” I didn’t know why she was so excited. I wondered if maybe she wanted to roll around in it for a little while. I figured my turn must have been close to over. She pointed to the photography book on the floor

near my closet. I wondered how in Christ's name Tony had managed to retch on it. "Were you gonna resell that? I hope you weren't gonna resell that." *Yeah, I was gonna resell that. It was seventy fucking dollars.* "That would suck if you were gonna resell that. I don't think they take ones like that." Emily and her helpful information moved on to see what my neighbors were up to. Tony walked back into the room in a towel.

"These don't fit anymore," he told me. He was trying to pull a pair of boxers over his head like something out of a stupid sitcom. I told him that maybe he should try a shirt instead. He told me to go ride a cock. I started shouting about how he should stop fucking around and that I'd been patient with him all night. I was sick of cleaning up after him and arguing with him and if he didn't put this shirt on I was going to kick his teeth down his throat. I told him I should have let him fucking choke, which was a dreadful thing to say. He called me a slut, but did as he was told. He got in my roommate's bed.

I lay down next to him and he asked me what was going on. I told him that he was sleeping with me because he threw up all over his own bed. He bolted into a sit. "I puked?" I couldn't believe he didn't remember. It had been like half an hour ago. It was the quickest blackout I had ever seen. I understood most people at least waited until morning. I asked him if he remembered us messing around, and he was incredulous. "We did what?" Nothing serious, I assured him. I was disappointed that this was news to him. *Must not have been that good, my friends will say.* Good thing we didn't fuck. 'Some girl told me I screwed her' would make an even lamer first time story than mine.

We stayed up for an hour and he seemed to have sobered considerably since his shower. While we lay in my roommate's bed I told him about the highlights of the game he'd played, the

excitement surrounding his alcohol poisoning. I fell asleep on his chest, my arm around his waist.

I woke up the next morning alone. I stretched and looked at my alarm clock. I realized that wasn't really my alarm clock. I was still in my roommate's bed. I sat up and pushed my hair away from my face. It was almost two thirty in the afternoon. I walked down the hall and through Tony's open door. He lay on his bed. I sat down next to him.

"How are you feeling this morning, babe?" I asked him.

"I don't know. Fine. Sort of shitty, I guess."

We didn't say anything for a moment, and I wondered if I should say something about the way we had fallen asleep the night before. Or about our having done anything the night before. I thought maybe I didn't have to say anything. I remembered how good it had felt to be so close to him, even to take care of him. I wondered if our relationship was going to be different. *See what a good girl I am? We can date now.* I could guiltlessly, rightfully filch his virginity. I thought maybe we would even be in love.

He rolled over and looked at me. "Mitts told me I puked last night," he said, and his Natural Light-scented breath mingled with my disintegrating hopes and dignity in the dorm room air.

## Funky

“It looks like there’s a cauliflower-shaped growth on your cervix,” my doctor said as I pulled my feet out of padded stirrups and sat up. My head was swimmy from lack of blood. I imagined a close red tunnel, an endoscope’s view, a flourish of vegetables bursting forth at the end of my vaginal canal.

*Looks like?* I thought. *Does that mean that maybe it isn’t really there?* “What do you mean?” I asked him. The left breast of his white coat was embroidered with a little thread panda bear and his title. “Dr. Dan” kept his gaze and his mustache aimed at the floor. “What does that mean?”

“It looks like the Human Papilloma Virus. The biopsy will tell us how cancerous the growth is and then we’ll have it removed with a little laser surgery. It’s a common procedure, just outpatient. In and out.”

*Human Papilloma Virus*, I thought. *Doesn’t that sound familiar? HPV.* I tried to remember where I’d heard the initials before, but I was having trouble organizing the old, unused notes of my Catholic school sexuality classes in my brain. My cheeks were on fire; a dull buzz encompassed the top of my head.

“Isn’t that an STD?” My voice burned in my tight throat. “Isn’t that genital warts?” I could hardly hear myself. Something was wrong with my ears.

“There are nearly a hundred different strains of HPV. Some are asymptomatic, some cause genital warts, and some cause cancerous lesions to grow on the cervix and in the vagina. You probably have either strain 16 or 18, which cause the latter.”

I clenched my teeth against my shaky voice. “Aren’t viruses the ones that don’t have cures?”

“There is no cure for HPV just yet, but we’ll get you some surgery in the meantime. Hopefully we’ll have a cure for you real soon.”

“But it is an STD, isn’t it?” I didn’t want to have to tell this to my mother who was waiting outside in the lobby and who had tried to make me sign a virginity contract that the Christian Right was passing around the nation when I was thirteen. I was home from college for the summer. A few weeks earlier, Dr. Dan’s secretary had called to say that my annual pap had come back irregular. My mother had come with me to my exam for moral support, and there was no way to avoid facing her. My eyes became watery and ashamed below my heavy forehead.

“Well, would you consider HIV an STD?” he asked. *Of course!* I thought. He didn’t wait for an answer. “A lot of times HIV is contracted through shared needles, or blood transfusions, so it’s not technically just an STD. *It can* be transmitted through sexual contact, but it doesn’t *have* to be.”

*But they test blood now. No one has gotten HIV from a blood transfusion since that hemophiliac teenager died from it and it was all over the news. I shouldn’t have to tell him that. And what the fuck do shared needles have to do with cauliflower florets in my vagina?* My fingers fidgeted with the pink sheet that covered my lap. My thighs were plastered to the paper underneath me by chilly sweat. “So I could have gotten it from someplace else?”

“Well, some people think that the virus can live in hot tubs that aren’t kept clean and can be contracted through the water.”

I thought that if that were true there would have to be some sort of law requiring that signs saying so be posted next to the ones that say not to stay in for more than fifteen minutes and not to leave kids unattended. *Did he say something about cancer before? How much of my cervix are they going to remove?*

“Am I going to be able to have babies?” I asked.

Dr. Dan hesitated. “Well, we rarely experience any long-term damage from the laser surgery. You shouldn’t have any problem conceiving later on.” And then much lighter, hastier,

“Don’t worry!” He patted my knee. “Get dressed and we’ll talk about it some more if you still have questions.” Dr. Dan closed the door behind him. As I stood up to pull my underpants on, heat and darkness fused in from the corners of my vision, and I fell to the floor.

Dr. Dan told me when I came to that a lot of women feel faint after such a long examination. He said it was just a matter of all my blood having rushed to my pelvis, lest I should think I’d suffered a sudden attack of histrionics (though he didn’t say why he didn’t tell me that before I stood up to put my clothes on). My mother was leaning over me, frowning severely, wondering what had happened that was horrid enough to make me lose consciousness.

“Are you all right?” she asked repeatedly, dissatisfied with my feeble nod.

I wasn’t. I spent the walk back to the car abashed, disgusted with myself. I couldn’t think of anything charming or tender about heterosexual intercourse. I only imagined men grunting and sweaty on top of me. I pictured bare penises entering gaping vaginas, close-up, hardcore, porno-style. My shoulders and chest cringed, my eyebrows creased desperately to clear my filthy mind, but a polluted film spread across my body, pouring out from the opening to my womb. My mother turned toward me, and I realized I had been shaking my head and quietly wincing. I made my face look tired, so she thought I still needed more time to recover from my spell before she could start asking questions.

When she pulled the car onto the freeway, she couldn’t wait any longer. “What did he say?” she asked.

I turned toward the window. “He said I have HPV,” I said, and I started to cry. I hated that I couldn’t tell her without crying. I hardly ever cried. “It’s the same thing that causes genital warts, but it’s a different kind that causes cancer in your cervix instead.” Then I was sobbing. “I have to have surgery to remove some tumor thing, and that’ll fix it.”

My mother had been cut open more than once. The word surgery did not shake her. “Oh don’t cry, sweetie,” she said. “It’ll be ok.” But she was still frowning. I knew she was



wondering how I had managed to get a disease in my genitals. I was sure she was picturing me falling drunkenly into bed with relative strangers, which, to her credit, wasn't entirely inaccurate.

"He said you can get it from hot tubs when they're not clean," I said. She didn't respond. "I might not be able to have babies." I felt my lungs collapsing under the weight of the sentence, and I curled up in a ball in my seat, weeping.

My mother watched the road with her hands on the steering wheel. "Well," she said, "you'd better start having some soon then." This, of course, was a weird thing to say to an unmarried twenty-year-old college student, and it didn't make sense, since my concern was over my ability to procreate at all, but it was perhaps meant to hurt, and it did. My mother had grown up in the same white, middle class, conservative culture I had, only she had never gotten out, had never had the chance to escape to college, had never experienced the diverse, tolerant world of flying keg stands and women's studies. Where she came from, people got venereal disease because they deserved it, and I was losing my struggle against also believing in the sort of stigma I would've thought I could intellectualize and overcome.

I cried harder. She said nothing else while I mourned the rest of the way home. She didn't squeeze my knee or take my hand, and I thought she stayed so far on her side of the vehicle because she was thinking that I was a whore.

I lay on the floor of my parents' family room in front of the unlit fireplace with the phone next to my head. I had to call my significant other and confess my condition. Luckily for me, I was sleeping with a woman at the time. It didn't seem likely that she would get cervical cancer in her face, so it wasn't really her problem. But she already knew I wasn't exactly famous for safe sex practices, and now she would know how soiled my lovers were, how poor my choices to let them touch me.

"My doctor says I probably got it from a hot tub," I told her through sobs.

“Oh, babe, that sucks,” she said sympathetically, but I imagined abhorrence in her voice. I saw her recoiling, wrinkling her perfect nose on the other side of the phone. “Are you going to be ok? Do you want to come over?”

I considered how nice it would be to have someone to whine on, to soak up her relentless attention that I sometimes found suffocating. But when I pictured her affectionately putting her hands on me, I felt empty and poisonous between my legs where Dr. Dan had poked for half an hour. I clenched my thighs together while I demurely declined.

When I hung up, I thought about a card game we had played at a friend’s house the weekend before against another couple, during which my girlfriend had taken someone else’s side in an argument. “I am definitely not putting out tonight,” I had threatened, pointing at her.

“Whatever,” she’d smiled. “I don’t want any of that anyway.” Her eyes had been bright with impending teasing. “Your stuff is probably funky.”

Waiting for surgery, I spent a week on the internet trying to find information about my affliction and was surprised to discover that it has its own government-sponsored website. I felt as if it should comfort me to learn that I was fortunate to catch my growth early in its development; thousands of women die every year from cervical cancer that goes unchecked. But what I read with more relief was that HPV is the most common STD in the world, which meant that I was not necessarily the raging slut venereal disease contraction might suggest I was. Chances of avoiding it actually appeared pretty slim: infection estimates range from forty to ninety percent of the sexually active single population. Is it passed through sexual emissions? Perhaps. By mere skin contact? Probably. I thought that condom packages should say that there are entire families of diseases they can’t protect against. A list of statistics told me that women on the Pill have a higher chance of contracting HPV than women who are not. I was sure that wasn’t in the info packet that came with my birth control. Why didn’t my pharmacist say so? One website speculated that the pesky growth rooted in my cervix didn’t have to be caused by

disease at all, that it needed no nourishment but cigarette toxins and nicotine to bloom. *Who says I have a virus*, I thought, the lighter in my pocket pressing against my thigh. I would rather have said I made myself sick consuming cigarettes than unclean dicks. The same website also told me that I didn't even have to be a smoker to be at fault. Nicotine is stored in the testes and loads up the semen that is shot at the cervix during unprotected intercourse, it said. All I needed to do to bathe my genitals in a heavy dose of carcinogens was let my boyfriend come inside me.

Blame it on romance.

I decided that my ex-boyfriend, the only male I'd slept with in a year (and a smoker!), was responsible for giving me cooties. I hadn't spoken to him in months, and he was startled to hear from me when he picked up the phone.

"I have the funk," I told him, and I couldn't get through the explanation without tears.

"Oh no," he kept saying, and then, "I'm sorry, Nik," when I was done. He sounded genuinely concerned, but I was disappointed by this response. I wanted him to weep for my misfortune, to break down into guilty sobs, tormented by regret and liability.

"I need you to go to the doctor and see if you have it. It looks like I must have gotten it from you."

He paused. "Okay . . .," he said. He wanted to ask me what the fuck had given me that idea. He wanted to remind me that I had had sex with that guy I met at Denny's, and that drug dealer right after that, just a few months before we started dating. What about that hockey player I dated in high school? Hadn't I lost my virginity to a kid who lived in a trailer or something? Maybe *you* gave it to *me*, you big fat skank, he was thinking. I sent psychic thanks to his mother for raising him so well that he didn't give a crying girl a hard time when he said simply, "Is anything going to happen to me if I have it?"

"No, just to me," *you fucking bastard*, I thought. *You're just going to walk around looking unassuming, carrying it, distributing it among the heterosexual population for the rest of*

*your life. Deadly things aren't going to grow in your cervix because you don't have one.* “You need to get tested, okay? Make sure you go to the doctor tomorrow.” I wasn’t especially angry about the possibility that he was the one who gave it to me; at least I’d loved him. And anyway, it beat getting VD from the Denny’s guy.

My mother told people I had caught cancer from a hot tub at our health spa, and that we were considering pressing charges. My father, who is not religious enough to have mastered her level of denial, called me into the living room the night before my surgery. The closest conversation we’d ever had to a sex talk was ten years before. We’d been sitting on the couch watching TV, and a pro-condom commercial aired. When it was over, he looked at me and said, “If you’re going to have sex before you get married, use a condom.” Since I was still in grade school, I had no idea what he was talking about, but my mother would have been horrified to learn that he’d conceded even that much.

“I called Nate and told him to go get tested,” I told him now. “If he comes back clean, then I had to have gotten it some other way.”

My father wasn’t buying it. “You don’t have to be specific in answering this,” he said with his hands up, like in surrender, like easy does it, “but isn’t there anyone else maybe you should call?” He remembered the hockey player. He knew I tended to drink more than a few.

“No, not really,” I said. “Even if I got it from someone else before Nate, he would have had to have gotten it from me. So he should still test positive. If he doesn’t, then I must have picked it up somewhere after that.” Like from any of the other men you may have slept with in the meantime, my father was thinking. “Nate was my last . . . thing.”

I tried not to cry when my father asked me if I could give it to other people. I had already thought of this. I had already pictured myself climbing on top of future boyfriends and telling them while my hands pulled at their belts, while my lips pressed against their abdomens, that I was about to give them a wild time and an incurable disease. When I explained to them that they

wouldn't suffer any symptoms, that they would only carry it, they would be relieved and tell me the deal's still good. I'll take it, they would say. Let the fluid transfer begin. And I would wag my finger in their faces. You'll care when you have a wife someday, I would tell them. You'll care when she comes home hysterical because she has cervical cancer.

"I read somewhere that it's passed by skin contact, like warts on your hands and things," I answered my father. "So I think it's more transmittable when you have an outbreak." I was sort of making that up. I had thought I was so liberated, but it took contracting a disease to realize that I wasn't educated at all, that what I didn't know could hurt me, and there I was, a grown woman, considering excuses and inventing facts for myself and my father. "And since my thing is in my cervix, I think I'd only pass it to someone if they came in contact with my cervix."

My father and I both knew that it is a considerable distance from the vaginal opening to the cervix, and that only something fairly long would make it that far. We shared a moment of thick silence while my father watched me pick at the foot I had crossed over in my lap. Finally, because there was nothing else to say, and because my father can be kind of an asshole, he said, "So, basically you can't have sex with black guys."

When I went in for surgery, Dr. Dan told me that according to the biopsy, my lesion was not *that* cancerous. I didn't understand what that meant. But I hadn't eaten in twelve hours, and it was early, and I couldn't manage to ask him to explain how cancer came in degrees before a man in a nurse's uniform with a German accent and an earring came to roll my pre-op bed away.

My ex-boyfriend called the day after surgery and told me his test had come back clean. *It was the hot tub!* I thought as I unhappily watched post-operative blood seep out of my vagina. I called Dr. Dan to ask him if this theory panned out.

"You can't test for HPV in males," he said after his secretary tried for five minutes to prevent me from talking to him before finally putting him on the phone.

“But my ex-boyfriend went to get tested specifically for that.” Dr. Dan was a liar. Either a liar, or less informed than the good people at the free clinic downtown that my ex-boyfriend had visited.

“You absolutely cannot site test for HPV in males,” he repeated. “And the strain we’re talking about is totally asymptomatic in them. The only way we know if males have HPV is if they have a strain that causes genital warts and develop an outbreak.” I couldn’t think of a good argument. “I don’t see why it matters anyway,” he said.

*Fuck you, Dr. Dan, I thought. Fuck you and your disease-free reproductive organs. Fuck you for never having to figure out which of your erroneous decisions irreparably contaminated your body.*

“My cervix is bleeding,” I told him.

I sensed him shrug. “That’s okay.”

For weeks after my surgery, I was nauseated when my girlfriend kissed me. I flinched at anything that reminded me that my crotch, which felt hollow and ugly, existed. The bleeding didn’t stop, and though Dr. Dan wasn’t concerned, I felt pain somewhere deep inside my abdomen where I feared the surgeons had punctured something vital.

“I found some bumps when I was touching myself last night,” my roommate told me a year later in our apartment. It was hot outside. She was blonde and spilling out of a low-cut lavender tank top. She was frantic and crying and sweaty.

“Touching yourself where?” I asked.

“Where I pee,” she said.

When she came home from the doctor’s later that day, she was sobbing convulsively, holding little packages of medicine in her hand. “I have genital warts,” she wailed.

I had long since stopped bleeding, and my self-revolt had been transient. I had gotten a different doctor back at school, a helpful doctor whom I could call with questions and who made time to talk to me, who had told me, as Dr. Dan should have, how common HPV is, and that, even though there is no cure, my contraction of it wouldn't necessarily have enduring negative effects on my health. He'd told me that there was a good chance my virus would go away, or at least stop cultivating tumors, if I stopped smoking and ate a lot of brassicas. I had confirmed that what Dr. Dan had said about it being extremely unlikely that laser surgery affected my ability to conceive was true. And men were, somewhat disturbingly, as willing to go to bed as they had been before (though I wasn't, and I behaved more safely). So rather than telling my roommate that this was the price she paid for sexual liberation, as her mother would, or that she was disgusting, as she thought she was, I said what her doctor had probably left out as I folded my arms around her.

"I know it seems like a big deal, but it's really not." Her eyes and nose leaked wet warmth onto my shoulder. "A lot of people have something. And you probably won't have that many outbreaks because you're young and healthy, and someday it might go away." I reminded her that my last two semi-annual paps had come back normal, and promised that we would regularly eat Brussels sprout casserole together. It would be a long time before she nonchalantly told other sexually active people, when they expressed shock or distaste at finding out she had HPV, that they probably did too; a long time before she realized that she should be relieved to have contracted an STD that wouldn't kill or seriously maim her, that she should be grateful for the warning shot; a long time before she thought it was funny to deadpan, mocking a pharmaceutical company's ads for genital wart medicine, that she was part of an alarming trend. It wasn't until more than a year later that we turned Parliament up loud on the radio and danced around the family room, changing the words a little and singing "We got the funk."

But it did happen. When we were healed.

## Killing Yap

When I told people that I was going to Yap, their responses were invariable: an automatic “Ooh!” and then, after a quick mental key word search turned up nothing, “What’s that?” Yap isn’t covered in grade school geography lessons. Computer word processing programs don’t even recognize it as a proper noun. Some people thought it was a verb, that “yapping” was an obscure sport about which they had never heard. Certainly none of them could have been aware of the way their American ideology is seeping into this far-off place, consequently destroying 3,500 years of culture.

After twenty hours of plane trips that afforded me glimpses of the Cleveland, Houston, and Honolulu airports, I stepped off the aircraft to an anticlimactic message: “Welcome to the United States of America.” I was in Guam. It takes one more plane, which stops like some sort of space-age sky bus at another Micronesian destination, Palau, to finally get to Yap. Yap, the land of stone money, where pieces of rock weighing up to one thousand pounds used to be legitimate currency. The island that locals believe is immune to hurricanes because it is protected by magic. A place where half-nude women roam free of self-conscious body images and media ideals of perfect breasts.

Experienced scuba divers know that Yap is a small island – a mere forty-six square miles in area – in the Federated States of Micronesia, about six hundred miles east of the Philippines. I discovered it myself on the back of a stranger’s dive shirt when I was getting certified to scuba. A little research into the silk-screened enigma unveiled an ancient civilization surrounded by a sea of pristine marine life and some of the oldest coral reef systems on earth. I dug up a few elusive travel articles – the island has only been open to tourism since 1989 – with pictures of deeply tanned, dark-haired women wearing nothing but colorful grass skirts and young



loinclothed boys climbing thin, soaring trees. I couldn't resist booking a trip when I learned that over one hundred Manta Rays, the largest fish in the cartilaginous ray family and one of the largest species of fish in the world, with wingspans that can exceed fifteen feet, consider Yap's waters home. I had seen plenty of colorful fish in the Caribbean. I was ready to swim with big animals.

A couple of teenagers stood chatting at the airport "gate" I entered. Really there were no gates, or rather, the entire airport was nothing but a gate: one doorway in a sort of kiosk through which to pass in and out. One side or the other. There was no interior, no gift shop or Cinnabon, and only a few bathroom stalls housed in a separate building, complete with a hole in the ground for a toilet. The boy and girl who greeted us were in traditional dress, loincloth and grass skirt, respectively, passing out woven flower headdresses. It took me a minute to notice that the girl was topless since she was crossing her arms over her chest, as if someone had just made off with her shirt and she was trying to save face while she continued her conversation. She covered herself awkwardly, uncomfortably, although her mother and grandmother undoubtedly wore nothing more than woven hibiscus skirts in the village. She was made to stand there by some tourism bureau, wearing the outfit that had become a costume rather than a way of life since visitors like me started bringing in jeans and tank tops.

Yap is lovely, rich in palm and banana trees, with a clean, crystal blue sky, but there is certainly nothing glamorous about it. The roads, many unpaved, were narrow and uneven under the wheels of the taxi. We passed shacks made of tin and scrap metal on the way to one of the only hotels on the island. It was a tired, three-story building made of painted concrete set in the middle of a small parking lot. My room seemed spacious enough and fairly clean, but dingy by conventional American standards.

I got up early my first morning, due more to the fourteen-hour time difference than ambition, and paid an appalling twenty dollars (Western convenience for a Western price!) for a ride to the beach, as the hotel wasn't situated on one.

The driver of the huge vintage van was named Joe. Like all Yapese, he had burgundy-tinted teeth and gums from years of chewing betel nut. Betel nut is a radish-sized, smooth nut that is picked from the areca palm while it is still green. Users split it open and sprinkle crushed dried coral inside, then put it back together and wrap it in a pepper leaf. All they get for that is a light buzz, which proponents credit with many, often contradictory, powers: it can calm nerves, improve concentration, and boost energy, as well as increase sexual virility, alleviate stress, and ward off ghosts. It's difficult to determine if it's technically addicting, since no one who uses it would ever bother trying to stop, and anyway, no one here cares. What definitely has been determined is that the caustic ingredients cause ulcers and cancers of the mouth. Joe chomped absentmindedly on the wad in the corner of his mouth as he drove along the middle of the winding jungle road and played with the radio dial. We passed over a reggae song before settling on Britney Spears. The signal came from Guam, and I supposed the stations existed primarily to amuse American soldiers and their families, who make up nearly ten percent of the population there. Joe was happily, tunelessly singing along, but my tour of a most remote island was tainted by the banal pop soundtrack (not even a *good* Britney Spears song) of my home country.

When we got to the beach, Joe made me wait in the van because he said he had to talk to the village chief whose property encompassed the sand on which I was trying to lie. Fifteen minutes later, I was walking along a shoreline I was sure I had seen on a postcard. Small wooden structures, maybe fifteen feet long and ten feet wide, on short stilts, dotted the beach. I

had heard that these domiciles could be rented cheaply, but saw from the outside that no electricity or plumbing was possible. There was no sign of the chief with whom my driver had said he was just talking, or anyone else. Nothing under the searing sun but a bunch of empty cabins, tall palm trees, translucent seawater, and me. I urinated in a small thatch of shrubs, because I had to go and no one was there to stop me, and because I couldn't imagine what else people who stayed there would do. I laid my towel out away from the shade of the palm trees because I had been warned about the possibility of being killed by a coconut. As I shut my eyes against the hot blinding light, I tried to imagine a world where falling fruit was one of the more serious threats to human life.

Back at the hotel, I told Roberto, a Spanish-born dive instructor, that I needed more sunscreen. He said I would have difficulty finding it outside of the hotel, since the natives don't use it. The hotel charged more for ten ounces of sunscreen than it did for steak, so I decided to walk to the market to make sure. Roberto gestured to my bathing suit top. "You know, you don't have to wear that around town," he said.

The few people I passed on the dusty road bowed to me, as I've seen in Asian movies. I bowed back to them. Not a car passed me during the half-mile walk, and the sparse buildings looked deserted. I took a picture of a bright purple edifice purporting to be the state house. It was about half the size of my parents' upper middle class home, and the sign that proclaimed its title was hand painted and, like all signs on Yap, in English, the official language. A beaten piece of wood nailed to a stake in the ground said "Reserved for the President," as in, the president of the Federated States of Micronesia. Evidently he was affluent enough to possess a car. The market down the street was part of a modern structure, built in the fashion of a very short strip mall – out of place on the island – which housed several storefronts. Inside, it was not

much different than a grocery store in any low-income city. The cramped shop was a little dark and dirty, with food staples sharing the shelves with small, cheap plastic toys. Roberto was right about sunscreen, though I did find tanning oil, obviously imported for the use of pasty – and ignorant, if they planned to magnify the sun’s rays there – tourists. I grabbed a bunch of three-inch long tropical bananas to snack on and carried them to the register. In line, I was flanked by two topless women. The one behind me had breasts so old and large that they nearly touched the counter on which we placed our goods. She stood patiently waiting, perfectly still, with no one stealing fascinated glances at her but me.

Early the next morning, I slathered myself in expensive hotel sunscreen and walked down to the dive shop sans bikini top, though I covered my thighs as local custom demands with a long pareo. Roberto looked at me wide-eyed and scurried around to the other five divers, mostly my fellow Americans but, in their fifties, thirty years my seniors. He was asking them if they minded the way I was dressed. Though they all shrugged and laughed off my youthful adventurousness, some of the women rolling their eyes with an exaggerated chorus of “Oh, sure,” I was irritated. My plane ticket to this country cost two thousand dollars, I said to Roberto loudly. It was difficult not to supplant my slowly mounting sense of complicity with self-righteousness; I felt bad enough the hotel maids wore polo shirts. I did not come this far to have to abide by the rules of my prude native country, I told him, whether some of its inhabitants were present or not.

It was a long boat ride to Mi’il Channel, where the mantas spend the mating season. The harbor that backs up to my hotel opened into the endless sea before we turned left into a narrower opening to the mangroves. We wove our way in shallow waters through forests and

around islands of them for twenty minutes before reaching uninterrupted ocean again. When we stopped, gentle azure waves rolled quietly around us.

We geared up and rolled over the edge of the boat. When I hit the water, I looked around and saw that the visibility was lacking; I couldn't see the sand floor, which I was told was only seventy feet below me. We perched on dead coral formations, destroyed by storms that had hit surrounding islands, and waited, balancing on our knees. I rocked with the slight current, a few millimeters of water forming an intimate flowing layer between my wetsuit and my mostly bare skin.

After only a few minutes, a pair of manta rays appeared from out of the cloudy distance. We were motionless as they glided languidly toward us. A twelve-foot female led an eight-foot male, recognizable by his smaller size and the reproductive organs that stuck out like a short finger on either side of his tail. The female shifted her wings, hawk-like, in time to my slow, deep breathing as her mate shadowed her, white undersides flashing from beneath dark, scarred backs. Disturbed sand particles suspended in the murky medium cast an empyreal glow around their elegant bodies. They passed undaunted, ignoring us though we were but a few feet away, and moved out of our sight. Almost nothing is known about the mantas' lifespan, and scientists presently have no way of determining the age of an adult. But any observer can tell, by the strength and purpose of their movements, by the way they acknowledge your insignificance as they slip past, that the creatures are ancient.

Back at our hotel, I signed up for the cultural village tour because I didn't feel daring enough to wander into a community and ask to poke around myself. The native woman who met our bus at the edge of the village was large, middle aged, with skin so thick and dark it looked

like dozens of layers of sunburn. I wondered where she got the fanny pack that she wore over her colorful grass skirt, though I was sure it was full of betel nut. She rolled one around in the corner of her cheek while she led us down a path through dense jungle, occasionally gesturing around her. Here is where they made the women go to menstruate in the old days. Here is where we sit with visitors who stop to rest in their travels. The woman next to me tapped my shoulder urgently to point to a wild boar, massive and still, eyeing us through the trees.

Our path opened into a clearing where we were greeted by many children in traditional attire. They modestly handed each of us a headdress like the ones we got at the airport and a coconut with the tip chopped off. I sipped coconut juice as our group, about twenty in all, gawked at the thatched-roof meeting house and well-behaved youths. The older women of the tribe sat silently chewing betel nut without so much as a glance at any of us. The children began a twenty-minute song and dance that originated, as legend has it, as entertainment for an ancient Yapese king. The king, who was a fish, got a fishhook caught in his lip, and the villagers put on a show to distract him from his pain. The oldest child in the village was twelve, but their voices were powerful and deep when they broke into the re-creation, periodically yelling and stamping their feet. They moved and shouted with a reverence and maturity no children – and few adults – I'd ever met possess. Their grace was lost on most in our group, who commented tactlessly during the performance on the pretty skirts, the crazy language, and, devastatingly, the girls' exposed developing breasts. Some of the girls rightly attempted to shrink behind their leis while they danced.

After the show, we snooped. Three of the girls sat down and demonstrated traditional crafts while we hovered over them: one made a broom, one wove those ubiquitous flower headdresses, and another intertwined palm leaves until she produced a remarkably lovely and

functional purse. One woman from our group brought her three-year-old daughter, and made her pose near, but not too near, the native children while she took pictures. Camera in hand, she nosed around the elderly women of the tribe, who still sat nobly, their stately, naked backs against the sun, ignoring her. We watched a tall, skinny boy climb a much taller, even skinnier areca palm with a knife tucked into his loincloth. He hacked off a bunch of betel nut twenty feet above our heads and brought it down for us. The chief prepared one for me and placed it in my hand, smiling. I kept it in my mouth for just a few minutes before spitting it out on the ground in a puddle of purple drool. Some of the children and the rest of the tourists laughed at me when I said it tasted like burning.

When we arrived back in the hotel lobby, some guests were going through the video collection. Though Yap has no television services, the American proprietor of the hotel imported TV/VCR units for each room, and videos were available to rent at the front desk. Earlier during my stay, I had caught the maids' children sitting on the bed of a vacant room watching *Dirty Dancing* while their mothers cleaned. Unfortunately, most of the movies offered were not only at least ten years old, but also of the Patrick Swayze level of quality. No artistic or cultural breakthroughs there, but the films were nevertheless a powerful tool of exposure to western civilization. (On our way to the beach, Joe asked me if I had ever been to McDonald's. When I replied, of course, he waxed wistful. "Oh, I have never been there, but I have seen it in the movies," he said. "It is my dream to work there someday.") There was a public video store on the island that carried a stock similar to our hotel's. Though they were not yet common on the island, personal VCRs were greatly coveted.

After World War II, the United States took over what is now the FSM as a Trust Territory. Over the years America brought the Yapese infrastructure, billions of dollars of aid,

Peace Corps workers, cash, American tourism ventures, and booze. Government programs discouraged the natives from their traditional practices of personal taro farming and sustainable fishing and tried to develop private industry. Annual per capita income in the 1960s was about \$60 per family, but during the Kennedy administration the people were encouraged to start getting paid-hourly jobs in foreign-owned enterprises. Many were eventually hired to work for government offices funded by US dollars and for partially US-owned fishing corporations that turned Micronesia's marine life into an annual \$250 million worth of seafood. The US helped set up stores so the Yapese could spend their new paychecks on imported American goods. The current school curriculum teaches western lifestyle standards and concepts of development, which the President admits happens "at the cost of traditional values and approaches." But the relatively new office of the President serves as a liaison between foreign interests and a traditionally isolated culture. "This is not a lamentable outcome," FSM's leader has stated on the nation's website, "but simply a modern reality."

I took a walk to the handicraft gallery while the other tourists watched movies and came upon two teenage girls strolling through their modern reality. The temperature was in the nineties and they were sweating profusely in baggy black denim jeans and oversized long-sleeved tee shirts. I was wearing a cotton skirt. They were wearing socks and tennis shoes. I sported flip-flops. Earlier in the day they had been at school, learning to speak English and memorizing the American presidents. If their native culture and long tradition of self-sufficiency are not passed on to them, after graduation they may not want to live modestly off the land, as their grandparents do. Then, if they don't start their own businesses with the limited resources available to them, they will have difficulty finding an opening in one of the few menial local job markets, since Micronesia has seven times as many people as it does employment opportunities.



Or, they will take their labor skills to the United States. The girls acted as if I wasn't there when I walked past them, though I attempted to catch their eye and smile. If it hadn't been for the palm trees rising on all sides, the nearly supernatural beauty of the distant virgin coast, and the total lack of commercial properties to spoil the landscape, I'd have felt like I was on a city street at home.

Two days later, I was in the middle of the ocean not long after sunrise. Spinner dolphins swam and jumped beside the boat as in some sort of animated Disney movie. Fat white diver men older than my father made inappropriate, witless comments about tan lines to me as I stood at the bow baring my chest to the South Pacific sun. We were diving Yap Caverns, a place Roberto refused to describe to me but said I had to see for myself.

When I entered the water, I didn't get it. We had been to several reef walls since I got there, and the one we swam along was similar to the others. The hard coral seemed stacked, one steep growth on top of the other, more expansive in every direction than the visibility. Looking up and around at the wall from a hundred feet below the surface was like glimpsing the layers of the earth, as if we'd jumped into a pit and were checking out the scenery on our way to the center of the planet. It seemed darker in that water, though Yap is as bright and sunny as any tropical island.

We turned a corner at the end of the wall, and my breath caught in my throat. Yap Caverns, a network of coral canyons with openings large enough to swim through, loomed before me. We entered a hole in a formation of burgundy coral, surrounded by schools of massive tuna. I swam over a napping reef shark, its fin tip dipped in white, and glanced at Roberto, who had taken his regulator out to flash me a smile. I rolled over and swam along on

my back. Sunlight pierced a chasm in the surrounding structure, and blinded me on its way to illuminating the soft white sand floor. We are in the last sacred natural realm of the world, I thought in the silence. We are undisturbed, undiscovered. We are not just part of another addition to the global village.

While I washed up for dinner that evening, there was a gentle knock at my room door. Two housekeeping girls, probably about my age, stood in the hallway with their chins down, eyes pointed up at my tall American frame. “Excuse me,” one of them said shyly, smiling, “but I have seen you are reading some magazines.” She nodded toward the trivial women’s publications piled on the desk behind me.

“Okay,” I said cheerfully, because I didn’t know what to say, but I didn’t want to seem impolite.

“Well,” she said very slowly. “I was wondering if you do not need them, if you could leave them in the room when you are finished.” I stared at her. “When you go back home.”

“Oh, of course!” I delivered my response with unreasonable delight. I just wanted to be friendly. Her face broke into relief. She said thank you, and the other girl said thank you. I smiled and smiled and said sure, no problem, and both of them hurried away.

I realized when I closed the door that I didn’t want to give them the stupid magazines. My roommate had given them to me to read on the plane, which I had, so I knew what they contained: makeup tips, fashion tips, low-fat cooking tips. Makeup ads, fashion ads, diet low-sodium cream cheese ads. I was ashamed, suddenly, even to possess them, much less to be spreading their inane content across the seas, distributing their information to less developed nations like some misguided Minister of Vogue. Long before my time, missionaries had come and made Catholics of the followers of an ancient, now forgotten religion. I hadn’t seen a single

sign, poster, or piece of literature in Yapese since I'd arrived. I'd been throwing around US dollars, Yap's official currency, while huge slabs of stone money rested around village properties growing moss. Tourists still have to request permission from island chiefs to visit Yap's smaller, less populated outer islands, where village leaders still have as much power as any elected official, but if the younger generation abandons their culture, it will die. If girls like the housekeepers embrace the allure of modernity, Yap will become Westernized like many of the other Pacific islands, and another of the few remaining traditional civilizations will be lost.

I sat on my bed staring at the magazines, tempted to stuff them into the bottom of my suitcase. But I couldn't bear to be the snotty American girl who hoarded her magazines, even though she could doubtlessly buy hundreds of them if she wanted to, even when she said she would share. So, guiltily, I resolved to leave them behind.

My last day underwater, Alex, a native, was my guide. We kicked casually through the eighty-degree water observing clams, blue parrotfish, nervous, brightly colored triggerfish, and stately lionfish with their flaring poisonous manes. Together we came upon a beautiful creature, like nothing I had ever seen, perched on top of a coral formation. It had the body of a sea star, but was crowded with too many arms. It was like a pincushion, bright purple with burgundy spines protruding from it in all directions. Alex approached it with a piece of hard dead coral he'd picked up off the sea floor. Though divers are never supposed to disturb or interact with marine life, I was excited that he was going to poke it and show me its fancy trick: maybe it would change color like an octopus, or retract like a clam, or expand to twice its size like a pufferfish. Instead, Alex jabbed his piece of coral violently into the center of the organism, and

swam away. I looked at the stabbed thing, alarmed, and though it was motionless, I imagined it dying wretchedly. When we surfaced, I spat out my regulator and yelled at him, “What the hell did you do?”

The crown-of-thorns, though I didn't recognize it, is a renegade member of the sea star family, and a natural enemy of coral conservation. Moving around the formations, it throws its stomach up through its mouth and secretes from it an acidic enzyme that breaks down the coral. It then sucks up this vomit soup, feeding on the living organisms, leaving behind a graveyard of bleached white coral skeletons. These animals are part of the ecosystem, but their numbers are reaching record highs and are steadily destroying coral much more quickly than the coral can replenish itself. Though scientists can't prove exactly why the outbreaks are occurring, prevailing theories point to the runoff from poor farming practices, which drags nutrients from the land into the sea and provides food for thousands of baby crown-of-thorns that would usually die of starvation. The competition among these creatures used to be fierce enough to keep their population down, but when there is plenty of food, there is nothing to control their numbers. Unfortunately, an adult crown-of-thorns produces sixty-five million eggs.

“They are destroying our reefs,” Alex said gravely. He stretched his arms out to indicate the vast turquoise around him, and beyond that, the rolling green island whose inhabitants learned from my country to try to force small amounts of land into profitable, unsustainable plantations. His home. “If we do not kill them, they will take over the entire ocean.”

## Toeing the Line

When I graduated from college with a liberal arts degree, I had neither the skills nor the desire to get a real job. My waitressing gig paid fairly well, but I needed to make some extra money if I was going to fulfill my aspiration to travel. Being young and thin, and wanting to believe that I could actually get by on my looks, I started answering any ad that “wanted: females.” Most of the men who answered the numbers I called wanted pictures of nude girls for porn sites, or pictures of nude girls with dildos for porn sites, or live nude girls for interactive web cam porn sites. Remembering always that I would be somebody’s mother someday, or maybe a candidate for city council, or even the PTA board, I didn’t consider these offers. But one man who placed an ad was looking for girls who would wear jeans and a shirt. His name was David, he paid \$100 an hour, and the only things he required his models to bare were their feet. That’s when I got into foot porn.

I exfoliated and moisturized my soles, and drove with my boyfriend to the studio. David had said that the shoot would take up to two hours, so I left my boyfriend in the mall across the street with his organic chemistry textbook and instructions to call the police if I was gone any longer than that. My father didn’t think I would last ten minutes on the job. He told me over the phone that there was no way anyone would pay me that much to do anything with my clothes on. “If it sounds too good to be true,” he predicted gloomily, “then it probably is.”

I took the stairs to the fifth floor studio and knocked on the door. David was about my height, maybe 5’9”, with dark hair and sunken brown eyes. His face was pale and pocked. He wore a gray Bugle Boy tee shirt with a snapshot of a nineteen fifties baseball team screened across it. His blue jeans were tapered at the ankle and fell a little too short of his immaculately white Nike sneakers. He was fat in the middle, like men of leisure, but his round belly looked

dense, immovable. “You’re a little early,” he said, which for some reason made me think I had interrupted something gross.

He gestured for me to sit on a metal folding chair. “Let me see your feet,” he said. I took off my flip-flops and he leaned in close. “And the bottoms?” I grabbed my ankles to show him. “That’s good, those are really nice.” He stepped back and peered into my face. “You have nice skin, so I guess it’s okay that you’re not wearing makeup.” I tried not to move as he considered me. “You’re very pretty.”

I looked at the floor. “Thanks.”

“Are you ready?”

He photocopied my license for proof that I was over eighteen and I signed a contract saying I understood that the pictures would be on websites that contained nudity. “What does it matter if I’m on websites with other naked girls as long as I’m not naked?” I asked him.

David started. “Umm . . .” he shrugged and just shook his head, wrinkled his eyebrows without looking at me.

I pictured a photo collage, my portrait surrounded by snapshots of big breasts and bare asses. I quickly tried to imagine a life in which the presence of my face amid masturbating or fornicating models would cause a scandal. Did I really think I was going to marry a celebrity or a politician?

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. I dated the paper and handed it to him. But when he gave me the opportunity to choose an alias, with which the pictures would be labeled, I took it.

For the next forty-five minutes I engaged David’s camera in a slow, myopic strip tease. It started out with some full-body shots, pictures of me sitting on a stool smiling in my jeans and tank top and flip-flops. Then, carefully following David’s instructions, I began to expose myself.

I crossed my right ankle over my left knee and pulled the back of my right flip-flop away a little to reveal my heel. I inched the rubber sandal forward until it was hanging off the edge of my toes by the thong. It dangled there for ten minutes while David snapped dozens of pictures from above and below my foot, from the left and right and front of it, adjusting the focus, checking the light. When I finally let the flip-flop drop to the floor, he sucked in his breath.

“That’s incredible,” he said.

I looked at his face. He wasn’t kidding. I stared at him for a moment, judging him for being a freak, before beginning a similar performance with my left foot.

Once they were unveiled, David worked on showcasing my feet for an hour. He had me scrunch my toes together, and spread them wide apart. I lay on my stomach and bent my knees up so he could take pictures of the bottoms of my feet from above. I stood on my tiptoes. He said little except when he gave me directions. But he continued to manifest his personal interest in his work. “Perfect,” he’d say, breathily, when the only thing in his lens was my foot. “Christ, that’s sexy.” About halfway through, he asked me if I ever painted my toenails.

“Yes,” I lied.

When we finished, he handed me ten twenty-dollar bills. I didn’t suppress my enthusiasm. “Next time I could paint my toes,” I gushed.

“Would you be comfortable wearing shorts?”

“Oh yeah, why wouldn’t I be? Do you want to set up the next time I could come in right now?”

I told everyone I met about my exciting new supplemental income. My friends, my family members, customers at work. Everyone was surprised that a Midwestern capital city held such a lucrative unusual market. My father was jealous that there wasn’t a similar moneymaking

venture an out-of-shape fifty-year-old male could pursue. My mother expressed concern about the future of my principles.

“I just hope this doesn’t lead to . . . other things,” she said the next time I stopped by her house. She worried that taking off my socks might get me to thinking about taking off more, like a gateway drug, as if foot porn were the marijuana of the sex industry. I assured her that fetish modeling did not threaten my moral fortitude because I knew my boundaries. Though she didn’t ask me where those were, and I only vaguely imagined them to be somewhere around the perimeters of decency and good sense, she was adequately placated, and admitted to being glad that I had found a source of cash that didn’t require so much time surrounded by drunks in a smoky restaurant. My aunt, who was sitting next to her at the kitchen table, was appalled.

“I had a guy come up to me when I worked at the makeup counter at Kaufmanns,” she told me. She said that he grabbed her hand and raked her long painted nails over his palm. Then he offered her twenty dollars. “I told him to get the hell out of there.”

“Why?” I asked. “It’s easy money. It’s not your problem he’s a weirdo. There will always be weirdoes. You might as well capitalize on it.”

“I don’t care,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t know how you can do that. I think it’s disgusting.”

Two weeks later, I painted my toenails pink with borrowed polish and pulled a pair of shorts over my freshly shaved legs. When I arrived at the studio, David was wearing the same thing he had been the last time. He told me that my first set of pictures had sold extremely well.

“You have the biggest feet of any of my girls,” he said flatly. I wore tens, but I was mostly toes. My uncle used to make fun of me when I was little because my toes looked like



fingers. My big toe was, in fact, the same length as my roommate's pinky. David pulled out one of the pictures from the last shoot. "See how your toes are perfectly straight?" He pointed to a close up of my feet resting placidly on the floor. "Most girls with long toes have crooked joints." He pulled out a picture of a longhaired, mocha-skinned girl who was dressed as if she was at a job interview, black slacks and white frilly blouse. She awkwardly held one of her feet out in front of her. "See? See how her toes are all jointed? Long straight toes are really hard to find." Who knew? I felt absurdly proud. I had always been a nerd. I was perpetually eager to do a good job, and this appeared to be no exception. So a sense of accomplishment superceded any disconcertion when he said, "I already have orders in for your next set of pictures. You're going to be somebody's girlfriend."

At the end of the shoot, which was exactly the same as the last one except for my outfit and fancy toenails, David tipped me an extra twenty dollars. I volunteered to wear my Catholic high school uniform for next time. "Boys love it," I said excitedly. "I'm sure you'll sell a ton of those pictures."

I told one of the other waitresses about my achievements when I got to work that night. She crinkled her nose. "Doesn't it bother you that guys are jerking off looking at your picture?" she asked. It really didn't, though I thought that maybe it should. It seemed disgusting in theory, but even though every time someone asked me the question I imagined a creepy guy with his erection in one hand and my photo in the other, I just couldn't get worked up about it.

"They could just as easily be looking at shoe catalogs," I said. "I don't understand what's the matter with them, but I'm not doing anything naughty. I don't even make naughty faces."

My roommate, who was a phone sex operator and actually talked to people while they jerked off, and pretended she liked it, was on my side. “Who cares, man?” she’d respond in naysayers’ faces. “They’re just pictures. It’s not like she’s selling herself.”

The uniform pictures were so popular that David wanted to do an outside shoot in the park that included pictures of my feet getting dirty. Those sold well enough that he wanted to use me to make his first video. He told me ahead of time that there were different themes he might want to explore. “We’ll probably start with the basics, but maybe eventually we can get into fruit squashing,” he said. Since my induction into the foot porn world a couple months earlier I had gone to some websites that David said he sold pictures to, though I never could have found myself on any of them. Each site, and innumerable others like them, displayed thousands of pictures. There were pictures of girls walking in mud, girls with penises between their feet, girls rubbing their feet against other girls’ feet, girls with semen all over their toes. I couldn’t believe anyone would buy my pictures when hard core foot porn was so readily available. These girls were the real deal. Some of them were naked. Some of them were having sex in the background of their foot close-up. Some of them were simply stepping on bananas.

“I think that sounds fun!” my mother said, probably imagining me walking gingerly through a pile of soft peeled fruit, squealing delightedly. “I hope you get to do that sometime.” I had recruited her to apply my nail polish for the video. I wanted to do red this time, since I always did pink, but with red it was obvious when you messed up, and I was sloppy. She sat on the floor painting my toenails the morning before the shoot. “What a sweet family picture this is,” she said, laughing. “The mother helping the porn star get ready. I think they should put my name in the credits.”

David was waiting at the studio in the same outfit as ever. We exchanged our usual clumsy pleasantries, and I signed a contract as always. “Hey,” I said, taking my hair down before we got started. “Do you know anything about this foot party that’s coming up?”

A couple weeks earlier, an ad in the alternative paper had been calling all foot porn models to work a fetish party. Jeff, the party coordinator, had told me over the phone that the workers would be paid twenty dollars for every fifteen minutes they let somebody spend with their feet. He said the guests would massage my feet, rub my feet on their faces, put my feet in their mouths. He asked me if I knew how to step on someone’s genitals. I didn’t.

“Well, then we’ll have to set up a meeting before the party, and I’ll show you how to do it.” We’d scheduled an appointment for a few days after my shoot with David. “It’s no big deal. You can practice on me.”

I’d recited the industry party line my phone sex and stripper friends always used when I explained the prospect to my boyfriend: an act was only what a person made of it. Though it was true that my pre-foot porn self would have laughed if asked if she’d ever even consider letting strange men directly apply their spit to her body for twenty bucks, if I treated it with the detachment I would any other stupid job, then that was what it was. Wasn’t it? But my boyfriend just kept shaking his head. “Some nasty old guy is going to lick you, with his tongue, all over your feet?”

Maybe I’d wanted him to tell me he wouldn’t allow it. Maybe I’d wanted him to give me an excuse to back out. Finally, very respectfully, he said, “Obviously, it’s up to you. I’m just not sure I’m comfortable with this.” But his skeptical blue eyes squinted at me, asking, “Are you insane?”

David had been invited to the event, evidently, through the vast underground foot porn networking system. “The problem with that type of party,” he said now, “is that if you end up with a girl after one of the other guys has already had her, then she’s got his spit all over her.” He looked at me meaningfully, but I just stared at him. “And . . .” he continued in my silence, “you don’t want to be licking feet that are covered in some guy’s spit.” He wasn’t going. But he knew people who were. People like him.

I looked at David, trying to imagine him, homely, humorless, a little disturbing, sitting at my feet, picking one of them up, sucking on my toes. I wanted to throw up. Or shudder hard, at the very least. The party was four hours long. I could walk away with \$320 cash – as much as I’d earn in three long shifts at work, and enough to pay a month’s rent – if I always had a customer. David told me that with my long, straight toes and disarming smile, I would.

David explained that he wanted to make the video in as close to one take as possible. He had prepared a list of things for me to do on camera. He read it through to me, stopping when I asked him to clarify the positions he wanted me to assume. When he was finished, I repeated the list back to him in sequence.

“Wow, you memorized that quick.” He was impressed. I was pleased with myself. “It’s a good thing you went to college,” he said with what sounded like a smile. But he didn’t smile, because he doesn’t.

I started out crouching on the floor. “Hi there. Would you like to get closer to my size ten and a half feet?” I exaggerated because David told me to, because it was a good thing to have huge feet in the porn business, like it is to have an enormous cock. I walked over to the couch and sat down, putting my open-toed, strappy black sandal-adorned feet on the floor.

David got so close that he bumped one of my toes with his camera lens. He looked up at me nervously, mouthing “sorry.”

I began to take off my shoes. “My feet really start to hurt after walking on them all day. It feels good to rub them.” David had provided me with a bottle of lotion that smelled sickeningly of sweet, artificial almonds. I rubbed it all over my feet for five minutes. I set them on a table, and straight out in front of me. I rolled over onto my stomach and showed the bottoms, and I lay on my back to show the tops. I sat on them. I sauntered over to a chair and braced myself against it so I could stand on my tiptoes. For a long time. David walked circles around me, got down on the carpet, scooted underneath me for the best angles. When he crouched in front of me for a minute I couldn’t help glancing toward his crotch. I knew he was into this sort of thing. I felt like he had to be aroused, but he didn’t appear to be. I tried to stop wondering if he wore tight underwear to keep his erection contained. After an hour, and two other lines – “See? They’re shiny” after the lotion session and “Come on, get closer to my soles” – he motioned for me to stay perfectly still in my chair and pressed pause.

“Now I want you to put your feet up on this stool and say, ‘Come back and worship my feet anytime.’” I made a face. “No? Is that not okay? Can you think of another word like ‘worship’ that you’d be more comfortable using?” I suggested “come back and see my feet” and “come back and watch me play with my feet,” but I wasn’t addressing the important cult-like devotion of my viewers. Though it was maybe the one thing in my life my English degree had prepared me for, I couldn’t think of an acceptable synonym.

We were almost done. Everything had gone flawlessly up until that point. I was eager to do a good job, to make the best foot porn video I could, and so, after hesitating for a few minutes, I conceded. I had always been the favorite student in the class, the hardest-working

employee, the most cooperative daughter. The nuns at my grade school would love to know that the unconditional aim to obey and please they instilled in me as a little girl lubricated the already slippery ethics slope I negotiated as a sex worker. David turned the camera back on.

“Come back and worship my feet anytime,” I said, smiling unconvincingly like a cheap whore. I propped them up on a stool for the finale: a lengthy close-up of my feet rubbing against one another. I watched them as I did this, to see what might look good; because I wasn’t really doing anything else; so I wouldn’t accidentally kick one of my own feet out of the frame. After I dragged the toes of my left foot across the top of my right foot and around to the ball, I came upon a stunning position. The bottoms of my feet touched, and I pushed my left toes into my right toes, moving them up, and down. The tops of my left toes fit into the space where the ball of my right foot and right toes met. The ball of my right foot melted perfectly into the space just above the ball of my left. My high arches formed a surprisingly obscene tunnel, light pink, soft curves. There was dark red nail polish. There was the sheen of thickly applied lotion. I beheld my feet making love to one another for five minutes, engrossed. They were erotic, sensual, slick. David was shaking his head, holding his breath, pursing his lips as if he would whistle, holy shit is that hot. I unleashed all the seductive glory of my toes.

David stood back farther so my face and the bottoms of my feet could be seen at the same time. “That’s what we call the money shot,” he had told me at a previous session. He stopped the tape.

Sitting on the floor putting my shoes on, I became unhappy with the things I had said on a jerk-off video. I would look people around the world in the eye across a television or computer screen, I realized, and literally invite them to worship me while they did outstandingly intimate things to themselves or others in their homes. And they’d press rewind and do it again. And

copy the tape and give it to their friends. I had made a bizarre, perverted record of myself that would long outlive me for a mere \$150. David always inquired if I was comfortable with something before asking me to do it, and I should have told him I wasn't ready for the last line. I didn't mind posing for pictures, or even pretending that my feet hurt or that I enjoyed slathering my lower extremities in stinky cream, but actually suggesting to fetishists that I wanted their regular worship made me uneasy. I hadn't wanted to do it, and I should have said so. I had been an overachiever my whole life, but this time I had compromised my personal comfort in order to excel. At foot porn. What troubled me most was that I knew he would have paid me whether I said the line or not. I knew that after I got home, when I was alone, when I was in the shower, I wouldn't be able to stop wincing for awhile as I continually imagined the words coming out of my mouth.

"I have to go," I said by way of suggesting that I wanted to be paid. My boyfriend, who needed the car, had dropped me off at the studio, and I explained to David that I had to catch the bus.

"Oh, no," he said. "You shouldn't have to take the bus. Let me take you home."

We sat in the tiny, battered red import in awkward silence after I gave David the directions to my apartment ten miles away. I watched the downtown buildings rise around, then fall behind us, as I thought about where I should have drawn the line. Speaking to pornography consumers suggestively, even via video, appeared to be more involved with them than I wanted to be. Doubly true for stepping on their genitals, I imagined. I was going to cancel on the toe-sucking party. I was going to call Jeff back, and tell him that I couldn't make it, because going seemed like going a little too far.

David glanced at me. "That's going to be a great video," he said.

I nodded; I had no doubt that we had created an extremely successful fetish product.

“Maybe for the next one we could do something with mud.”

“Sure,” I said. For \$150, I thought, I’d step in a lot of things. But if he asked me to say that I loved the way it squished through my toes because it was the next best thing to the viewer’s ejaculate all over my feet or something, I would refuse.

“I just ordered a new backdrop, too,” he said.

I eyed the grime covering the black plastic console between us. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s a big cloth that I can hang up, and it’s got a beach scene on it. I was thinking we could do a regular still shoot with like, a lawn chair in front of it, and you could wear your bathing suit.” David had asked me if I would take my clothes off the first time we worked together. I’d declined. During our second session, he had asked me to do some “implied nudity,” posing, for example, with no shirt on but with my arms across my chest. I’d passed on that as well; though I didn’t have any particular problem with the idea, my instinct had just been to say no. “I could pay you extra,” he continued. “Maybe twice as much?”

David had told me that plenty of the girls who answered his ad were willing to disrobe. But he’d noticed that, in his opinion, there was an inverse correlation between the quality of the models and how much they were willing to do. “I had a real skank in here before you, totally naked,” he had said once. “I think I could smell her ass.” He was tired, apparently, of getting what he paid minimally for.

I was no skank, but \$200 an hour was a lot of money. Anyway, I reasoned, I wore bathing suits all the time. What difference did it make if I stripped down to a bikini for some pictures? My parents, and friends, and even ex-lovers had pictures of me in stringy two-pieces in their photo albums.



“I got a new bathing suit recently, actually,” I said, and decency and good sense expanded their mutable borders enough to encompass mostly-naked foot porn modeling. I looked back out the window, but stopped noticing the landscape. I debated whether the new blue bathing suit would in fact be best, or if the green one would better complement the set, as David drove the rest of the way home.

## Giving Up the Diamonds

When I was four, my father presented my mother with a large box – a wrapped, three-foot cardboard cube – on Christmas morning. My sister and I sat on the floor amidst piles of holiday detritus watching my mother tear the paper off the package, then pull more paper out from inside of it, followed by another, smaller box. At this point, my mother, wondering if it were all a joke, paused to give my father a consternating smile before she continued. Inside the smaller box was more paper, and then more paper, and then my mother gasped, and stopped. She slowly lifted a tiny black velvet box from the rubble. She opened it, saw the band of channel-set diamonds, said something like, “Oh, Verne,” and threw her arms around my father. She was happy, and he was happy; everyone was happy, just like in jewelry commercials on TV. I couldn’t wait to be them, couldn’t wait to have a happy marriage and diamonds of my own, and my enthusiasm hadn’t faded for either when I got engaged nearly twenty years later.

My intended didn’t propose so much as amiably agree to marry me. Even if he had asked me to be his wife in some sort of traditional way, Dan, whose principal loves include science and thrift stores, wouldn’t have done it with a ring. He is brilliant, pragmatic, austere. His parents brought him up in a humble middle-class home, and he certainly wasn’t seduced during his youth by images of classy, newly bejeweled women weeping gratefully in diamond ads.

I tend to be smart, lucid, and defiant, but I was raised a princess. My parents had married poor, but as my father got richer, he started spending money on progressively, excessively expensive clothes, Cadillacs, and other things he could show people. The diamonds-as-a-symbol-of-everlasting-love sentiment I saw demonstrated in my living room as a preschooler snowballed into a family consumer frenzy as my father decked my mother out like a movie star, or a drag queen. She got her ears pierced six times to accommodate as many as possible of the

diamonds and rubies and sapphires she received on birthdays and anniversaries, and she fumbled with fingers encumbered by gold and rocks to write checks at the grocery store. As a teenager, I sported precious stones around my neck, on my hands, and in my ears as well – gifts, like my \$200 shoes and new car, from my parents.

By the time I got engaged, my father had since gone bankrupt; he had been caught embezzling a couple million dollars from his company shortly before I graduated college. Without his generous wealth, on which I had relied my entire life, and which had allowed me to spend equal amounts of time waitressing and drinking on my front porch while other graduates devoted their efforts to things like organizing their lives and finding careers, I panicked. I picked up additional shifts, and more jobs – housecleaning, modeling, telemarketing, administrative assisting, catering – until I worked seventy hours most weeks, well more than I needed in order to pay my rent. As the year went on, and Dan finished school, the bank and creditors took my parents' timeshares, cars, and house, and I hoarded cash. My parents also finalized their divorce, which had been pending since my father had, just before the financial scandal broke, owned up to having several mistresses. But whatever had happened to my family, I didn't change my plans.

"I'm going to go buy myself a diamond ring," I told Dan. This meant that I was going to spend a large chunk of my savings – which we already considered *our* savings, in the sickeningly symbiotic way that couples in love do – on a piece of wedding paraphernalia. Perhaps expecting resistance, I said, "I only want one. I just want to get one that I can wear for a wedding ring forever."

But Dan just said, as he generally did, that I should do what I pleased.

Armed with my bankcard, an empowering checking account balance, and an irresponsibly big-spending best friend, I went shopping. Erin and I walked into a local “galleria of jewelry,” an immense building with tinted windows in the middle of a parking lot in an affluent suburb. A tall, thin, smarmy suit asked if he could help us ladies.

“I need to buy a wedding ring,” I told him. He tried to show me men’s wedding bands. I explained that, no, I needed a ring with diamonds in it, for myself.

“You mean an engagement ring?” he asked.

“I guess.”

“You’re buying yourself your engagement ring?” He was smiling. Mocking me.

Erin glared at him. “She’s the one with the money,” she said. We snorted at his investment in the archaic status quo, never mind that if I were truly enlightened, I wouldn’t have gotten a ring at all, or even embraced the antiquated and historically subjugating institution of marriage.

“Okay,” he said, immediately apologetic upon realizing how revolutionary we were.

“How much are you willing to spend?”

Erin and I, daughters of rich parents both, had long ago agreed that if one were going to buy a diamond, it should be one that people can see, and admire, not some mildly festive chip barely big enough to catch the sun. It was stupid to buy a tiny stone just to have a diamond. A small diamond, we knew, embarrassed everyone: the wearer couldn’t be proud of it, and people who looked at it had to feign admiration, and the wearer had to pretend she didn’t know they were feigning it, etc. Besides, I didn’t want a temporary ring, one that my husband would, of course, have to replace with bigger and better pieces as we grew older and wealthier and

greedier. If I was going to get married with a diamond, it was going to be forever, just as they say, and I somewhat arbitrarily plucked a large upper limit from my brain.

I shrugged. “Six thousand dollars,” I said, though I imagined I’d probably only drop three grand or so.

The suit’s eyes widened. Maybe this suburb wasn’t as affluent as it seemed. Or maybe it was that I was wearing jeans with no knees and a Honda dealership tee. Either way, I swelled with spending power and pride.

Diamond interest seemed as abstractly affective as love, and I approached it accordingly: when I met the right one, I thought, I would just know. Nothing the suit showed us moved me. We left the galleria, as one leaves a singles bar, discouraged but determined. Five jewelry stores later, I encountered a ring of such class and grace that I grabbed hold of Erin with both arms as I peered into the glass case. An orb of light-refracting magic rested squarely in the center of a medium-width silver-colored band. The stone was flanked by two small circular others, petite, endearing, yet still dazzling and impressively costly, to be sure. All the diamonds were channel set, so that I wouldn’t have to worry about them snagging on dishtowels, or, later, my children. A short, red-faced good old boy heard us chattering excitedly and joined us on the other side of the counter, asking if we ladies needed anything.

“I’m in love with this ring,” I said. He offered to let me touch it. I slipped it on to the sound of our delighted gasps and held my hand at arm’s length, tilting my head to consider my shining ring finger. I asked if the band was platinum, which I had decided, based on density, durability, and the hype in rap songs, was the only acceptable metal. Of course, our chubby friend informed us. This designer didn’t work in anything else. Erin and I rolled our eyes and nodded sagaciously, both of us relieved that nobody wore white gold anymore.

I returned home, exhilarated with my find, and gushed to Dan. After I described to him, in detail, the many disappointments we had encountered at other jewelry stores, and the design and draw of The One, he shrugged and agreed to return with me a few days later to meet the ring.

This jewelry store didn't sell rings with diamonds already in them. Richard, our personal diamond broker of the day, told us that that setup was for unsuspecting clients who wanted to end up with diamonds that were imperfectly cut for maximum profitability at those *other* jewelry stores. We had to personally choose a stone. After making sure we didn't need any refreshments, Richard retrieved my dream band, minus the center stone it had been wearing when I first saw it, and took diamonds out of unimpressive envelopes for us a couple at a time. He placed them in the setting while I concentrated intently on the differences between them. Erin had instructed me, before we left, to purchase at least one carat for the center stone, because it sounded better to say, when people inquired about the size, that it was "just over a carat." But one carat cost disproportionately more than "just under a carat," so we went for the latter. After forty-five minutes of my intense scrutiny and Dan's severe boredom, I found a diamond with good weight, color, and clarity. The total, between band, rocks, and tax: just under \$10,000. Dan's eyes widened when Richard turned his calculator our way to show us the figure.

"I'm only getting married once," I said to Dan. "And I should get what I want."

He shook his head. "That's fine," he said. "I just can't believe that's what people really pay for this shit." I had heard him say that about jewelry before. I admitted that it was crazy, but I didn't care. Though I spent plenty of time considering, for example, the effect of big business on the income gap, and the inanity of honoring traditions like taking a husband's last name just for tradition's sake, I had dropped the contemplation ball on the diamond issue. I had briefly wondered whether it was too absurd to spend thousands of dollars purchasing diamonds, but I

never questioned why I really wanted them in the first place, and, like most consumers, I'd simply reasoned that if I wanted something, I should have it. So, just like that, I was writing the biggest check of my life.

Dan and I decided to let the store hold the ring for us. We didn't live in the safest area of town, and we weren't getting married for almost a year. We were going to use the ring as a wedding ring, not an engagement ring, and if I was going to spend \$10,000 on it, I certainly didn't need both. Even I had limits.

Back at work, I fantasized about the way the ceiling lights would encounter the bling on my finger and gloriously explode as I dragged a stinky blue rag across bar tables. I occupied my time with important ring-related tasks, like finding out how to insure the most expensive thing I'd ever owned. I got an agent and learned that it would cost a couple hundred dollars a year. By the time I reached eighty, the cost of insurance would amount to a whole other ring, but I sensibly reasoned to Erin that one couldn't put a price on that kind of peace of mind. I considered taking out the insurance policy and picking the ring up early after all, since I was eager to show friends, coworkers, and store clerks what I bought. One day, a woman of immense mass and sourness whose house I cleaned treated me like a maid, which was what I was, and I seethed quietly as I continued scrubbing her front hall. Just wait until I get my diamonds, I thought. Then people will know that I command respect.

I wish that sad, shallow moment on the fat lady's floor had led me to recognize how frightening was the connection I made between personal merit and signs of wealth, to see that a status-driven upbringing had caused me to overlook the kinds of custom and consumer issues I'd been practically hunting for since my intro to women's studies class freshman year. Instead, in some moment so unexceptional I can't even remember it, it simply struck me that wearing

\$10,000 on a finger was preposterous. Maybe it was while I was sitting at my desk at one of my jobs, a job for which nearly half of my yearly salary, the kind of salary on which over thirty million entire households in this country operate, equaled the amount of money I spent on a piece of jewelry. Maybe I was walking through an alley to the United Dairy Farmers store on the corner to buy some ice cream when I realized that even I would be tempted to jump a defenseless, self-righteous, wasteful snob like myself if I caught sight of the ring. Maybe I had a Zen moment in which I reflected that material belongings are, metaphysically, worthless, or maybe I just considered that \$10,000 could buy a car, or secure a home loan, or get 71,000 pounds of food to hungry kids through Feed the Children. What was the matter with me that I was willing to blow so much hard-earned cash – it hadn't come out of a trust fund, but out of my own sweat, boredom, and occasional tears – on a collection of nonfunctional minerals? Even my father told me, when I admitted how much the ring cost, that I was insane. Even in my recently repossessed familial home, where hundred-dollar bottles of wine had been opened as easily as so many cans of Miller High Life, ten grand was a lot to drop on something that couldn't be driven, or tasted, or used in any way. Even my father had kept my mother's individual pieces well within the four-figure range. And he'd been paying with stolen money.

I made a mental list of things I couldn't or shouldn't do with just under a carat of rocks on my hand: condition my hair, garden, scuba dive, knead dough, apply moisturizer ("Lotion is the enemy of sparkle," one saleswoman had said gravely), wash the bathtub. I began voicing my doubts. I assaulted my kickboxing class partner with my logic while we thrust our fists into either side of a punching bag.

"I couldn't do this with a pile on diamonds on my finger, could I?" I yelled over the gym's pulsing techno. We had never met before, and she glanced at me for a second before



looking away and pretending I hadn't said anything. "Who would dip a \$10,000 piece of jewelry into a bucketful of caustic disinfecting chemicals?" I demanded of a fellow secretary at my office. A regular customer at the bar, whom I was pestering with my practical concerns, couldn't believe I had even considered diamonds in the first place. His forehead creased with surprise at my irresponsibility.

"Don't you know how filthy the diamond trade is?" he asked me.

I didn't.

Terrorist organizations – al-Qaeda, for one – use the diamond trade to raise and transport the huge amounts of money that fund their activities. The fight for control of diamond mines sparked the territory wars that ultimately resulted in apartheid in South Africa, and has caused bloody conflicts high in civilian casualties in several countries on the continent. Diamonds that fuel such conflicts are known, appropriately, as conflict diamonds. An international certification system devoted to keeping conflict diamonds out of the diamond trade called the Kimberly Process has been in place for a couple of years, but there are still flaws and loopholes in the operation, ones that aren't likely to be tightened without consumer pressure.

Also significantly, the "precious" stones for which people annually shell out seven billion dollars are not even rare. The massive and monopolizing De Beers Mining Co. – whose founder Cecil Rhodes invented and sold the public on the correlation between diamonds and something he knew would never go out of style: love – reputedly keeps four billion dollars of the rocks stockpiled in a London vault even as new diamonds are mined all the time.

I had seen commercials about how buying illicit drugs supports terrorism, but messages concerning the truth about the diamond trade are absent from mainstream media. I was embarrassed that consumers had been so duped, that geology had been subjected to the lies and

whims of capitalism, embarrassed by my own unawareness and complicity. A study conducted by Jewelry Consumer Opinion Council in 2003 established that only 26% of jewelry consumers had any idea what was going on, but I generally considered myself to be among at least the top twenty-sixth percentile of the informed. It wasn't like me not to have done any research.

My diamond consumption, now perhaps insidious as well as senseless, couldn't go unchecked. But mostly, my idea to try to get my money back and let the jewelry store keep my ring met furious resistance from every woman I knew. My mother told me that no price I could afford was too high to pay, that I had earned it. An astonishing number of women, and ones I know aren't generally keen on math, calculated for me that the ring would only cost \$150 per year to wear – not including insurance – if I didn't take it off until I was at least ninety. Erin said that a symbol of my love with Dan, which she believed was amazing, should be as breathtakingly beautiful as the thing it represented.

I went to visit my ring. I asked the saleswoman to get it for me, and I put it on. I held my hand out and tilted my head. It was, indeed, stunning. I gazed wistfully at it, as a child does at the enticing blue bottle of Drano she knows she shouldn't drink. "It really is gorgeous," I said.

I wasn't ready to admit that I didn't want to put it down because I knew the person who wanted it, and who wanted to wear it, and, even though I soon wasn't going to be that person anymore, it's hard to let go of someone you're comfortable with. Like all the other women I talked to, I didn't want to give up the diamonds because a relentless ad campaign instilled in me a belief in jewelry as a symbol of love, an attachment to a high quality of life and relationship embodied in a ring. But I was also clinging to an old existence, one in which self-worth was measured by something as easy to get as money, in which any problem could be fixed with a purchase, and precious stones guaranteed a marriage to last forever. I clung to the diamonds

because they were a bastion of a recently departed life, one that was, like the stones' value, illusory and somewhat shallow, but that I nevertheless couldn't help being nostalgic for, one in which I'd grown up, one in which I didn't have to worry about how I would balance making a living and living meaningfully or whether my broke, aging parents would have enough money to buy groceries. Even though the greed and showiness that the ring stood for was the kind that had ruined my father and my family, I could still only want to not want it. But I didn't need to admit those things; lucky for me, I didn't want to support intercontinental terrorism or feel like a jackass by losing a \$7,000 center stone at an amusement park or down a drain.

"I'm pregnant," I told Richard over the phone shortly afterwards, because it was easier to tell him that than to explain my slow road to personal growth. "I have to return our purchase because I need the money for the baby." Like any respectable stranger, he didn't want to touch that. The company issued me a check. It was over. They charged me a \$250 punking out fee, but I couldn't be too bitter about it; such was the price of gradually learning the sources and consequences of my vanity, and at that, it was a pretty good deal.

I stood at a party a month after our wedding and drank Shiraz while my mother-in-law introduced me to another in-law of some sort.

"I heard you got married in Fiji," the woman said. "That must have been wonderful. Let's see the ring!"

Smiling obligingly, I held my left hand out, palm down, and she grabbed hold of it. Then I watched her face register a familiar disappointment at the sight of my plain platinum band.

"Oh, I think it's lovely," she lied.

Dan, who, when I ask him if we have a pencil sharpener, proposes that I use a sharp knife, was pleased, and I think a little proud, when I surrendered the diamond ring.

We tell people, a surprising number of people who ask why we didn't buy any rocks, that some diamonds have dubious backgrounds and that we didn't want to inadvertently support causes we didn't believe in, or even just that precious stones weren't practical for our active lifestyle. We tend to spare them tirades on price-fixing or the irrational drives of a consumer society. We never explain that we are confident in the strength and durability of our relationship and don't need especially hard gems to validate it, or that I've recently overcome the impulse to flash symbols of upper-middle classness in order to feel like a better person, so they generally respond by patting me sympathetically and telling me that I can always get a real ring later, when I'm older, when we have more money.

"Yes, I can get a more expensive ring later," I tell the well-wishers. But I won't.

## Sleigh Bed

A few months before I graduated from college, my father, my rock, sat calmly on a couch across the family room from me, and said, “I’ve been seeing someone else.” My parents had come to visit me at my apartment. I looked over at my mother, who had been sitting on a loveseat opposite us, and saw that she was crying. She knew that that sentence was the most unfathomable I’d ever heard, and had crawled halfway across the floor toward me by the time my father finished delivering it.

My parents were the magic parents, the ones all my friends wanted to be when they grew up and of whom all other married people, I’d always believed, were jealous. They went on dates together and wrote songs together and hosted parties together. They loved their children and had money and were attractive and always tan from tropical vacations. I didn’t believe my father when he told me he had a girlfriend, though I couldn’t imagine why he would’ve made it up. My mother held onto me while I stared at him in disbelief and we both cried hard as he tried to explain how unhappy he was in his home, in their marriage, though he couldn’t explain why. He came to my other side and puts his arms around me as well. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but I didn’t know how to not let it feel good when he hugged me, didn’t know how to hate him when he’d had his arms around me my whole life.

For as long as I can remember, my father has been in love with me. He walked in the door after work every weekday calling “Where’s my baby?” until I left for college, and he wasn’t talking about my mother. His feelings for me were so intense that as a child I was afraid of him. When he wrapped his big arms around me, he would squeeze so tightly and be so reluctant to let go that the attention made me uncomfortable. When I was seven, *Superman IV* came out in theaters. My parents and I were lying on the family room floor watching TV when a

trailer for it came on, and my father suggested that we jump in the car and catch the next showing. It was dark out, and seemed late to me as it was my bedtime, though it was probably only nine o'clock, and I was thrilled by the spontaneity and adulthood of the idea and time. But my mother didn't feel like putting her contacts in and getting ready and staying up, and, though I had agreed to go alone with my father, I found while I was changing back out of my pajamas in my room that I was nervous. I imagined us holding hands in the theater and then my father staring ardently at me across a Denny's table during pie afterward. The intensity of his adoration, unadulterated in the absence of other distractions like my mother, made me anxious, and I lied and said I had realized I was too tired to go.

But eventually I got used to the smothering, and undoubtedly thrived on a father's unconditional love. The first time I ever saw my father cry was when I told him that I filled out his name next to "Who is your best friend?" on a survey for a high school religion class. That I was one half of the most important relationship in his life was so obvious that there, in my college apartment, after my father outlined his intention to abandon his marriage though my mother was begging him to stay, my mother, desperate, said to me, "Tell him you'll never speak to him again if he leaves."

"I can't believe what a dick you are," was all I could say to him, and his deserving it made weight and fire throb behind my eyes. He just said, over and over, that he was "sorry for rocking my world."

Though it doesn't seem like something I would forget, I can't remember how long it was after that that my father told me he was a swinger. It certainly seems like it must have been an arresting moment, but all that comes to mind are vague images of the two of us in a nice restaurant, my pointing out to him that most people got that sort of thing out of their systems in

college and that it seemed like a ridiculous reason to get a divorce, and my being repulsed when he responded that it was an entire lifestyle, one that he planned to maintain until at least his seventies. I remember thinking, though I don't remember if I said it, that I hoped it would be fucking worth it. Maybe that particular incident doesn't stand out for me because I was still reeling from the shock of the divorce news, or because sometime shortly after, he also told me that he was a criminal.

That July, a few weeks after my college graduation, I drove up to the house my parents once shared and found my father's car in the driveway. I wondered what could be happening now. Maybe my father is begging for forgiveness, I thought. Or somebody died.

I could see my parents talking on the back deck through the morning room window. When I walked outside, they looked serious, but not tragic. My father told me to sit down. He asked me how my day was. "What's going on?" I asked him. He rocked in an expensive patio chair.

"Just let me preface this," he said, and which I hated, "by saying that your mother and I have been talking about getting back together." My mother didn't look at me as I regarded her ruefully. I didn't understand how she could take back a man who'd left her for a girl my age. I couldn't fathom my parents lying in bed together again after my father had admittedly been spending the last sixteen weeks getting wasted and having group sex. "We've been spending a lot of time on the phone these past few weeks, and I've decided that I may have made a mistake. I really miss your mother. And I'm realizing that my leaving may have had a lot to do with my own lack of ability to communicate my feelings to her. So, with time, we think we might be able to work things out. And I know that it would take a *long* time. But what has happened today in no way affects my decision about possibly coming back."

I tried to think of what kind of awful thing he was going to say, but his speech was distracting. I couldn't imagine. "What? What happened today?"

He put his hands out in front of him, palms down, here we go. "For about the last ten years," he said calmly, "I've been embezzling money from my own company." My eyes welled up instantly. He had paused, expecting this. "Over the last couple of months, Bill has started to discover it, which is why I was trying so hard to sell my half of the business. Unfortunately, as you know, I wasn't able to find a buyer, but I had gotten myself so deep into the bad things I was doing, over time, that I couldn't get out of them. So this morning, when I walked into the office, Bill was there with our lawyers, which I had no idea was happening, and they had prepared this deal." He turned his arms out and shrugged. "And I had to take it." He paused again and continued staring at my eyes. "In order to escape prosecution by them, for stealing, I relinquished all my rights to the business today." His enunciation was careful, perfect. I considered all the unhappy places this was going. Immediately I thought of our complete lack of savings, how we didn't own anything we had outright, that my mom's work experience consisted mainly of bartending in the seventies.

"So there's nothing," I choked. "We don't have anything; there's no money." My father only kept a few hundred dollars in his checking account. We spent money like we were famous, or insane. My father always reminded us that there was no sense in saving because we only lived once and, more importantly, we could die at any second, as his brother had in an accident. We owned more artwork, and diamonds, and memories of extravagant dinners and luxury vacations than any of my other rich friends from Catholic school had. Neither of my parents made a move toward me as I sobbed in my designer seat. I thought it was strange that my mother wasn't crying. I reasoned dramatically that she probably wasn't able to cry anymore



after all the recent heartache. Then I remembered that she had been taking a lot of painkillers since my dad left. Really, we both had. My mother began telling people, when she was pulled over for speeding, when someone harassed her for getting too thin, when she started crying when James Taylor came on, that we were having a bad year.

When my father decided to end his marriage, he had gone shopping. Knowing his devoted, god-fearing wife would neither approve of nor join the orgiastic lifestyle he had already started living, he secretly leased and furnished an apartment. He had taken his ego and his spending power to the most prestigious furniture dealer in the city to get the integral component of his new existence: the bed. Two massive handcrafted pieces of cherry wood formed the head and foot of a sleigh bed that I had to jump up to get onto and that cost more than a year of my college tuition. My father had eventually moved into his sex lair full-time after finally confronting my mother with the option of spouse swapping or getting divorced, but he could no longer afford the lease when his business was taken away from him. He was forced to bring his things back to his old house. When the movers came, my mother spitefully sent the bed to my apartment, much to the delight of my boyfriend and me. The mattress was three feet thick, and could only be uncomfortable in the sense that we knew my father had been screwing other people's wives on it.

"Don't forget you have to give me that bed back," my father said on the phone a week after we had assembled it in my room. "I'm serious. My slut-bag girlfriend's bed is a piece of shit." Surprisingly, my father had decided he couldn't be honorable after all and didn't go back to my mother, so he moved in with the girl he'd been sleeping with when they were married. He called her a slut-bag because I had childishly forbidden him to mention her by name. So

precious was she to him that he complied, and voluntarily chose a modified version of skanked-out fuck-bag, which was what my roommates and I called her.

“I know,” I said. “You told me already.”

“You shouldn’t even have it at all,” he reminded me. “I could really use that here. Every time I wake up, my fucking back hurts, and all I do is wish I had that bed.”

A month before the day my father was forced to give up all his money, or The Fall, as my mother called it, he bought me a car. It was awarded to me as a college graduation present. Like many upper middle class liberal arts majors, I hadn’t had any real career plans all along, but when I realized that ‘bought’ actually meant ‘leased with no money down,’ I needed to find a job. “You’re going to have to make the payments,” my father told me. “And you have to call around and get yourself some insurance, because all of our insurance was through the company and has been cancelled.”

I found an ad in the newspaper for a sports bar waitress, females encouraged. I put on tight jeans. Though I hadn’t a single day’s serving experience, I was hired on the spot and started working five days a week. My father called to inform me that he had taken half of my college loans out in my name. We had taken out the maximum possible every quarter for four years. “There’s no reason not to,” he’d said, because interest rates were so low. “It’s free money.” We owed way more than the cost of tuition; the university had deposited the surplus cash for “living expenses” into my bank account. Remembering that I had written my father checks so he could take that extra money to Palm Springs or Mexico, I was angry.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” my roommate told me. “Lots of people make their own car payments and loan payments.”

“You don’t,” I said. My other roommate, whose father sent her an allowance totaling \$500 a week, just looked at me pityingly.

Once a year since I was in grade school, my family had congregated at a cottage on Lake Erie that belonged to my father’s friend David. Aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents had come to cook, play cards, bicker, and canoe. The cottage had been built during the Depression on a street that led to a now federally protected creek and wetland system. The cottage was small, and there was no heat, and the family room held only more books than it did dust and spiders. You could hear the waves smash the edge of the property from anywhere in the house. The sound calmed you to sleep, and slowly brought back your consciousness, and when you woke up you remembered dreaming it. I was ecstatic to take my best friend and boyfriend there to meet David, who my father was currently visiting. The place was inspiring and sentimental, and I was unhappy to see a reminder of my father’s new financial struggle in the gravel driveway. I had heard that he had traded his car in, but I could hardly accept the Ford Taurus we pulled up next to as his.

Over the last six years my father had driven three brand new black Cadillacs, one after the other, that were beautiful, and responded to voice commands, and had computers in them. They had upgraded super-fast engines, and got eighteen miles to the gallon. Getting back in the car after having dinner out the previous winter, I had commented to my father how well the car had retained heat while we were in the restaurant. “I left it running,” he said. “You couldn’t even hear the engine, could you?” My father’s car was his partner in senseless big-spending crime. He slashed his car payment by \$800 a month by trading it in. He got a silver one because he wouldn’t be able to afford the \$50 detailing he had often gotten, and dirt wasn’t as visible on a

lighter car. I couldn't picture my proud father in this classless family sedan, and was glad he wasn't anywhere near it. I knew I would be able to see his ridiculous shame. I hadn't realized until he didn't have any money that he measured his self-worth by how much he could spend. It wasn't until he had nothing that his ferocious consumerism and materialism seemed sad. It depressed me now, and I was embarrassed that I hadn't been depressed by it before.

My father walked out onto the front porch to meet us, a hint of the man he had recently been. He was tall and blond and broad shouldered, but less stately. He had lost forty pounds, stressed, starving himself with grief over the money he'd lost. His blue eyes were rimmed red and set deeper and his face looked pallid and hollow. My roommate took his picture standing next to the grill as the two of them chattered excitedly about how much thinner he was. He still smiled easily, but anyone could tell he didn't mean it. It was hard for me to pull off my instinctive response, to pretend nothing was happening, that we were still the same great old friends sharing the same great lives, when he looked so bad.

For as long as I had been coming to the cottage, I had never met David, though I had seen pictures of his penis. David was sixty-something, a body builder, a professor at CUNY, gay. When he stepped out of the cottage he was wearing only tiny cut off jean shorts. His nipples were pierced. His body was completely hairless. David had many boyfriends, and every year before the family arrived, my parents had hidden the framed pictures of their hard-ons he kept throughout the house. The first erection I ever saw was a picture of David's that I recovered from a dresser drawer in the upstairs room in which I stayed as a young girl. I don't know why I considered telling him this as he stood in front of me for the first time.

After we had dinner, and after it got late, my father and I went out on the back porch and sat, in the dark and quiet, alone for the first time since The Fall. I was nervous like on a first date, before the inevitable moves come.

“It’s really good to see you,” he said. “I really missed you. Thanks a lot for coming up here.”

“I love it here,” I said. We sat listening to the lake.

“So, being a jobless loser,” he said with a fraudulent laugh, “I’ve had a lot of time to think about the things I’ve done, and what I want to do with my life. And I’ll tell you, it is fucking scary to be fifty years old and have no savings or retirement fund. Or even a prospect of employment.”

He had told me something similar on the phone before, and I was having a hard time locating sympathy for his prospects. “But you had more fun in the last couple years than most people will ever come close to having in their entire lives,” I told him. I would say this to my parents countless times over the next few months. “Lots of people don’t have savings accounts. Most people. All you lost is money. You still have your health, and your looks, and your intelligence.” This statement was trite, but true. Over time, as my parents lost more and more things, and became more and more despondent, I would never understand why they were incapable of putting their situation in a little perspective. My father, having done it to himself, certainly had no excuse.

“Well, that’s true, it could always be worse.” But I knew this didn’t really comfort him. “You’re still the most important thing in my life, and I still have you.”

What I’d gained from my father’s attentions throughout my life wasn’t just a sometimes eerily close father figure; it was also the confidence that came with someone telling me every

single day, however hyperbolically, that I was the best at everything. I'd still jumped into his lap when he got home from work as a senior in high school because the strength of his affection was everything I knew about who I was. "Well, you're still my hero," I told him. I was trying to save something. My father's eyes filled with tears. I'd been telling him he was my hero since I was a little girl. I still felt like I meant it, but I couldn't imagine how it could possibly be true.

We sat awkwardly for a few minutes trying not to cry. I looked at the dark water moving gently, consistently, thirty feet away. My father cleared his throat and tried to sound breezy. "So how's my bed?" he asked, because it was important to him that he got it back, and he didn't want me to forget it.

I left my gaze on the lake, furious. "It's great," I replied. "It's really comfortable." When I went to my mother's house after we got back from the cottage, she was wearing her displeasure. She was angry with me for failing to disown my father, but I didn't know how to. She thought, understandably, that he was disgusting, and couldn't believe that I talked to him, much less let him touch me. I told her that I, too, was appalled by his behavior, but that he was still my dad. He had lied, and cheated, and stolen, but he wasn't going to do that anymore; he said that he had changed, and I wanted to support him in his efforts to be newly honest and upstanding.

My mother just shook her head unhappily for a while before trying to make conversation. I fingered a stack of magazines on the stone fireplace hearth I was sitting on. "Wasn't it weird being there with him and David?" she asked finally.

"Why would it be?" I asked. I looked at her, and her eyes registered confusion, and then disappointed understanding, and then irritation. "Oh, Nik," she said. "He didn't tell you. Your father's been blowing David for years."

A short, stunned laugh escaped my mouth, because there's not much you can say when someone says something like that about your dad. So much, I thought, for his efforts to be newly honest.

The only money my parents had after The Fall was what the deal my father had signed gave them: \$9000 a month for one year. Though my father itemized for me every time I talked to him how fast it disappeared after taxes, and after being split between him and my mother, and after paying bills and buying food, and accounting for what he called "the cost of life," which I imagined consisted mostly of top shelf vodka and recreational Viagra, I couldn't understand how he couldn't live on this income. But my mother was making the house payment, utility payments, the payment on her wildly excessive SUV, and payments on joint credit cards my father had helped rack up, and she was out of cash. When my father left, my mother enrolled in art classes at the community college. She had been in art school when I was a toddler, but had to leave when either the money ran out or her sisters couldn't watch me anymore. "Now I have time for some self-improvement," she had said when she went back. "I can do something I really want to do." Her plan was to live off the divorce settlement for the rest of her life. She had often referred to "the money your father owes me," which was half of his half of the business, or a little less than a million dollars. But that money didn't exist anymore.

My mother's parents were angry that she refused to stop going to school. "You just have to face reality and get a full-time job, quit wasting your time with this" – and my grandfather paused to gesture dismissively – "college." I didn't know how to tell her that her survival depended on her getting her shit together, getting over it, and getting a low-paying entry-level job that she would hate. The first thing she stopped being able to afford was health insurance.

And then, in December, she called me frantically to say that people were calling and threatening to repossess her car.

“How long has it been since you made a payment?” I asked her.

“Three months?” she guessed.

I told her I would use my boyfriend’s car to get to work and give her mine. That day, a friend followed my mother to the dealership, where she parked her SUV in the lot, left the keys in it, and walked away.

My father asked me to take him out to dinner since I had started working seventy hours a week at multiple jobs and had steady income. “I haven’t been out for steak in a long time,” he said longingly. We ate while he talked about the directionlessness of his life and the impossibility of future happiness, mostly due to his postponed and likely poverty-stricken retirement. A few weeks later, I found out he had taken his girlfriend to Mexico over the holiday.

“You said you were going to spend Christmas in New York with David!” I yelled into the phone after he got back. He denied that he’d gone to Cozumel, and that my mother’s rich friends who said he had been there were mistaken, or lying, until we hung up. He called me back twenty minutes later to say that, on second thought, he didn’t want to lie to me anymore. He had charged the trip, rather than my mother’s prescriptions or some of the college loan payments he’d stuck me with, to his credit card, which he was going to default out of paying when he declared bankruptcy in a month.

“I don’t know why I still fucking talk to him,” I seethed to my boyfriend. He wondered why I couldn’t stop being surprised at my father’s behavior and just accept that he was an asshole. I did too.



My father called me often. “Hi, Baby!” was always the first thing he said when I picked up the phone, like it was the best thing that had happened to him all day. One night, when I came home from working a double, reeking of bar, my head aching from a thirteen-hour ponytail, he called me to tell me that for the last ten years he had been dead inside.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think,” he said. “And it’s becoming clearer to me what was going on with myself, and with your mother, and with how things ended up happening the way they did. All that time when I was stealing that money, I had to keep rationalizing to myself that what I was doing was okay. And to live with what I was doing, with all the people I was hurting, I had to sort of . . . turn off my conscience. And eventually, I think everything just turned off. This thing with your mother, I know it was wrong to do it the way I did it, and everyone thought we were so happy, but now I feel like if I hadn’t been doing all these bad things and trying to turn myself off to the reality of them, I would have stood up and said, ‘I don’t want to go to church on Sundays.’ Or I wouldn’t have let her yell at me for telling dirty jokes at parties, or whatever. Your mother and I are really at odds with each other on a lot of issues, and our marriage probably would have failed a long time ago if I hadn’t been so emotionally numb.” I had always viewed my father’s willingness to accompany my mother to church every Sunday despite his confessed atheism as an admirable self-sacrifice, a mark of his immeasurable love for her. I had watched the way she nagged at him when he drove too fast, or said something inappropriate to maybe the wrong crowd, or wasn’t listening to her. I had attributed his ability to laugh, and literally shrug it away, every time, to his infinite patience. It was something to which I had aspired my entire life, and here he was telling me it was the result of his having no soul.

“But the one thing in my life,” he continued, his voice breaking, “that I could always feel, and that I was always aware of, was how much I loved you.” I started crying on my living room futon. I was alone, and the room was dark. I hadn’t even turned the lights on yet when he called. “You were the one thing that brought me constant happiness, no matter what was happening in my life. Even now, when I have nothing, and no one, and no future, hearing your voice is what makes it worth it for me to be alive.” He was weeping openly now, more than he had been at his brother’s funeral, worse than when he realized how much he missed his father a month after he died. “And I swear to you that I am going to make you love me again. Forget the money, and the music I played with your mother, and going to Cozumel. I’m going to make you respect me for who I really am, because I know that I’m a good man. And I can show you that.”

My mother had recently started telling me that I was just like my father, not with the charmed exasperation wives use, but accusatory now, when I told her my roommates and I had rented a famous porno, or she heard I used to cheat on a boyfriend. The likeness was something of which I had always been proud, had even defended, but I found myself newly terrorized by the possibility that it might be true. I worried that I didn’t have a conscience, or that I was genetically incapable of having functional sexual relationships with other human beings. I remember pressing myself against my current boyfriend as he slept one of the first nights he stayed over, after my parents broke the news of the impending divorce, and crying for all the things I might do to him. The man who made me, through heredity and esteem, was kind of a dick, or perhaps dreadfully chemically imbalanced. He was not who I had thought he was at all, in action or motivation. Even his love for me, it seemed now, was more a reflection of his own ego. He wasn’t determined to make me respect him again because he was worried about me. His concern wasn’t about how I felt. It was about him feeling okay about how I felt about him.

Everything he did, not just the lying and the stealing and the group sex, but also our closeness, served only to satisfy his enormously self-centered desires.

When I climbed onto my boyfriend's chest that night, he asked me what my father had said on the phone. "He told me that he's been dead inside for ten years, and the only thing that brought him joy in his life was me."

I was angry that my father insisted on imposing his problems on me when I was trying to get my life together. He hadn't learned anything about his own crippling self-absorption, and he hadn't changed. He could keep promising to be different and not following through. I could keep trying to hate him and failing.

My boyfriend was silent a moment. "Sounds pretty intense," he said.

"It was." He stroked my hair until we fell asleep on the last material connection to my father's selfishness and greed.

We decided to leave the country. My boyfriend, who had become my fiancé, wanted to travel for a while after he graduated; I suggested a six month itinerary. Neither of my parents wanted me to go. They both called constantly, with money problems, emotional problems, needing to talk to me even though I couldn't help them, making me let them tell me how bad it hurt. I suppose that when they lost everything else, they wanted to hang on to the one thing they had left. But a year and a half after The Fall, my intended finished college, and I had saved enough money for our travels. Shortly before we were slated to leave, my father called me at one of my jobs.

"Hey, Baby!" he said. He asked me how things were, if I was ready to go, and reminded me that he was going to miss me. He told me that he wanted his bed back before I went.

“You’re out of your fucking mind,” I growled into the phone. I forgave, in our casual interactions, his exceptionally inappropriate and egotistic priorities in the face of everything he’d done because I didn’t know how to stop loving him. I had tried pretending they weren’t there, had tried persuading him to surrender them. This time, I hung up, and simply walked away. It wasn’t my responsibility to make sure my parents were taken care of, or acting reasonably. I had achieved my goal of embarking on an extensive trip. I had a remarkably functional relationship with an honest and intelligent person to whom I would soon be married. I had my own plans, my own life. My father may not have been everything I thought he was. But that didn’t change anything that had always been true about me.

We didn’t have room for the sleigh bed in our storage, so we couldn’t keep it. I’d considered selling it, but it seemed like a lot of work. My father had offered many times to drive a truck over to pick it up and take it back to his house, and all I had to do was call him and tell him when. When I got home, I made a gift of the gorgeous piece of furniture to my roommate, and continued packing.



## Strands of Grey

The dense trees below us look like so many proud stalks of broccoli as we fly into Mulu airport. We arrived in Sarawak, Borneo three days ago, and hung listlessly around Kuching city, gingerly stepping past piles of dead fish and chickens at the markets, and resting our hands on huge mounds of raw nuts and stacks of soft, transparent fabrics at the shops, while we waited for our tour to commence. Four other tourists, also young, also looking for brief, non-occidental adventure, eventually joined us at the hotel. We fill the plane that flies us low into the depths of the jungle. We mean to spend the week tramping rain forest trails and drinking boiled river water. Dan grasps my hand. We are anxious, nervous, sick with the motion of the tiny plane. We are eager to be on the ground. We are thrilled with the gentle fear of impending filth and discomfort.

Our guide, a native, a member of the indigenous Iban tribe, met us before our flight to Mulu. He told us that his name is Chris, which I considered a disappointing name for a Bornean tribesman. His silky black hair falls to the middle of his smooth, olive-brown neck. He wears snug green cotton shorts over his sculpted ass and thighs. When we step off the plane, he tells us that we'll be going immediately to Mulu National Park, where we will begin exploring a piece of the world's most extensive cave system. We scramble to separate the things we don't need from the things we will carry, pulling cameras, water bottles, and first aid kits out of our luggage. Chris watches us with wide mahogany eyes as we slather sunscreen on our pale skin and douse ourselves in DEET. I look up from my chores and notice him. I feel stupid, though he waits patiently.

It is dark in Deer Cave. Chris leads us with a large flashlight. He tells us about different kinds of rock formations in his even Malaysian accent. "Water falls on this rock in sheets, rather

than in drops,” he says, stopping at a rounded boulder. He runs his hand over the top of it. “See how this surface is smooth?” Evidently, we are all looking at him blankly. He inclines his head forward a little. “Smooth? Is that not the right word?” No, it is, we assure him. The ground of the cave is covered in a thick layer of something that looks like wet dirt and reeks of ammonia. It is bat guano, he tells us. Can’t we hear them chattering? He points his flashlight upwards, and though the cave ceiling is too far above for the light to reach it, we can see the shadows shifting. There are two million bats perched overhead. He turns his flashlight off and crouches. “Glowworm,” he says, picking up a sliver of fluorescent green light. When he drops it, his fingers are covered in luminescence.

We walk along a path on the slippery rock floor. Chris tells us that we could rappel down into the deep caverns that occasionally drop off on either side. Then we would have to crawl through a collection of tunnels and swim rivers that blast through the cave on their way down from the nearby mountains. He has done this before; he has been to a place in the earth where probably no one else has ever been. I am jealous, and in awe, of his ability, and his bravery. We come upon a grouping of large stalactites and Chris interprets their shapes. Doesn’t this one look like an eagle? This one is a mother cradling her child. Another is an enormous penis. We giggle politely and say, oh yes, I see the resemblance. He shrugs. “This is what happens to you,” he says, “when you spend too much time in caves.”

At dusk, every bat in Deer Cave wakes up. A large group of Japanese tourists and a few American backpackers wait a little distance from the mouth of the cave at an observation deck, their imposing telephoto lenses in their hands. “There is a better place,” Chris tells us. We follow him through a passage in the jungle until we are standing underneath a great hole in the rock where the cave lets out above ground. Two or three bats trickle out a few minutes after we

arrive. Soon, there is a torrent of black flapping creatures, tens of thousands of bats rushing out into the atmosphere in a single mass every moment. They form groups when they have cleared the exit, spin themselves into a giant circle and whirl in their place in the sky before slowly unraveling into a long, curling ribbon and taking off into the night. Chris looks at me and smiles at the wonder on my face before turning back to the continuing spectacle. For the better part of an hour, we watch the bats flee from the dark, cool air of the cave into the heavy tropical climate beyond its gaping jaw.

The next day we have trekked through two more caves by noon. A placid stream that runs through the second one forms a large, translucent pool near where we exit. Our hearts pound from climbing up to cave entrances, and we gasp in the heat; even Chris' arms and legs are slick with sweat. I have stuck by him all morning as he calmly, quietly explained the workings of the underground jungle, the others straggling behind. He suggests that we swim while he sets out the lunch he has brought for us. I strip down to a green bikini and wade in. It is nearly one hundred degrees outside, even under the forest canopy, and the icy water is shocking. I don't go in past my waist, but splash around with Dan in the shallow end. I glance over to see if Chris is watching us. I know that my exposed skin is taut and alive with wet cold.

After lunch, Dan and I explore another cave with the Scot on our tour while the others go back to the rainforest lodge. When we return to the stilted bungalows a few hours later, they have all disappeared. The proprietor of the place tells us that we can find them at the grocery store. He leads us through tall grass until we arrive at a small house made of thin planks of wood. Chris and the others are sitting on the front porch. They are drunk. I take a seat at their table, the only table, looking at the fields and forest that surround us on all sides.



The grocery store is the front room of a family home where locals can buy Coca-Cola, potato chips, and booze. Our companions are passing around a bottle of some sort of liquor distilled from rice. They yell “Oha!” before draining their cups, making a face, and chasing the drink with canned pop. Chris tells us it means whatever we’d like it to – good health, good fortune, down the hatch. Empty junk food bags litter the table. Someone has opened a can of juice and set it out to distract the ants and flies from the bottles of alcohol and soda on the table. Hundreds of tiny black bugs crawl along the can’s rim and march up and down its sides in long, even rows.

Chris has taken off his shirt, and I realize I have been waiting for it to happen. Dark, beautiful tribal tattoos cover his ribs, chest, arms, and shoulders. Large patterned flowers. Birds and convoluted dragons. Stars and bold black lines. His belly looks soft, slightly pudgy, and I am let down. I think he knows this. “I drink too much beer,” he says, clasping his hands over his abdomen and looking at me. “I used to have a stomach like a rock.”

I am surprised when one of the girls, the Australian, says that tour guides in every country only take the job so they can screw the single women on their expeditions. Chris is nodding happily. “Is that true?” I ask him, surprised.

“I am not going to say yes,” he says, poorly containing a smile. “But if I said no, I would be lying.” He tips his head back and laughs softly, endlessly, like a child.

“You have sex with your tourists?” I demand like some sort of disbelieving schoolgirl. What do I care? Did I resist gorgeously-accented dive masters, displaced or vacationing Italians or Brazilians when the functionality of my ovaries seemed eternal, before I met a man I would do anything not to lose, when it didn’t feel like opportunities were slipping away while I wandered jungles for as long as I pleased? Chris says that sometimes they make him, that the single

women come into his room and throw themselves at him. I am startled to hear myself say that this is no excuse to have sex with someone, as if an excuse for unbridled sexuality were necessary, as if I'd ever had one. The others can't believe I'm so naïve, and Dan watches me curiously, and Chris just keeps laughing at me, until I drop it.

The next morning we leave the lodge and hike eight kilometers through the rainforest under our packs. The camp at which we arrive is nothing more than a wooden picnic pavilion with a few sheltered spaces for sleeping attached. Dan and I sit down at a table and compare mosquito bites. Chris joins us and asks us if we have been together long.

"We're getting married," I tell him. "In four months."

His eyes brighten and he bows his head a little. "Oh, congratulations," he says to Dan.

Chris also wants to get married. He is thirty-two, and every time he sees his mother, she asks him when he will settle down. He wants to marry a Malay girl, and perpetuate his race and culture, but he can't help that he likes thin white girls. "Usually we just get prostitutes," he tells us, "we" referring to jungle guides, prostitutes referring generally to imports from China. "If you have been in the jungle or in caves for a long time, it gets very lonely, and you need a prostitute when you get to the city." He says, when I ask him, that one go with a prostitute costs eight US dollars, which we all agree is a deal. "Or for a hundred dollars, you can get one all night," he tells us. This sounds like a big markup to me, but Chris assures me it's worth it. "Then you can do it five or six times," he says. He asks Dan if he's ever had a prostitute and Dan says no. Chris looks at me. "Okay," he says, turning back to Dan, unable to fathom an existence in which such self-restraint would be necessary, or possible, "maybe I will ask you another time."

Later that evening I come back from a bath in the frigid river and Chris is still sitting in the same place, where he has been drinking, smoking, talking to Malay guides and other tourists

all day. I see that he is alone. While I am walking toward him, I trip, but don't fall, banging my knee on the bench at his table. He laughs heartily.

“A woman should be graceful,” he says, looking in my eyes, and I scowl at him and walk away.

In the morning we embark on Headhunter's Trail, an 11.5-kilometer trek through sweltering tropical forest. Chris sets the pace and we move fast, jumping over exposed tree roots as thick as my torso, swatting madly at horse flies, sand flies, jungle flies that bite our arms and necks until we look as though we've been stricken with measles, panting deliriously through our sweat, until we reach the end, the river, three hours later. We sit while the Canadian, who is dumpy and slow, catches up. We pull the leeches from our feet and ankles and torture them with matches, spit, Tiger Balm while we wait.

A boat arrives. It is a very narrow-bottomed, wooden canoe with a thick-shouldered Malay captain who calls himself George. We fold our aching legs in the tipsy vessel and make our way down the river under a canopy of lush green trees. We pass several families bathing in the murky current, their small shacks, mostly tin, dotting the riverside behind them. They wave to us, smiling rotted smiles, or duck shyly underwater. Butterflies bigger than a fist float above us, but we can't hear the birds for the motor that propels us on.

We arrive at a rickety wooden dock that leads to a long wooden walkway. I am walking next to the heavy, pasty Brit, who is hating it here, and hating himself for it. He is covered in mud and is limping. “Quit your whining, you girl,” he chides himself for wishing he was lying down in an exquisite hotel bed. “You fat, pathetic girl.” He glances at me. “No offense to girls.” I tell him none is taken. The path clears and the longhouse appears. It sits on tall stilts, a thousand feet of mismatched wood, the homes of the thirty village families set shoulder to

shoulder across a field. There are chickens and pigs and tattered dogs everywhere. The Brit's chin collapses. "This better not be the place," he says, his voice breaking. "Please tell me we're not sleeping in this bloody place."

We take a set of steps up to the porch that runs across the entire longhouse. Beyond the porch is a narrow hall that also unites the abodes, an indoor common space along the front of the lengthy structure. We stand in the hall while Chris disappears for a moment, opening our eyes wide to take in the scene that surrounds us. Children and dogs on their way to someplace skirt us as if we are puddles.

Chris returns and says we can shower. The Brit and the Aussie call dibs on the first round with the two stalls available, and I walk out onto the porch to sit down while Dan wanders. Chris comes over and stands in front of me.

"Are you going to shower?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"Why not?"

I shrug. "I don't know." I am coated in dirt, sweat, sunscreen, and DEET, but the showers here, like all showers in the jungle, are fed directly by the cold river. Besides, all my clothes are dirty, and I tell him so.

"You should take a shower," he says. "You are welcome to after the others are done."

"I know." He doesn't move. "Thank you. I'm fine."

"I have a sarong you could wear if you want to bathe," he offers. "So you won't have to put on your dirty things."

I narrow my eyes at him. "What is your deal with me taking a shower?" I ask. He opens his mouth but no answer comes. Maybe he believes that women should be clean as they should

be graceful. Maybe he thinks that because I have long hair and soft curves, I should have sweet-smelling skin and clean clothes. “Fine, go get me your skirt,” I say. “I’ll take a shower if it’s so important to you.”

On the back wall of the communal hall are doors to each family’s home: a pair of rooms, a living/sleeping room first, then a kitchen/dining room behind it. We are staying with the chief, who has two rooms with toilets and two with shower stalls beyond his kitchen area. I shower last, since I was slowest to sign up, and pull my hair back into a ponytail before immersing my body in the stream of freezing water. I scrub vigorously with a piece of white flaking soap I find on the cement shower floor. I dry off and pull Chris’ sarong around my hips, cinching and folding the waist over on itself. I stuff my sports bra, which I’ve scarcely taken off in days and which is soaked through with perspiration, into my bag. I put on a bikini top that doesn’t flatten my breasts into one unrecognizable lump beneath my shirt and don a reasonably unsoiled black tank top. I moisturize my face and remove the elastic band that holds my ponytail, letting my hair spill over my shoulders. I glance once more into the small mirror that hangs on the wall before I leave the bathroom, wishing I had eyelash curlers.

When I arrive back in the longhouse hall, the rest of the tourists are sitting with some villagers in a wide circle on the floor. They are drunk. The moment I sit next to Dan, an old, shirtless man leans over and places a glass in front of me. He fills it with cloudy yellow liquid.

“This is Chief Bala,” Chris tells me, gesturing toward the man. I smile and say hello to him, to which he bows his head. Chief Bala’s thin frame is covered in dark, papery skin. Large flower tattoos adorn each of his wrinkled shoulders. There are gaping holes in the lobes of his ears, and he is wearing a Nike baseball cap. He says something to Chris in Malay. Chris turns to me. “The chief says, ‘Down in one.’”

I look at the glass at my lap. “What is it?”

“Homemade rice wine,” Chris says. He nods at it. “Down in one.”

I tip my head back and take the fluid down in several swallows. It tastes like bad chardonnay. “Oha!” Chris yells, raising his glass, and the tourists and villagers shout it back at him before guzzling their own drinks. The chief immediately dispenses refills from reused two-liter Coke bottles.

The Aussie and Canadian are taking pictures of the villagers and delighting them by showing them their images on the digital camera screens. The Brit, who was brought nearly to tears at the prospect of setting foot inside the longhouse, is lying on the floor, wasted, giggling. The Scot is engaged in a silent and steady drink-off with Chief Bala. Dan is talking to a man next to him who does not speak English but insists on telling Dan the story, it seems, of some sort of tooth that he wears around his neck. They take turns saying whatever they want, neither one understanding a word the other says, and Chris does not bother interpreting. He is busy talking to me.

“So you are getting married,” he says.

I smile and take his cigarette out of his hand. I drag on it. “That’s right,” I say, exhaling.

“I have a wedding gift for you.” He holds out a flat, round pod. It is hard and brown and shiny, as wide as my palm.

“What is it?”

“It is a seed,” he says, “of a plant that grows by the river.” He looks at it in my hand while he tells me. “You can make a hole in it and wear it around your neck. It will always bring you good fortune.”

I turn the seed over in my hand, brushing the surface with my fingers. “I love it,” I say. I imagine wearing it with my wedding dress. I imagine wearing it to no place, with a tee shirt, or my pajamas. I imagine it, unique, exotic, beloved, hanging from my neck when I am older, when I am a mother, when I am middle-aged and middle-class and back where I belong. “It’s absolutely amazing. I’ll never take it off.”

Chris and I repeatedly toast one another and drink heavily. I smoke his cigarettes and raise my eyebrow at him suggestively while I tell him about my past indiscretions, about my wild trips in the days when I traveled single. He tells me that he grew up in a longhouse downriver.

“What kind of a name is Chris, anyway?” I ask him.

His face turns solemn. “Chris is my Christian name,” he says carefully. His words, though always correct, come farther apart with alcohol dulling his intellect. “I chose it when I was baptized. When I was a boy.”

Of course. He told us that Christians ran the schools that the more recent generations attended, but I didn’t put it together that it wasn’t his first religion and that he would’ve been required to convert. “Then what’s your real name?”

“Ningkan,” he says. He smiles proudly. “My name is Ningkan.”

I don’t know what this means, but it’s not important. “I think it’s beautiful,” I say, and I lean into him and put my hand on his forearm, and though Dan sees me, he doesn’t care. One of the reasons I admire him is that he is astonishingly secure, and I am happy to observe his nonchalance. He knows that I cannot envision a future without him, no matter how intensely I want to throw myself recklessly into the arms of this tribesman.

We are called into the chief's kitchen, where some women have prepared dinner for us. Plates of thin sautéed ferns share the table with heaping piles of white rice. We become quiet with exhaustion, intoxication, and consumption. The Scot falls asleep sitting up in his chair. The Canadian excuses herself and lies down in the adjoining room. I am astonished to see that it is only seven o'clock, but I can no longer keep my eyes open either.

There were sleeping mats for rent at the camp, but here we sleep on the floor. Dan and I crawl underneath the mosquito net he rigged from the ceiling beams earlier. He is glad to lie next to me as always, not angry with me for my puerile flirting, and I am overwhelmed with gratitude for his confidence, his trust. My stomach is heavy with rice wine and fronds. The feet of dozens of small ants crawl over my legs. My head throbs and swims. "I'm not going to make it," I whisper to Dan, but he is already sleeping.

My watch says two o'clock when I wake up. The front of my brain pulsates painfully and my bladder aches. I hold my dim headlamp in my hand and walk through the kitchen, through the shadows, to the bathroom with my eyes half closed. On my way back I notice that Chris is sitting at the long table where we ate dinner, talking to a man I don't recognize. They are drinking beer by candlelight. I stop a few feet away from them. He is pleased to see me.

"Why aren't you asleep?" he asks. He is very calm in the stillness, in the faint orange glow. I tell him I don't know. He would like me to stay, I think, to sit down and drink with him.

His chair is turned at an angle, half away from the table. I consider him for a moment. I could slowly walk to him and sit on his lap. He would watch me silently as I drank from his bottle. I would be comfortable, natural, talking to him softly about the ants, about the river, about his tattoos, show him mine. Then I would stand and take his hand, lead him past the



sleeping tourists and my future husband and into the hall of the longhouse, press him to a wall. I would ask him, Do you want me? He wouldn't answer. He would watch me intently with wide mahogany eyes. Or he would say in his unstrained way, with a delicate nod, Yes. Then I would kiss him, and tell him he could touch me. I would ask him to touch me wherever he liked.

The women are huddled in the corner of the kitchen, preparing something by the light of a fire they have built in the floor. They have not slept. "Goodnight," I say to Chris, and he bows to me slightly in his chair. I step lightly back to my place, the women eyeing me as I pass.

At six the next morning I am at the table with the other tourists. Chris has dumped a loaf of sliced bread next to a huge bowl of ramen noodles in front of us. I am nauseated by the homemade fermented poison that courses through my body. The women walk briskly in and out of the kitchen carrying the loaded plates of food they worked on all night. Today there will be a ceremony. Chris stirs about the kitchen excitedly. "You are very lucky to see this," he keeps saying.

Outside the men stalk the yard, loosely gripping machetes. We gather on the porch of the longhouse, peering down to where some hogs and chickens are tied up on the grass. In awhile some gongs and drums are dragged out next to us. The plates of food, the offerings, have been placed on four mats around the lot. "This is a groundbreaking," Chris tells us. Four holes have been dug in the ground where the foundations of the new longhouse will be erected. They are building one out of cement, since the wood of their current abode tends to decay and catch fire. "They used to sacrifice captives from other tribes and bury their heads in the holes," Chris continues, "but they are not allowed to do that anymore."

"What do they do now?" the Aussie asks.

Chris looks at her as if she is missing something obvious. “They use chickens and pigs.”

A group of old women staffs the instruments to our left and starts a slow arrhythmic pounding of deep drums. The gong irregularly accompanies them with one shallow, tinny note. My head is fuzzy and hurts when I turn it too quickly to see the witchdoctor grab a rooster by its neck and shake it upside down over the offerings, his upper body dancing around on top of legs crouched low to the ground. A thickset man approaches the pig nearest us with his knife. I think he will raise it high and bring it down on the animal with one swift, Biblical strike, but he instead sets the machete against the squirming thing’s neck and begins to carve slowly as if through a turkey. The body of the swine jerks violently with its fierce kicking, and Dan asks me if I am getting pictures of this. I shake my head without looking at him, and hand him the camera.

Other men start cutting through the necks of the sacrifices at their feet while the ominous music continues. The Aussie has to excuse herself to the inside hall. Blood spills out of severed heads and bodies splayed out around the yard. Chris, who is leaning over the men as they slaughter, catches my eye from the ground and gestures: Do you want to come down here? When I open my lips to mouth, No, I think I will throw up. A rooster who is lying in a pool of blood twitches and suddenly jumps to his feet. He staggers, trying to keep his balance. His eyes are unmoving and positively dazzled. His head, which is no longer truly attached, drops off the top of his neck and hangs there by an uncut piece of skin. A man with a machete saunters over and lops it the rest of the way off, tossing it in the grass near the body.

We pay the equivalent of five US dollars each to the longhouse as the price for food and lodging before gathering our things. We walk back to the dock, where the largest pig is being sliced into pieces. Two men reach their hands into the carcass and pull out its insides. They make a pile of the organs they can use; the offal, they throw into the river.

“I wish I had not left,” Chris says. He departed his longhouse as a teenager to join a world full of tourism and prostitutes and convenience stores and karaoke bars, but here there is significance and certainty. Here blood runs purposefully into the soil and the young mature and marry and the rice is always harvested. Here the men don’t decline, but move as a part in the enchantingly endless, timeless revolution.

I glance toward the longhouse behind us, and then back at him. “Why don’t you go back?”

He shakes his head. “It is too late. I have seen too much.”

“But if you never left, you would say, ‘I wish I could go out into the world and see what is there.’ And now that you have left, you say, ‘I wish I had never seen what the world was.’” He nods at me. I shrug. “Such is life.”

I climb into the bow of the canoe behind Chris, and the others get in behind us. George starts up the motor and we are gliding beneath the awning of rainforest life again. In a few days we will leave Borneo, a place many Americans warned us wasn’t safe to visit, an island on which our friends and the state department said we were likely to be kidnapped. I thought about it as I tried to fall asleep in the bungalow, and in camp, imagining, to the sounds of the night creatures chirping and crying, Chris taking me, my wrists bound, to a hut deep in the forest where we couldn’t be found. He would force me to the ground beneath him, he would keep me there among the plants and bugs and birds and earth that teemed with unruly fecundity under the steaming sky.

I watch Chris’ shoulder muscles through his tee shirt as he stretches his arms out to dip his fingers in the rushing water. His inky hair floats on the wind we are making, and I notice a few strands of grey as the scenery flies past us in a streaking green blur.

## Finding Mandarinfish

There's nothing going on in the Republic of Palau. Traffic on the bridge that connects Babeldaob Island, on which the airport sits, with main Koror Island is light and slow. We are flanked by unremarkable sights as our hotel van moves through Palau's capital, Koror city, along the two-lane causeway: a bank, a gas station, a noodle shop, a baseball field. We emerge on the other side of Main Street and continue on to the island of Arakabesang, watching the scenery turn to encircling water, to cleared land and the Office of the President, to dense vegetation. After nearly an hour, we arrive at our destination, a hilltop resort with seven quietly elegant bungalows. We have gone about a dozen kilometers, and we have driven through almost every area of commercial activity and passed close by more than two-thirds of the population of the country. Though I am no stranger to island vacations, Palau is somewhat unusual in that it is remote enough to lack bustle, but western enough to be void of exceptional cultural experiences. It didn't occur to me when we planned the trip that we might not have anything to do.

My husband-to-be wakes up early the next morning with an earache. We don't see any other guests or hear anything but pet-store-exotic bird calls as we make our way through the resort, down the hill that overlooks the jungle and, just beyond, the sea, toward the road to Koror that will take us two kilometers to the hospital at the other end of Arakabesang. Cars occasionally overtake us as we pass a small, dingy grocery store and some wood and corrugated tin shacks, several with chickens tethered in the yard. We wander the halls of the hospital, which, in its lack of sterility and size, seems more like an abandoned elementary school, in search of an employee. There are few florescent lights. There are rooms that are empty of people and mostly also of equipment. There is a sign reminding patients that they need to provide their own sheets, toiletries, and food in the event of an overnight stay. We run into a

middle-aged Palauan man in scrubs with a cheekful of betel nut who directs us to a staffed desk. We wait while a woman in a doctor's coat finishes typing something, checks out Dan's ears, and sends us to the pharmacist to wait some more. Really, this is what most people come on vacation to do: sit around with no place to go. Usually they just do it on a beach. I never sit around on a beach, I realize. It bores me.

Later that night we walk the other way down the road, toward the Palau Pacific Resort. Palau's most prestigious retreat is even farther away from Main Street than ours. It sits alone on a beach on an isolated edge of a remote island in an obscure republic, but it looks like a resort anywhere. Rows of identically furnished narrow balconies face the water in a several-story high wall. A lobby contains a posting of the week's activities: snorkel trips, basket-weaving demonstrations, orchid garden tours. We sit down to eat in the open-air restaurant by the pool as the sun sets, watching the coast, the other diners, and an American couple, we think, who have chosen the restaurant's option to be crowned with flowers and served five courses on a distant piece of the shore for 180 US dollars, Palau's official currency. Sixty guests, all Japanese, slowly gather on the beach, milling around as if they are waiting for something. A woman starts shouting directions in the appropriate language, and they begin forming groups.

"Scavenger hunt?" I ask Dan.

He shakes his head in wonder and mild distaste. "Why are they playing these weird games?"

I consider the crowd. Palau has few bars, all of them a good half-hour drive away and with a midnight closing time. "What else are they going to do?" Tomorrow we'll start scuba diving, which is why we came, but we'll be back to the resort in the early afternoon. We have just come from Australia, where we intermittently dove and read and ate and socialized on a

liveaboard for a week, and we went there from two weeks of jungle trekking and mountain climbing in Borneo, there from Phuket, from Phi Phi, from Phuket the first time, from Bangkok from Chiang Mai from Bangkok from the States, all in seven weeks. Though we are only going to be in Micronesia for six days, our schedule is relatively open. “Actually, what are *we* going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

I tell him that I read somewhere that one of Palau’s islands, Angaur, is uninhabited but for a couple hundred people, a few primitive guesthouses, and several thousand macaques. It is accessible by small, low-altitude planes, and I suggest that we go there when we have some free time.

“Okay,” Dan says. “Or we could just stay here. Why do you want to go there?”

“I don’t know,” I say. It doesn’t seem like going there just for the sake of going somewhere is a good reason. Neither is because I feel like I should be moving. I shrug. “There’re monkeys there.”

The next morning, Dan’s ears are better, and we call our dive shop to send a van for us. We stop in Koror to pick up another pair of divers from an undistinguished, pool-less cement block hotel. Looking around at the city beyond vehicle windows again, I am somewhat surprised at the absence of an impressive hospitality industry in a country whose virtually only income besides US aid is tourism. I was in Yap, Palau’s Micronesian neighbor to the northeast, years ago, and witnessed its dearth of commerce, but Palau is considered the most westernized nation in the region, and it can receive nearly ten times as much tourism as Yap. Palau boasts an aquarium, a museum, and a handful of nice resorts, only one of which occupies beachfront.

There are some expensive restaurants with good seafood, but it's a long, hard layover and an expensive plane ticket just for some quality soft-shell crab.

At the dive shop, we wait for forty-five minutes, a long time even in dive shop time, to leave. I pace off the affront to my Midwestern punctuality on the cement dock until half a dozen other divers, a captain, a divemaster, and a videographer finish loading their gear on the boat and we speed away into open water. The rock islands, which made Palau famous, are breathtaking. Hundreds of emerald jungle-covered chunks of limestone dot the republic's shockingly turquoise waters. We cut close around some of them, under arches made by others, our mouths gaping, on our way to a site called Blue Holes.

Once moored, we jump in the water and quickly descend a hundred feet. Blue Holes is filled with caves, overhangs, and swim-throughs made by coral formations. I watch a distant diver eclipse the early morning sun that shines through one of the holes as he swims past. Between the light and the particles in the stirred water, the formations are wrapped in a bright, fuzzy glow against the deep blue. We swim on with surgeonfish and parrotfish, passing dozens of white tip, black tip, grey reef sharks, until we round Blue Corner, Palau's best-known dive site. The current here is strong, too strong to fight, and too fast to just move along with. We ascend a bit and hover above a plateau of coral, kicking furiously and searching for rocks to grab onto. I sway in place with the current, gripping a stone. Many divers claim a sense of peace or restfulness as a reason they like to get underwater, especially in drift and current dives during which they are still like this. But my thoughts often don't slow to the pace of the breaths I drag through my regulator. Hanging here in the current, I can't, and don't try to shut off my mind. Presently, I am watching the roving wildlife while focusing on my grasp and imagining what might happen if the current got the better of me. I wonder how much air everyone else has left.

I think about how to make pumpkin curry while giant Napoleon wrasse, sweetlips, and schools of barracuda swim by. Once, during a dive on a previous vacation, when I was contemplating – what? how the sand seemed coarser in that country? the conclusion I drew in a women’s studies paper as a college freshman? – a ten-foot manta ray almost slipped past me unnoticed.

In the bungalow that afternoon, I am failing to convince Dan that we should jet over to Angaur. He reads lazily on the bed, mostly ignoring me, until I persist.

“Why do you have ants in your pants?” he asks me. He doesn’t mean it as an inquiry into my present state. It’s a question of existential significance, one he asks me all the time. I don’t know. Because I have an overactive brain. Because I have very high metabolism. I close my mouth and look at him, and he suggests I open a book. I take out my journal and check my watch for the time until we can start walking toward dinner as I content myself making lists of things we will need to buy for our wedding reception five months later.

We have dived twice by noon the next morning, and Clayton, our Palauan divemaster, tells us that we can go on an additional snorkel trip after we climb into the boat the second time. We skid across the South Pacific to Palau’s island of Eil Malk and dock at a short pier. Clayton tells us to put on the neoprene booties we’ve taken off since we last surfaced. “You need shoes,” he says, and the thin layer of rubber tread on the bottom of our dive socks makes them the closest thing we’ve got. We follow the pier to a forest and walk over a thick bed of plant debris. We stop at the bottom of a steep hill.

“Be careful not to slip,” Clayton says, and as the others start climbing, I notice a pile of crutches and leg braces against a tree. We make our way up and over the hill, and the forest clears around another pier that juts over Jellyfish Lake.



Jellyfish Lake has been sealed off from most marine life for millions of years. The jellyfish, who entered the lake through fissures in the limestone that surround it in the larval stage, have been safe in their protected pocket of sea, and, with hardly any animals to defend against, thrived and evolved into a mostly sting-less, dominating throng. The jellyfish share the lake with some pajama cardinalfish and anemones, but Clayton informs us proudly that this site has the fourth densest population of a single animal in the world. In 2002, there were reportedly twenty-four million jellies in this fifty-thousand-square-meter lake.

“What’s first densest?” I ask.

“The Christmas Island crabs,” he says. When I ask him what are second and third, he shrugs. He sits at the edge of the pier while we don masks and snorkels. “Kick gently so you don’t hurt the jellyfish,” he says. He nods at the underwater camera hanging by a cord from my wrist. “Hold onto that, because if you drop it, you cannot dive down to get it.”

“Why?” I ask. “How deep is it?”

“It is not deep,” he says. “But the bottom is toxic with bacteria.”

The visibility in Jellyfish Lake is poor. I swim slowly past a few cardinalfish near the pier before a jellyfish I couldn’t see coming drifts into view. It looks pink; its long, curling tentacles trail from a fat, rosy pulsating bell. It sucks and spits water rhythmically as it floats past. As I cautiously swim forward, I see a dozen more, and with a few more soft kicks, I am surrounded. I turn my head and see that I cannot proceed in any direction without making contact with the creatures; jellyfish bounce off my wetsuit with my every move. Though I know that they are probably not aware of me at all, and certainly not in any philosophical sense, and that they can’t hurt me, I find I am intimidated by them. I am overwhelmed, claustrophobic, lying in a swarm of cnidarians, less than a few inches of space between each of them. They fly

aimlessly and uncontrollably in the direction of any current my legs make while I raise my head out of the water and start toward Dan with my arms tight at my sides, trying to jostle as few living things as possible. I reach through a throng of pink bodies and tug on his wetsuit, and he lifts his head.

“Hey, pal,” he says, spitting his snorkel out and smiling wide. The animals follow the sun and are less dense where he is, nearer the pier. I put my face back in the water for a moment and watch them float around us. I want to poke one on its head, but am scared, and tell him so. He laughs at me.

“Go ahead,” he says. He tells me to relax, though he knows it is not something I do easily. A woman at our dive shop mentioned that the jellyfish aren’t entirely incapable of stinging; it’s possible to run into one and get a slight, poisonous tingle. But the nematocysts are in the tentacles, not in the throbbing umbrella that I want to touch, and I know this. I am anxious, I think, because I’ve been stung by a jellyfish before. The stripes where it wrapped itself around my leg burned for weeks. I imagine my fingertips painfully inflamed for the rest of our trip, for our Fijian wedding. It’s unlikely, actually impossible, but I have to hold my breath for a moment and strengthen my resolve before I tap one lightly on the center of its top. It rebounds off my finger like a gelatin mold, and continues on its way.

I feel movement around me and bring my face to the air. A few Asian women of indiscernible age are hanging onto large pieces of Styrofoam nearby. Each has a man towing her float toward the pier. When they get there, the men get out of the water, scoop the women up in their arms onto the landing, and from there, hoist them onto their backs. I watch the women bob calmly away on the shoulders of their transports, until they disappear into the forest, toward the hill, and back to their crutches.

We visit two more sites on our third day of diving. I have purchased a reef hook for our return to Blue Corner, and, when it's time to hang in the current, secure the metal catch at one end of the rope to a rock and the clasp at the other to my buoyancy control vest. As the water rushes past me, I stretch out my limbs and float, watching the easy movements of the turtles and the fish as they are carried. We linger while small, flat, worm-like nudibranchs crawl imperceptibly along the coral at Turtle Wall. Afterwards, we ride around the rock islands, the boat rocking, the sun's warmth penetrating, lulling us. When we arrive at the dive shop, Dan and I rinse our gear a final time. We get a ride back to the bungalow, where we sit on our balcony and talk about what sort of house we will one day build, and don't talk, until it is dark and time to order some soup.

We can't dive for twenty-four hours before we fly, so our last day is dedicated to kayaking. Clayton waits for the other dive masters to leave with customers on dive boats before deftly sliding his dark, stocky frame into a one-seat plastic kayak and motioning for Dan and me to occupy the pair of holes in the other. We push away from the dock and are soon paddling around the rock islands, looking up at heaps of green trees rising from knobs of stone from our seats atop impossibly clear blue-green water. We can see fish swimming around the short coral growths. I comment on the abundance of the sea cucumbers; every few feet a fat, foot-long brown or black one rests on the sand an arm's length beneath us.

"Tell me if you see any green ones," Clayton says as Dan and I peer around our sides.

"Why? Can you eat them?" I ask, because I think I'm funny, not because I think he's going to say, "Yes. Look, there's one!" He plunges his arm into the water, pulls out a lump of simple animal matter, bends it in half, drives his finger into it, and extracts a thin, runny piece of insides and offers it to me

“You can eat the intestine,” he says. The translucent organ drips off the tip of his index finger, which he’s holding out to me. “Do you want to try it?” I shake my head no, and he swings his arm in Dan’s direction.

“No, thanks,” Dan says. “That’s all you.”

Clayton raises his hand high, tips his head back, and drops the part into his mouth while we watch in horror. “It would be better,” he says, “if we had lime.” He tosses the rest of the sea cucumber back into the water, claiming nonchalantly that it will grow itself a new intestine within a few months or so.

We run ashore on an empty beach and unload bento boxes full of rice, vegetables, and tofu. Clayton munches on a four-inch island banana and picks small, smooth brown ovals from the sand. He bashes one of them against a rock with another rock and pulls off the shell. Dan and I are evidently sitting under a nut tree.

“Here,” Clayton says, handing me something that looks like an almond. I put it in my mouth and it has the wet, earthy flavor of raw nut.

“What kind of nut is this?” I ask.

Clayton shrugs. “Some kind.” He is collecting them in a plastic bag to take home to his family. It is already half full.

“What do people do with them? Do you roast them, or cook with them?”

“You can just eat them, for food,” Clayton says. He pauses and looks up from where he is bent over the ground. “You can buy them at the store.” And then, as if it is just occurring to him, as he is grabbing a handful off the beach, “Isn’t that silly?”

Dan and I rest our backs against the trunk of the tree and watch Clayton. We walk inland a bit to the edges of the jungle, and back. We chase a crab around in shallow waves for a while before Clayton carries his kayak back to the water, and we move on to another island.

We immerse ourselves into this one's thick vegetation, stepping carefully over roots and detritus. Here and there are scattered thick glass bottles inscribed with Japanese, and Clayton picks one up. They are left over from the war, he says, and explains how the Japanese camped out all over these islands before telling us an indelicate joke about how they lost the war to the Americans because they spent all of their time cooking rice.

For over two hundred years, Palau has been, in some way or another, occupied: Britain, then Spain, then Germany, and then Japan controlled the islands before the Americans stormed them during World War II and gave Palau the distinction of hosting one of the war's bloodiest battles when over fifteen thousand men died on the outer island of Peleliu. Since the invasion of Westerners, the country has been wracked by devastating foreign disease and intertribal and international warfare. Palau became an independent nation in 1994, though the United States essentially bought domain over the republic, including the right to stash nuclear weapons, for \$450 million dollars of aid. But Palau hasn't experienced any new military installations yet.

This period is, I realize, the most placid that Palau has had in centuries. It may actually be among the most peaceful – between the kindness and unconcern of the people and the ease of the commerce and government – stunningly beautiful – between the rock islands, the jungles, and the turquoise sea and its abundant creatures – places on the planet. Which is why fifty or sixty thousand people, even some who don't dive, visit every year. Which is why even I am calming, am inadvertently allowing tranquility to seep in like so many microscopic jellyfish.

We repossess our kayaks and paddle a while until we stop in front of a rock wall. Dan and I sit quietly, watching Clayton, until he asks us if we can hold our breaths.

Dan cocks an eyebrow at him. “For how long?”

“I don’t know,” Clayton says. “Mandarinfish Lake is on the other side of this.” He gestures at the stone in front of us.

We jump into the chest-high water in our tee shirts and khakis and tie our kayaks to a hanging tree branch. We grab our snorkels, secure our masks and fins, and prepare like freedivers, taking one deep breath, exhale, another deep breath, exhale, lunging into the water with our lungs full of the third swill of air. I kick hard through a gap between the foundation and the sand floor, swimming toward the light at the other side, until the rock above gives way again and I break the surface, gasping. “It’s like a big pool,” Dan says, appearing next to me, and indeed, we are in a large and shallow body of warm, sparkling water encased by thick jungle.

We are looking for mandarinfish. They are small and dark blue with seemingly random swirls and stripes of oranges, yellows, and greens. They are notoriously difficult to spot, because they are only a few centimeters long, they often favor the light of dusk, and they are not found wild in many places. I missed the mandarinfish when I was in Yap; the divers went out to search for them in the early evenings, and I was busy spending my nights drinking with the few other youths on the island, most of them docked liveaboard staff, getting high with the American manager of a neighboring hotel, and once, shamefully, watching a movie about a Scottish hairdresser in my room. Clayton tells us that to find mandarinfish, we must swim slowly and look carefully among the coral heads in the lake. It takes patience and concentration to find them, he says, which worries me a little.

We put our faces in the water, and soon lose track of one another. I inspect the bursts of hard corals in the sand, moving my eyes over the piles of fingerlike growths, watching for movement against the reds and browns. Bland fish and I regard each other disinterestedly. I notice I'm thinking about the logistics of moving to another state, which we'll have to do when we get back home in four months. Occasionally I raise my head and locate Dan or Clayton across the lake, their fins shifting smoothly on the water, before I immerse myself back in the shoal.

The sun travels leisurely toward the horizon, and I eventually spread my arms and legs out wide and stop kicking. My clothes are damp and tepid as they ripple around me, and my limbs become weightless and my consciousness languid, my breath loud and sluggish in my snorkel. I am drifting, roaming, still, my lungs and eyes moving only, when a flutter of tiny fins enters my vision. The small fish moves like a grasshopper, jumping quickly from space to space, as if it alights on an invisible perch before taking off again each time. Unhurried excitement, an excitement that doesn't propel me toward the others but blooms warmly and quietly in my chest, spreads through me. I float on the surface, and nothing moves faster, not my mind, not the current, not the time ticking the moments until we will lug our bags and our wet clothes to the plane back to Australia, to more vigorous vacation, than the giddy mandarinfish that skips playfully among the coral below me.

## On Love and Leachfields

“Could you please bring me the tissues out of my bag, Pal?” I called to Dan from the bathroom of our first hostel. We had paid two extra American dollars for en suite facilities in a rundown backpacker’s joint, and I sat down on the toilet without noticing that there was nothing to wipe with. Tiny ants patrolled the cracks between the sink and the wall and the wall and the floor. A few lizards took turns scurrying across the ceiling. I eyed them sharply.

“What for?” Dan asked through the door.

“What do you mean, what for?” I called back. I laughed quietly in spite of myself. From the moment our “Escape the States Before the Careers and Babies” trip started, my intended and I spent a lot of time talking about toilets. We had recently graduated from college and set off on a six-month vacation that would culminate in a Fijian wedding. We were free of mortgage and debt obligations. We had our youth. We had big dreams and birth control. Back home, our more positive naysayers couldn’t help pointing out that we could have used the money for a down payment on a house. The more negative ones said that it would be a miracle if we still wanted to get married after getting to know each other as well as we would by spending so much time together. Before we left, Dan had taken a Southeast Asia guidebook out of the library and given me a quick course in distant culture. I’d learned, among other things, that people in Thailand, our first stop, don’t traditionally use toilet paper. But I’d forgotten.

“They don’t use toilet paper here, remember?” Dan yelled from the other side of the door. He was overtired, giddy from the twenty-three hours of plane rides and the heat. I could hear him skipping around, excited about what he had to tell me. He turned it into a song: “I already told you that, but you – weren’t – listeniiiiinnng!”

“Please just give me the tissues,” I pleaded. He didn’t respond. “Dan?”



“What?”

“Get me my tissues!”

“No,” he said solemnly. “Use the water gun, like you’re supposed to.” And I heard him walk away.

I looked around and saw a sprayer, like the one on my mother’s kitchen sink, hitched to the side of the toilet. I picked it up, aimed it directly into the bowl, and squeezed the trigger. A powerful stream of water shot out. Satisfied that I had conducted a successful test of the equipment, I directed the device at myself and squeezed again. Though I knew it was coming, I couldn’t help jumping a little when the cold water blasted me in the crotch.

Fancy Western hotels in Thailand have amenities like toilet paper, and as crappy as our hostel was, it was at least fancy enough to have sit-down toilets. At the Bangkok train station, however, I had no choice but to leave my silly American pretensions at the bathroom door and squat. I managed to pee on my jeans *and* spill all over myself the plastic bowl of foul water that was provided in lieu of a water gun.

Dan smiled broadly as I walked through the exit, all wet spots and irritation. “You peed your pants,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

“I’m never using a squat toilet again,” I told him. I waited for a moment, ready to fight, but he spared me a repeat performance of the “people who use squat toilets don’t get hemorrhoids because they don’t strain their anuses as much” lecture. “And I’m carrying tissues from now on.”

“Oh, come on.” He laughed at me. “That’s a waste of paper.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” I said. “We use toilet paper when we’re at home. You’ve used toilet paper your entire life.”

He stopped smiling. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean there’s not a better way.” He was suddenly earnest, prepared to explain poignant environmental truths to his liberal arts graduate partner. I was a soft hippie, the sort who recycles and turns off the water when teeth-brushing, and I wanted to do more. But I had been raised in all the comforts a yuppie could afford, and wasn’t as prepared as perhaps either one of us had thought I would be to abandon them. Dan readied his hands for the gesturing that accompanies his recitations on why he studied ecology and engineering, on the way that the marriage between science and conservation will beget the future of the earth.

Though toilet paper was invented in China in the late 1300s, it was for emperors only, and everyone else around the globe used everything from corn cobs to wool to newspaper to lace for the next five centuries. Widespread use didn’t catch on until New York’s Joseph Cayetty started selling it in 1857, with his name printed on every sheet. Now, the world uses twenty million tons of tissue a year, most of it toilet, with North Americans using ten times as much as Asians and Africans per capita. According to Charmin toilet paper company, each person in the States uses over twenty thousand sheets annually. The multi-billion dollar industry uses a lot of resources. By Greenpeace’s estimates, Canada would save nearly fifty thousand trees a year if every household in the country replaced just one roll of regular toilet paper with the recycled kind.

Notwithstanding my recent problems, I actually thought that a quick, concentrated water bath was a great way to refresh one’s unmentionables. In addition to being more environmentally responsible, it seemed more sanitary. And classily European. But the water in Thailand is dirty, and smells, and I was sweaty and frustrated and wearing my own urine, so I put on my “we’re not talking about this anymore” face, and said, “We’re not talking about this

anymore. If the water here isn't safe enough to drink, then it's not suitable for spraying all over my naughty bits. From now on, I'm carrying tissues."

When we arrived at the Brisbane airport in Australia a few weeks later, I rushed gleefully into the bathroom, where I was greeted by rows of dazzling sinks, followed by dozens of sparkling sit-down toilets, each one bedecked by roll upon roll of toilet paper. I sat leisurely down in a stall, breathing in disinfectant, dangling and kicking my legs about like a child on the edge of a physician's table while I urinated delightedly. After standing up and fastening my perfectly dry pants about me, I looked for the flushing mechanism. To my surprise, there were not one, but two buttons on the back of the toilet, one right next to the other. I inspected them for discrepancies, but they appeared to be identical. Just two rectangles on top of the tank, and no other handles or levers in sight. Baffled, I set my finger lightly upon the left, then the right button, wondering if one would be easier, and therefore more correct, to depress. But nothing happened. Finally, I opened the stall door, set myself sideways to it, prepared to flee in the face of any catastrophe, and pushed firmly on the button on the right. I stepped back quickly; the toilet flushed. I walked over to the sink and washed my hands, pleased that I had chosen my button wisely. I vowed never to disturb the other one.

Soon after, I came upon an advertisement for "half-flush" toilets in a magazine. Evidently, an Australian invented a toilet with two flush options in order to conserve the country's often scarce water supply. The button on the left uses half as much water, just enough to flush down a couple of tissues. The button on the right induces full-blast flushing, to take care of solid waste. It was such a good idea that nearly all toilets across Australia were half-flushing ones. We eventually found that the buttons can be rectangular or square, and are sometimes colored in halfway or completely, denoting their respective purpose. Even though low-volume

toilets, which use a third as much water as standard toilets, were introduced in the States in the early nineties, they still use twice as much water as the half-flush's .8 gallons. Dan and I agreed on its splendiddness, and decided that when we built a house, we would import our toilets from ten thousand miles away.

We soon found work in an ecovillage just north of Brisbane. Jeff and Frances Michaels, a middle-aged, new age-y yuppie couple, agreed to compensate us for our toils on their property with free room and board in their beautiful home. The tile floors were clean and cool, the linens spotless, the toilets flushing. The Michaels informed us that though their plumbing appeared conventional, it in fact ran into an alternative treatment system. All their grey water (sink and drain) and black water (toilet) was filtered through a box containing some combination of sand and worms before being gravity-fed into their downhill orchards for irrigation. A friend of theirs had invented and installed the box, and Dan didn't understand exactly how it worked. The Michaels didn't really seem to either, but theirs was a lifestyle I could definitely support. This was conservation with style.

A week later, we reported to a farm on the southeast coast for a similar work arrangement. I arrived with a full bladder, and was devastated when I walked into the bathroom. There were holes in either end of the floor, one of which was filled with a wooden plug, the other containing a toilet – a squat toilet, to my utter dejection. A sign on the door identified the toilet as composting and asked visitors not to urinate in it, and to throw a handful of wood chips in when they were finished. I urinated in it anyway, because I didn't know where else to go, but asked about the proper protocol when I returned to the kitchen.

“Sometimes you have to wee when you have a shit,” Brian Woodward told me over the breakfast table. His partner Sally Middleton smiled and nodded sagaciously. “We're not saying

you can't *ever* urinate in it. Sometimes it's unavoidable. But urine upsets the nutrient balance of the compost, so we ask that you keep it to a minimum." He was originally from England, and said the last syllable of "compost" as if it rhymed with "lost."

Dan, who had taken a "Design of Waste Management Systems" course just before graduation, had been telling me about composting toilets. They often require no energy or water, cost almost no money, and allow waste to become a resource. Not only do they produce fertilizer, but they also reduce trash: fifty percent of all biosolids, the leftovers of domestic sewage treatment, end up in a landfill. But in order to work optimally – that is, kill pathogens and break down organic material into an easily used source of energy, and all without stinking – a complex balance of aeration, moisture, nutrients, and temperature needs to be achieved. The Woodward-Middletons used woodchips to help maintain airspace and control moisture in their pile, though other materials such as sawdust, straw, and rice hulls will also work, as well as provide additional nutrients for the microorganisms. "It's a recipe," Dan had said. "You gotta get the recipe right, otherwise the cake will fall," which is a disgusting analogy, but I had never considered that it meant I might not be able to pee in someone's particular batter.

"So where do you pee?" I asked Brian.

"It's especially good for the trees, if you'd like to do them the service, Dan," he said, turning his gray-bearded grin toward him. I waited, but he didn't address me. I appealed to Sally.

"Where do *you* pee?" I asked her.

Oh, we have a special toilet just for women, I hoped Sally might say, then direct me to an immaculate bidet down the hall. But instead she gestured vaguely around her. "Wherever," she said, looking out the window into the yard.

I frowned, but everyone pretended not to notice. Dan asked Brian questions about how their toilet worked. Brian explained that the second-floor bathroom was built on top of a huge wooden structure that caught the waste. There are two spaces for toilets because one is used until the compartment underneath it is full, and then that one is closed up and they use the other one. The waste from the filled compartment then gets transferred into a middle compartment where it composts further and is ultimately taken out and spread around the gardens. When Dan commented on the intelligence of this design, Brian said proudly that it was his own.

“We stayed with some people who had a worm box,” I offered.

Brian and Sally rolled their eyes. They had heard of the guy who was going around the country with his inventions. Brian said that the black water treatment was inadequate, that it didn't kill the pathogens in human feces, and wasn't safe for watering plants, much less food plants, thereby crushing my future worm box dreams.

The next day, I was squatting collecting firewood with the Woodward-Middleton's teenage daughter Holly when I announced that I had to pee. “So you guys just go in the yard, right?” I asked her.

She didn't even look up. “Right.”

“I suppose I should go behind something then, huh?” I asked, smiling.

She raised her head and crinkled her eyebrows at me. “I guess.” Like I was some kind of prude. “If you want to.”

Actually I'd quite prefer to do it right here next to you since that seems to be all right, I thought as I walked toward shelter. What a relief that we are both empowered enough to feel comfortable huddling and pissing around the yard together.

After squatting behind a barn, I pulled my pants up, aggravated that I didn't have any toilet paper. But of course I didn't have any toilet paper; I was standing in the middle of someone's lawn. We knew some environmentalists who were of the "if it's yellow, let it mellow; if it's brown, flush it down" persuasion, which conserves water and is only slightly distasteful in that the bathroom starts to reek of ammonia after awhile, but Sally and Holly were so enlightened that they didn't waste trees *or* water when they peed. They even blessed the land several times a day with their nutritious excretions.

"Are you married?" I asked Brian and Sally that evening while we served ourselves vegetable lasagna.

Brian, who was sitting next to me, brought his face too close to my mine. "Does it matter?" He was acting mock defensive, I thought.

"Not to me," I replied easily, because it didn't. "I was just wondering because you guys have different last names."

"Yes, we are married," Sally told me. "I didn't want to change my last name. Brian wanted me to change it to something stupid, but I've always been partial to the one I have."

Brian scowled at her. "Something stupid," he muttered. He turned to me, really defensive this time. "I agree that to expect women to automatically change their names just because they get married is silly. But I thought that since we were starting a family, we could combine our last names and make up a new one, for the both of us."

"Yes!" I shouted, pointing my fork at him. "That's what I want to do too! I've been trying to talk Dan into the exact same thing!"

"See?" Brian said happily. "We could be the Middlewards. Or the Woodtons." "Or the Middlewoods," I said helpfully. "And Dan and I could be the McGillands

instead of the McClelland-Gills, just like I've always said!" Dan just smiled at me: we're not talking about that right now. Brian suggested that he and I should get married because we wanted the same things, and we all chewed quietly for a moment until Holly piped up and changed the subject.

Lying in bed that night, waiting for Dan to return from the shower, I flipped through the pictures he'd been showing me in his travel journal. In it, he kept track of where we went, who we met, whether he liked the food. I caught a glimpse of the last page, and was shocked to find a draft of his wedding vows. *Throughout my life, my thoughts on marriage . . .* I lingered just long enough to realize what it was, then turned a few more pages, my circulatory system pumping hard, and made a mental note to start working on my own vows. I will say something, I thought, about the way he lets me eat off his plate even if he asked me before he ordered if I was hungry and I said no, so he only got enough for one person. Something about how it's obvious that we're best friends because we still stay up late some nights talking and giggling like grade school children, even if we have to get up early in the morning. As I enumerated the reasons I knew we were perfect for each other, despite my disbelief in destiny or fate, I paged through his sketches absentmindedly. Until I came upon a picture of a toilet.

For a second, I didn't recognize it as a toilet, since the drawing involved the cross-section of a large box that had been divided in half. There was a hole in the top of each of the two compartments, with an arrow pointing to each hole. They were labeled, simply, "toilet."

"So, you really like the composting toilet here," I said as Dan walked into the room with a towel around his waist.



“Yeah, I think it’s a good design.” He dried off his face and hair, his voice muffled from behind the towel. “I probably would prefer a regular toilet to a squat toilet, but they both have their advantages, you know?”

Oh, I know. “Do you intend on having a composting toilet in our house?” I asked, breezy, casual.

“Potentially,” he said, bending over to wipe some water droplets from his calf. “You’ll want to grow some herbs and vegetables, and it would be a great source of cheap, natural fertilizer. Besides, it’s really the most efficient way of dealing with home waste right now.”

I had given up on worm boxes for the moment. In light of the recent information, they weren’t my strongest bargaining chip. “What about leachfields?” I asked.

Leachfields treat wastewater so that it is safe to return to groundwater or water bodies without the use of chemicals. Contaminated water from a house goes into a septic tank, and from there to another tank that disperses the water alternately to different sections of a piping system of porous PVC. The pipes, whose spacing is meticulously calculated, distribute the water evenly into the soil, where bacteria eat the organic matter, ammonium, and other nutrients, and, as the water flows deeper, the viruses, with no organic matter to host them, absorb into the soil and break down. Leachfields can be as cheap as about \$5,000, but they take up a huge amount of yard, upwards of ninety feet lengthwise, and on average the owner has to pay to have the sludge pumped out of the septic tank every several years. And they don’t break toilet paper down into useful compost; paper solids, among others, get wasted, as with traditional toilets. Also, the land must have at least four feet of soil depth before the next layer of impermeable clay or bedrock, which isn’t necessarily easy to come by. In our home state of Ohio, for instance, the United States Geological Survey estimates that less than half a percent of all land is suitable for

leachfields. Similar onsite wastewater treatments only get more expensive and more complicated from there. Still. You can pee in the toilet, and you don't have to worry about your recipe turning into a malodorous, rotting pile of crap.

“Those can be good systems. And so can Living Machines.” Dan had spent his undergraduate career building and maintaining the miniature ecosystems that purify wastewater using natural processes. “I'm not saying I know exactly what we'll want to use, but composting is definitely a viable option.”

That's a good point, I could have said. It wasn't like we were building a house in a week. Or even in five years. Instead I lowered my voice and sneered, “There is no fucking way I'm getting a composting toilet in my house.”

He stared at me for a second. “Your house?” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“What happened to the half-flush toilet?” I demanded. “A half-flush toilet and a water gun thing so we don't waste any paper.”

He shook his head. “That is a good idea, but we can do more. Think of all the water that is used to flush toilets everyday – even half-flush toilets. If you eliminated the flushing system, it would probably save billions of gallons of water.” His voice got a little louder, and the gesturing began. “Think of everyone in the world who uses a toilet. If they all instituted composting toilets, the environmental impact would be huge. Even if just you and I do it, it will save . . .” (I saw him firing quick math in his head, which I generally found extremely endearing: the average person flushes four times a day at five gallons a flush, times two people, times 365 days . . .) “over ten thousand gallons of water a year!” He was amazed at the idea of it. “Why do we continue to mix waste with our most valuable resource – water – only to spend huge

amounts of time and money separating the two and wasting the fuel potential of the waste in the process?” He slung his towel over his shoulder and looked at me.

Certainly, I couldn't answer this question. And of course, it was one of the better ones I'd ever heard. But I would not be moved.

“I am not getting up in the middle of the night and wandering out into the middle of the yard to take a piss,” I told him. “I am not having my daughters, or their girlfriends, running around outside *weeing* on the lawn! Even if you could balance the nutrients so that I could actually pee in my own bathroom, I hate digging my hands in that bucket of wood chips every time I go in there.” I pointed my finger viciously at him. “And the system is not exactly odorless!” Well, not exactly, but pretty much. The Woodmiddles, or Tonwards, were quite effectively maintaining their compost, so that the area around the toilet only smelled very vaguely of earth and people. But I was not cool. I was the overemotional, irrational wife. I was tired of squatting around fields, not wiping, or rinsing, before pulling my underpants back on. I was sick of trying to simultaneously keep my balance and go poo. I wanted to live as easily as the Michaels. But the Michaels had sacrificed nothing, and it wasn't good enough. I didn't want to be told anymore, to know, that what I really wanted – a flushing toilet that I could sit down on – was irresponsible, immoral, close-minded.

The reason I am in love with Dan, the reason I believe we can live graciously together until we die, is that in response, he simply climbed into bed with me, nuzzled his face in my neck, and gave me a squeeze. “Okay, Buddy,” he said. “Alright, Pal. We'll see what kind of options we have in a few years when it's time to build a house.” He knew that as I learned more about ecology, I would find the right balance between resource use and convenience, just as I knew that once he realized how important it was to me, he would change his last name.

Marriage, like conservation, is a process of negotiation and compromise. So even though I knew he meant, I'll talk you into it eventually, I squeezed him back.

## The Trouble with Taylorwood

Several days into our time in Australia, I convinced my intended that we should work at a nudist resort.

We had eight weeks and little money to spend on our trip, and so decided to join an organization called WWOOF, or Willing Workers on Organic Farms, whose fifty-dollar membership came with a book of names and phone numbers of Australians who would trade us food and lodging for about four hours of work a day. The day we got the book, I read it in our hostel as I would an enthralling novel, turning the pages until well after my eyes grew tired, fascinated by each subsequent sentence. There aren't really any rules for who can and cannot run a listing in WWOOF; anyone with forty-five bucks can get his contact information and a description of what he's looking for printed. The upshot is that there are opportunities far beyond organic farming for a WWOOFer. We could do anything. We could shear sheep, or build tables, or baby-sit someone's ailing mother, or groom alpacas, whatever those were, or keep a lonely couple company. I wasn't far in when I encountered the first entry by nudists, and, excited for a salacious break in otherwise tame reports of cow-milking and hay-making, I read their requests and warnings aloud to Dan.

"This one says, 'Nudists only, please,'" I told him, and he laughed. Half an hour later, I interrupted his journal-writing again. "Look at this: 'Please be advised that we are naturists.'" It hadn't taken me long to figure out that "naturist" was a euphemism for "naked all the time." But though Dan smiled, or shook his head – or ignored me, after awhile – I was picturing us running nude through a vast vegetable garden, stopping here and there to scoop up weeds while exotic birds called overhead. I imagined wind caressing my evenly-tanned skin, warm afternoon sun on

my buns, even as we drove to Peter's (non-nude) Organic Farm, where we had made contact and agreed to work.

Once I decide that something is a good idea – going to Australia, baking a chocolate cake, trying nudism – I work blindly, diligently, toward setting it into motion. As I continued flipping through the fifteen hundred entries in the WWOOF book in search of our next destination after we finished our daily duties to Peter's chickens and banana trees, I marked the nudist positions along with those that offered interesting activities like composting and making cheese. And I kept pestering Dan.

“What if we were naked right now?” I asked him while lobbing a machete at a banana branch our first morning in the sweltering field. He said something pragmatic, like, “We'd be getting badly burned,” or, “We'd have a hell of a time getting this banana sap off later.”

Both of our fathers had consistently walked around naked or in their underpants in our youths, but our mothers and culture had nevertheless managed to instill conventional embarrassment for our nude bodies in us as children. I'd had my first taste of the thrill of bucking it on European beaches years prior, but Dan didn't believe my assertion that casually baring his genitals to a crowd would be empowering. He wasn't annoyed, as I was, at the shock our hosts exhibited when I got ready to go swimming in the creek by stripping down to a bikini. (I realized a minute too late that the four other girls joining us, their grandchildren, swam in long shorts and tee shirts.) But Peter and his wife were teetotalers, Baptists, and septuagenarians, and after three days in which we hadn't been able to curse, get wasted, or rag on Jesus, I knew the time was right. I announced to Dan my intention to call Taylorwood, a 30-acre nudist resort in the Whitsundays, a gorgeous piece of the continent's east coast that we had to drive through on our way south anyway. Dan simply shrugged and said, “Fine.”

We arrived at the low, long sign with yellow wooden letters announcing the resort five hours after leaving Peter's early one morning. We turned off the empty, jungle-lined highway and pulled into the drive, stopping at a short swinging fence that was held fast by a padlock and a thick metal chain. Dan got out of our tiny imported rental and inspected the lock before doing something I couldn't see and throwing open the gate. "It's a trick chain," he said, getting back in the passenger seat and handing me an envelope with our names on it. "There's a break in one of the links." After he replaced the chain, we drove on along the bumpy dirt path, looking at the surrounding palm trees and fields. The envelope contained, in addition to plenty of spelling and grammatical errors, the information that the first little green caravan – caravan is Australian for trailer – on our right was our new home. There were also instructions to throw off the shackles of the clothed world immediately.

"We are a NUDIST Resort, NOT a clothes optional Resort and this applies to our staff and WOOFERS as well (This naturally will depend on the type of work, the weather and naturally, health, then we wear clothes) can you imagine wipper snipping in the buff? OUCH!" Wipper snipping is Australian for weed whacking, and Dan and I suspected this had been typed without a hint of irony. We had also received a page of frequently asked questions reiterating that it was best to assume "the nudist uniform (nude)" as soon as possible, pointing out that we needed to carry a "personal towel" at all times so that our bare bottoms didn't make contact with couches and chairs in common spaces (which, though we had never considered it before, greatly relieved us), and assuring us that there was no reason to be embarrassed by our nudity because every nudist has had to take "that first step of being nude amongst strangers," which I guessed implied that they were a sympathetic people.

We grabbed our boots, hats, and toiletries and entered our trailer. It featured a bed at one end, a small couch at the other, and a kitchen sink, refrigerator, and small table in the middle. We set our things down and looked around. We opened the fridge, which was empty. We looked at each other.

“Well,” I said. “I guess we should get naked?”

Dan shrugged, shook his head, and laughed a little. “I guess.”

We walked down a path toward the pool, naked but for our sandals and sunglasses. Near the office, we ran into the resort owner.

“How ya goin’?” he asked, which is Australian for “How are you,” and he stuck his hand out toward Dan. “I’m Rogin.” He was average height, thin, his medium brown hair shaved into a flattop. He was wearing shorts and a button-down shirt.

Afraid that we were the subjects of an insidious joke, we glanced around frantically until we located two naked people in the pool. They raised chubby arms out of the water and waved at us. We turned back to Rogin and introduced ourselves.

“You’ve got the day for yourselves,” he said. “Just look around, and have a swim if you like. We’ll start early tomorrow morning.” We must have looked confused, or distressed, because he paused before he walked away, adding, “I’m dressed because I’m going into town for a bit.”

The man and woman in the pool got out to greet us. They were average height, overweight, and smiling. They looked like any other friendly middle-aged couple, except that they weren’t wearing bathing suits, and they were absolutely and unequivocally without a single pubic hair. Chlorinated water glistened on the man’s back hair, chest hair, and ass hair, but what pudenda were visible from under their big bellies were smooth and disconcertingly shiny. This



guy said his name was Peter, and I said something about our just having stayed with a Peter, though inwardly I doubted that that Peter waxed his balls. The woman swung her arm out from behind pendulous, waist-length breasts to shake our hands, and I wondered why she didn't remove her mustache or sparse chin beard, as she obviously was no stranger to depilatory creams or razors. We made conversation about the weather and where we were from for a few minutes before the two waddled away to their state-of-the-art trailer, parked just across the street from our old sad one. And by the time they had turned their backs to us, just like that, we were used to being naked with unfamiliar people. They were clearly comfortable with their bodies, and, as we were as well, the interaction had quickly taken on the banality of any polite meeting. If we'd been harboring inhibitions, they were gone.

The resort wasn't so much what the word calls to mind as a property on which people park campers. It wasn't yet officially open for the summer, and Dan and I had just met the only guests, so we wandered empty grounds. There was one cabin that could be rented, and a few slightly derelict caravans, but it appeared that most people roared up in powerful mobile-home-towing trucks, which they parked on small lots spaced along the drive. There were a few grassy field patches dotted with palm trees, and beyond that, the bush, which is Australian for forest. Inexplicably, a flock of peacocks roamed the resort. I imagined they must have been added for a touch of the aesthetic, but they climbed up on furniture, and knocked things over with their ostentatious tails, and occasionally engaged one another in raucous fights. The lounge area next to the pool at the end of the drive boasted a TV, some cheap couches, a few tables, and cooking amenities like pots, pans, a sink, and a BBQ. Really, the whole thing made up a slightly glorified picnic area, but then there were signs in the bathroom block next to our camper stating that this was the cheapest nudist resort in Australia (so please conserve water).

Most WWOOF hosts feed their workers whatever they cook for themselves and/or their families, but Rogin and his wife, Linda, whom we hadn't seen, had stocked a refrigerator with food for us to "self-cater." That was fine with us, until we realized that they'd provided cheap pasta with powdered sauce packets, some canned vegetables, and a Styrofoam container of old frozen chicken pieces. I sat on my personal towel, one half of the only towel Dan and I had, which we'd ripped in half in case we both needed to sit down at the same time, and flipped through a copy of *The Australian Naturist* while he grilled the meat. The magazine was full of pictures of people doing stuff naked: swimming, playing fetch with their dogs, horseback riding. I skimmed an article about the value of doing things naked as a family, as it fostered self-confidence and tolerance (though it failed to explain exactly how) in children at an early age. If I understood the nudist movement, and the article, correctly, some of it was to do with being comfortable in your own skin, no matter what, but most of the pictures were of girls, the majority apparently under the age of twenty-five, and all of them in outstanding shape, their bald pubic areas glinting in the sun.

Prior to 1972, it was illegal in Australia to show photographs of a woman's pubic hair in any context other than medical. Ancient Greece liked depilated ladies, as did a long tradition of Western art, and so too, evidently, did the lawmakers. (Germans, whose word for pubic hair, *schamhaar*, translates literally to "shame hair," appear to have had some issues with it as well.) Aussie nudist magazines had to airbrush pictures until they won the right to leave muff in the shots. But pubic hair wasn't popular for long. Soon girls were trimming, waxing, and shaving, in nudist magazines as in nudie magazines, which brought us to the current situation: not a pubic hair in sight, on our new friends or in *The Australian Naturist*. There was, however, a letter to the editor in which a reader commended the magazine for printing a few pictures of girls with

big healthy bush, which is American for pubic hair, in a recent issue. Pubic hair was coming back, the reader insisted, and it was nice to finally see magazines acknowledging the organic look.

“Hey, see, some naturists do like it natural,” I said to Dan. I looked up at him at the barbeque and he gave me a distant, “Oh, yeah?” He was busy turning chicken and keeping his exposed skin away from the hot grill and spattering grease. He was standing as far from it as he could, his back arching his belly into a concave half-moon away from the fire, his arms reaching out in front of him. He flipped the last piece of meat over and took a large step back. He looked at me, sweat and exasperation on his brow.

“This is stupid,” he said.

Rousseau philosophized about returning to a naked state of natural virtuousness and joy in the 1700s, but early twentieth-century Europeans thought they had discovered the key to the new and glorious world in nudism. Enlightened sun-soaked, fresh-air-gulping citizens formed movements promoting the ultimate cure-all: a socially and physically active nude life that would produce a strong, disease-free, socially adept, morally intact populace. Ruth Barcan, in her book *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy*, explains that “the early exponents of naturism saw it as a recipe for a healthy individual, for healthy relations between the sexes, and for a healthy society.” Doctors recommended it, Germans attended naked gym school and clubs, and Christians wrote books about recovering Eden on earth. French journalist Roger Salardenne claimed that naturists were after, and expected, nothing less than “the complete development on all levels of the human personality and the obtaining of a harmonious balance of the individual and society based on the worship of Honour, Beauty, Truth, and Health.”

And so there we were, two beautifully healthy beings who respected truth, and maybe even honor, waiting for Rogin near the office in nothing but our work boots and hats at five to eight the next morning. He arrived after a few minutes. He was, again, fully clothed.

“Today’s a clothes day, guys,” he said, looking at our nude bodies like we were the idiots. “It’s a bit chill.” Though the sky was overcast, the temperature was no less than seventy-five degrees. Granted, that was about thirty degrees below normal, but Dan and I had already applied thick layers of sunscreen and DEET all over our skin, and it was lightly drizzling, which made it, if anything, the most practical condition for not bothering to wear dry clothes. We went and got dressed anyway, and then began the grueling and repetitive task of raking rocks out of the driveway. Sometime after tea, but before lunch, which was our quitting time, Rogin disappeared for a few minutes and returned nude. I saw him coming back up the path, his flaccid penis jogging around between his legs as he moved. My eyes lingered on it longer than I felt a nudist’s should. I looked away as he stopped and stood with his skinny, sagging chest and hairless, gleaming genitalia facing our covered frames for a moment.

“You can wear what you like, guys,” he said, and then picked up his rake and resumed work.

After lunch, and after Rogin had interrupted our meal to criticize our raking abilities (there were still plenty of too-big rocks in the gravel drive), I went to the communal bathroom. We were covered in dust and sweat, and I wanted to rinse off before jumping in the pool. Behind the sinks and the toilet stalls were two tile walls, one extending a little ways into the room from the left and one from the right. Mounted into the backs of the walls were the showerheads. Nothing divided the showers in each corner but the fifteen feet of space or so between them. The back wall of the building, the wall opposite the walls with the showerheads,

was made of glass. I stood between the two open stalls for a moment, considering their lack of privacy. The bathroom facility was set up on a hill at one edge of Taylorwood. Its entrance faced the bush. Its back, the enormous window, looked out over the resort.

The next day Dan and I played naked Frisbee, just like in the nudist magazines, after we had earned our free time for the day from Rogin. We could see Peter and his wife sitting in the lounge area watching TV and drinking beer, as they had been doing pretty consistently for the last two days. I articulated my concerns to Dan about our recent heavy chemical use. Though I was pleased to have a nicely sun-kissed ass, it certainly wasn't good for my skin, and we were running low on sunscreen as we slathered ourselves in it several times a day. Plus, it's buggy in the bush, so in addition to the sunscreen, we'd already exhausted an entire small can of topical insect repellent, which we were applying in places I was sure the manufacturers hadn't intended when they developed it. It didn't stop the mosquitoes anyway; we would, with clothes on, usually sustain a few bites on our arms and legs, but without the protection of fabric, our bodies were covered indiscriminately in itchy poisonous bumps.

"I think I'm growing a DEET tumor," I told Dan.

"Well, you probably have dengue fever or Ross River virus from the mosquitoes anyway," he said, tossing the bright orange disk my way.

At dusk, I stood over the oven range in the lounge stirring some crappy dried noodles to life in boiling water when a new set of shaved nuts walked in. He had emerged, I presumed, from the forty-foot RV that had lumbered into our Frisbee playing ground an hour before. He was tall, forty-ish, on the thin side, with bleached spiky hair. From across the room, I could see that his eyes were badly bloodshot.

"How ya goin'?" he asked, blinking around him. "I'm Neil."

“Hi, Neil,” I said, smiling. “I’m Nicole.” He stood still for a moment, looking at the TV, which I’d turned off after Peter retired to his camper, then staring at the couch, and the pot I was cooking in. He walked slowly over to me. I made myself small, pressing my arms hard into my sides, when he stopped an inch from my body. Being naked with strangers had become pretty normal, but that didn’t mean I wanted our bare skins touching. I kept my face turned forward while he brought his mouth nearly to my ear. His voice was low and gravelly. “What’s for dinner, Nicole?” he asked. He considered my pasta briefly after I named it, then walked away.

Since my desire to come to Taylorwood had been based somewhat on vague romantic notions and mostly on compulsion, I had failed to wonder what it would really be like. And while I had answered Dan’s repeated queries about why I wanted to work at a nudist resort so badly with assertions it would be fun, and that even if it wasn’t, a good story was better than a good time, I had never stopped to think that maybe some of my interest involved a desire to be looked at. I was the first person to strip when someone suggested skinny dipping, and part of the excitement of hanging out topless on beaches overseas had been the throng of hot young foreign men that generally accompanied it. Though I’d selectively forgotten the HBO specials I’d seen when I was fantasizing about running around a nudist resort, cable had taught me that nudists tended to be old, out of shape men. Since I hadn’t considered the possible influence of my own exhibitionism in deciding to go naturist, I certainly hadn’t contemplated its conditions. Evidently, I didn’t think that enforced exhibitionism was as fun as it might sound. Evidently, I wanted to choose who looked and when. I hoped not to run into Neil again. Even before his arrival, I’d showered quickly at night because the window I stood naked and washing myself in was one of the only lights in the dark resort sky.

By the next afternoon, Dan and I had decided that we hated Rogin. He was a windbag, and a jerk. He was running for city council, which was queer, since people don't usually elect naked people to government positions, even locally, and he constantly lamented the appalling inferiority of the other candidates while we worked. He complained about the quality of the horribly unpleasant and boring raking and clearing and sweeping jobs we did, even though we were both hard Midwestern workers. Dan got stung twice in the face and I once on the arm when Rogin sent us near a wasp nest to do some chores, and he always gave Dan more English muffin halves than me at tea. We hadn't come here for the work, and certainly not for the dehydrated noodles. We had come to be nudists, which we had been, and we called a farm a thousand kilometers or so down the coast that agreed to take us in three days.

That evening, while we were doing our dishes, a new heavy, immaculately waxed couple entered the lounge area. The *Australian Naturist* reader who predicted the comeback of heavy bush was ahead of his time, or else word hadn't reached Taylorwood's guests yet. I, however, was embodying the visionary trend. Pubic hair maintenance hadn't seemed particularly relevant on the banana farm, and I'd found myself reluctant to resume my usual trimming once we arrived at the nudist resort. I'd modeled for fetishists, taken my clothes off for artists, and even posed for pornographic anime illustrators. Still, it's unsettling to sit around watching Australian soaps ass naked under the pretext of candor and communal good feelings while people steal clandestine glances at your vagina, and I was glad that my shame hair was securely in place.

Dan and I retreated to our trailer after half an hour of what had become standard conversation with the nudists (isn't Ohio the state with all the potatoes, no, that's a different one, you wouldn't believe what our RV can do, oh yeah, it's probably amazing). Dan was several steps ahead of me on the path when the two tiny, shitty little dogs that lived in the office escaped

whatever had enclosed them and charged my ankles, barking and baring their teeth furiously. Defending myself against small mean dogs could only be more ridiculous if I were doing it totally nude, and here I was. I kept them off by whipping my personal towel at them while the new couple helped from the couch. “Watch out!” they called cheerfully. “They bite!”

No one has maintained, in a long while, that exercising, housecleaning, or eating naked is better for your body than doing any of the same activities clothed. Nowadays doctors prefer to found advice on things like facts and evidence, and also there’s that skin cancer thing, so nudism is mostly recreational. Taylorwood had the elements of a good time: beer, magazines full of young, hairless girls, TV, a pool. The only thing that wasn’t enjoyable was the constant, compulsory nudity. Despite all our efforts, we had sustained extensive insect bites and sunburns, and our butt cheeks were permanently dimpled and crinkly from sitting on our scratchy, textured personal towels during down time. We had placed delicate body parts near open fires and stove ranges and ill-behaved pets, and coated them in sunscreen and bug spray. Nudity had rendered nearly all our activities totally impractical, sometimes miserable, and occasionally unsettling. I suspected the real motivation for many nudists consisted of a combination of a desire to belong to something and exhibitionism, and nobody was owning up to the latter. Neil had asked me twice more what was for dinner, once when I was clearly making breakfast, and though there are creepy people everywhere, perhaps it’s better to encounter them while dressed. I love being nude, even publicly sometimes, but it has its time and place and limits. Like soccer fans, and scientologists, nudists just take a good thing a little too far, and I missed being able to put on a tee shirt, or underwear, for various reasons.

And so, two days later, we left. Even in my sensational reveries of nude bliss, and even in the utopia depicted in the pages of *The Australian Naturist*, where healthy attractive people



live in the buff together, each one equally beautiful, equally leered at, every one a young brilliant professional cutting loose, organizing volleyball games, engaging in stimulating conversation about Gaarder and alternative forms of hair removal, somebody is bound to lean too close to an oven range. Nudism doesn't make every moment of life more fantastic, as I had imagined it would. Unfortunately, it wouldn't save civilization, either, but then early twentieth century Europeans had had a lot of ideas that didn't quite work out. Dan and I pulled out of Taylorwood's drive with our clothes on and our car packed. We drove south down Bruce Highway, on our way to an ecologically sustainable village where we would tend and plant vegetables, and from there, to Sydney, to the Blue Mountains, to whatever WWOOF hosts we decided to live with for awhile, with a little more appreciation for modern civilization's dependence on pants.

## What You Do When You're WWOOFing

Date: Mon, 8 Mar 2004 00:34:50 -0800 (PST)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: the life of a banana farmer

Allow me to set, dramatically, the entirely novel events of a few days ago in scene. When we drove up to the house set far back on the dusty, rutted road to Peter's Organic Farm, I was ready to turn around. I didn't put the Hyundai in park or turn it off as I looked at the helter-skelter assortment of concrete blocks and wood and tin set among the brush. "This can't be a house," I said to Dan, horrified. "Is this a house? I don't see any other houses."

He coaxed me out of the car and we followed the sound of singing to a slight, middle-aged Indian man standing amid mechanical parts in a makeshift shed off the side of the driveway. The afternoon sun blasted 107-degree heat on the outskirts of Tully, two hours south of Cairns on the east coast, and the man's face sweated profusely under a floppy khaki hat. His clothes were too big and covered in black stains.

"Are you Peter?" I asked. We have joined WWOOF – Willing Workers on Organic Farms – Australia, an organization whose \$45 membership comes with a book of contacts who will award us food and lodging for a few hours of work (though many of the sort of personal ads that accompany the phone numbers don't have anything to do with farming, and seek simply housekeepers or random laborers or company). We eventually conquered the Australian payphone system and called half a dozen people who were within a few hours' driving distance who told us exasperatedly, when we asked if they needed WWOOFers, that it was the wet season (which didn't mean anything to us), before Beryl Watson, Peter's wife, answered and said that we were welcome to come.

“No, no,” the Indian man said, and laughed a little. “I’m Gordon, their son-in-law.” He shook our hands and we introduced ourselves. “Come.” He walked us a little way to what I had feared was the house and there emerged Beryl, old and wide and sturdy, wearing a floral muumuu and long white braid. A fly landed on one of her bucked front teeth when she smiled to say hello and invite us inside.

Thirty years ago, the Watsons bought a piece of land, parked their caravan, which also contained six children, on it, and sowed a banana plant. Now, they have a hundred acres, eight hundred chickens, ten cows, and more bananas than they can count. They cut down a tree and built a wooden roof over their caravan in those early days, and they’ve slowly added on a few rooms since. Hardly one of them consists of all four walls; the kitchen and living areas are part of a rambling space that opens to the yard in several places. Peter appeared in the kitchen, white-haired and beaming. “Hello, I’m Peter the Pumpkin Eater,” he said, all smiles. We sat down at the table to chat and Beryl told us about the recent lice outbreak on the farm while Dan and I quietly and politely panicked. We joined WWOOF because we have eight weeks in and no real plans for this country, and it seemed like a) a good way to save money, b) a promising premise for meeting people, and c) an exciting adventure for some liberal suburban recyclers on their last-hurrah-before-real-adulthood trip, as some less nerdy people might go skydiving, or smuggle heroin across the Thai border. We were concerned, those first moments, that we’d gotten in over our heads.

But for the past few days, we’ve been talking with Gordon’s six children, who live on the property with their parents and grandparents, doing dishes, reading *Wise Traditions* magazines, and learning things we didn’t know about our food. Raw milk, for example, is perfectly safe to drink (once Beryl convinces you that milk is *not* made of germs, as you have believed since your

fifth-grade unit on pasteurization and other modern marvels of science), provided it's been collected and kept sanitarily. Eggs don't need to be refrigerated; in fact, they are stacked on room-temperature grocery store shelves in Australia and New Zealand and Asia. There is no such thing as a banana tree; bananas grow on plants, the stems of which produce around forty leaves and exactly one bunch each. In the mornings, the Watsons dispatch us to the banana paddy, I in an old pair of Peter's powder blue dress pants and one of his discarded plaid pajama shirts because banana sap is black and impossible to remove from clothing, to tackle fungus-contaminated leaves with machetes for four hours. When we're finished, we shower, lunch, and are welcome to look at farming books and swim in the nearby creek and sweat and help with household chores and endure constant ambush by mosquitoes, roaches, and frogs that enter the house freely and enthusiastically.

I am having a blast. The Watsons are lovely, all of them, intelligent and cooperative and friendly. These avid Baptists even let us share one of their spare rooms because we're getting married in a few months. We are exceptionally hot and sticky, whether working, sleeping, or relaxing, and nearly every dish Beryl serves us has at least one insect in it, and the labor is exhausting, but I'm cheerful and energetic. Dan, ever the minimalist and ecologist, seems at home in this very far from our middle-class home. When I point out to him that my bug bites have gotten so bad that they are bleeding, or mention that I need to take a break before I pass out from working in the oppressive heat, or exclaim that I have nearly shaved off a piece of a limb to a careless machete swing, he shrugs. "Hey," he says. "That's the life of a banana farmer."

Banana farmers, though they only have to work a few hours a day if they've got an army of kin to help out, have their own worries, to be sure. Though 84% of the world's banana market is controlled by five enormous companies, most of Australia's annual 200-275 thousand tons of

the fruit is produced by small growers. Peter's crops are vulnerable to pests, disease, and drought. And if competition from the country's seven thousand other banana farm employees isn't enough to make him nervous, Australia is currently in the process of trying to lift the ban on imports from the world's fifth-largest banana producer, the Philippines. Still, something about being around plants and family all day seems so rewarding. I stood at a large table in the open hall last night and helped Beryl place eggs in cartons and then place a "Peter's Organic Farm" label on them to prepare them for shipping to Sydney stores. Maybe it's an extension of my love of wrapping all things up in neat little packages, and being around the raw and unprocessed (I *have* always enjoyed parks, and hippies), but I've scarcely felt so content, even with mosquitoes ceaselessly attacking my arms and legs and feet.

Today we got another WWOOFer (Gordon estimates they take about three hundred a year, and as many as eight at a time). Peter and Beryl say that many Korean parents send their offspring to WWOOF in Australia because it's a cheap and effective way to get them an English education. They say that many WWOOF hosts don't accept Koreans because their English skills are often nonexistent and it's difficult to work with the language barrier. All our Korean WWOOFer can say in English is "Hello, my name is Ricky." But he'll be on his own soon, since we're leaving the day after tomorrow to check out the beautiful sunny Whitsundays, a beach town about five hours down the coast. It's time for us to go, because I'm getting weird. Watching a granddaughter milk the cow and then Beryl separate the liquid into containers for distribution to all her kids and their kids and set some aside to make yogurt and then make bread and churn butter for dinner, I decided that I want to be a farm wife. I'd love to have a cow, whose enzyme-intact raw milk I would feed to my nine children, and the by-products of which I would turn into cheese in my free time. Wow.

Date: Wed, 17 Mar 2004 00:34:59 -0800 (PST)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: easy ecology for everyone

We are in lovely Crystal Waters Ecovillage, near the town of Maleny (just north of Brisbane), at the stunning home of the Michaels. We arrived here yesterday (our Monday), and have been gardening and harvesting rosellas, a flower that can be cooked down into perfumey juices and jams or dried for tea. This is a community of 640 acres divided into 512 acres of common land and eighty-three residential lots, each of which is owned by hippies who garden and don't appear to really have jobs. The village does not allow dogs, so the native fauna are free to thrive; there are kangaroos and wallabies all over the place. (Dan's afraid of the kangas and their potentially fatal kicks and was not pleased to see one as tall as me standing between us and our car this morning. It was really exciting in that uneventful wildlife encounter sort of way; we watched it watch us and scratch itself for a while before it bounded off.) We're learning about permaculture and biodynamic farming principles so we can be truly strange when we get back to the states. These are exactly the sorts of things Dan wants to apply his eco engineering degree to. Part of the reason he thought WWOOFing sounded fun is because he wants to further his education about waste management and other aspects of low-impact living. This house, for example, though its walls and floors are studded with beautiful tiles and the rooms are filled with immaculate wood furniture, has a drain system by which all the waste from the sinks (grey water) and toilets (black water) are delivered to a worm box, where creepy crawlies and sand filter the water so that it's suitable for gardening. It's their alternative to dumping everything

into massive chemical treatment plants. You can bet your ass we will employ some sort of similarly responsible system in our house.

It's dinner time, so I'm going to go be served organic pasta with pesto or falafel pitas and cottage cheese or some other type of treat for people who don't shave their armpits (which, lately, includes me). Organic farmers treat themselves so well. They live without the stress of competitive consumerism, make their own hours and rules, and eat amazing food. It seems as enviable as it is romantic.

Date: Wed, 19 Mar 2004 21:20:04 -0800 (PST)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: mulling over Maleny

We're helping the Michaels, who run a gardening supply business out of their garage, get their garden ready for the winter crops (yes, they have winter here, but it only gets down to about seventy degrees). If I haven't mentioned this yet, I'm moving here. We spent a little time in adorable Maleny, half an hour down the extremely winding and scenic road from Crystal Waters, because I needed to pick up some moisturizer (my skin is drying out from all the sun. I found my first major wrinkle last week, near my collarbone, and when I showed it to Dan and asked him if he still loved me, he said that of course he did – just not that part). Maleny – small, silent, clean – has a health food co-op, a bookstore, an ice cream store whose Hazelnut Roche has earned many well-deserved awards, and a record store, all next to views of the Glass House Mountains. It's so strange to sit on a park bench here and try to talk Dan into expatriating to a tiny town (I think this might actually not even be a town, but a shire, of all the quaint things) while I'm wearing \$30 panties left over from a happy life of heavily spending my father's money

but which, to be fair, left me with little but an impressive collection of \$30 panties in the end. I always thought I'd live in a nice apartment in walking or subway distance to theaters and museums or a big house outside city limits but inside a short commute to malls and careers and large, concentrated populations. Last night the Michaels had to go out for a previously-planned engagement, and left Dan and me to cook dinner for ourselves. What I never would have guessed is the coolest thing is walking out to the garden and picking some spinach and tomatoes and garlic and onions and throwing them into a pan of eggs you collected from the chickens in the backyard. So in addition to my cow, whose name, I've decided after hours of intense consideration, will be Jenny, I'm fantasizing about a chicken, or several chickens, at least one of which will probably be named Helen, though I'm still open to suggestions. And I will have a large vegetable garden, and plenty of fruit trees. I lay in the Michael's window seat earlier reading organic gardening magazines and realized I don't know anything about gardening. You have to grow some plants for mulch, and some to encourage insects, and certain amounts of others or they won't flourish. Or you have to pollinate them by hand, whatever that could entail, and you have to fertilize them and spray them. I've never grown anything but a patch of wheat grass in a tiny mosaic pot. And it died. Growers have their own body of knowledge, just like mechanics, and philosophers; it's completely overwhelming to an outsider.

Date: Mon, 22 Mar 2004 19:06:48 -0800 (PST)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: no more tricks, I'll build my house with bricks

It took us 13 hours to get to Hunter Valley wine country, just a few hours drive north of Sydney, on Sunday. We are staying on a large property called Earthways, the home of an architect who



specializes in ecologically friendly building. His house is a large two-story mud brick structure that is run almost entirely on solar energy (many conservationists only have solar water heaters, as implementing solar electricity is quite complicated and expensive). As I say, the house is made of mud. And it is awesome. It uses the same principles as adobe, costs little to build if you've got your own dirt and straw (and hearty Australian volunteers), and will, theoretically, last for hundreds of years. The ceilings are lovely wood, and all the walls are, naturally, the color of earth. The architect, Brian, lives here with his younger wife Sally and their two monster children, who are ten and twelve. The work is fun; today I was wetting down a big wall in an addition onto the house that isn't done yet, and the surface of the bricks started to liquefy and turn back to mud when I hosed it down extensively, and then I could rub it around and make it look "finished," or like one solid wall, instead of like the hundreds of stacked bricks it is. But the kids are the biggest brats I've ever met. They whine incessantly and yell and act like they're five, and are home schooled but refuse to do their work, so they just lie around or follow us about bitching all day. They are not good for people who are thinking about having kids soon (us) to be around (Dan says of them, "They make me want to kill people").

Still, I'm in love with the house. Everything in it is so natural that the whole structure seems to breathe. It seems to me that there can be few things more satisfying than living in a house you built with your own hands; it must be something.

Date: Wed, 24 Mar 2004 14:12:27-0800 (PST)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: people in mud houses shouldn't throw so much attitude

We narrowly escaped the drama at the mud brick residence and are now safe in Sydney. We spent one more evening at the dinner table with the family all screaming at each other at the same time, as usual, until someone finally got louder than the others or started crying. Earlier that same evening, Brian had suggested, based on our agreement that married women shouldn't have to change their last names, that I should marry him, which I was able to determine was the precise moment Sally stopped liking me. She also didn't like what I prepared for dinner, though it was a fabulous lentil soup creation, served with bread and a side of sweet potatoes, carrots, and apples steamed in butter and cinnamon. We had to pretend when we took our leave the next morning that it was with regret. But we did learn about building houses out of mud. I guess I had sort of naively believed, probably based on our experiences with the Watson family, that farm children are all well-adjusted and down-to-earth just by virtue of being farm children. So I also learned that a chicken coop and organic garden don't necessarily equal happiness.

Date: Sat, 3 Apr 2004 16:43:19 -0800

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: peace, love, and pesticide-free marijuana

We have, after spending some time off in Sydney and the Blue Mountains, found our new job in Byron Bay, the surfer-yippie-bohemian paradise of Australia. Here, the restaurants serve vegan food, and everyone is wearing board shorts, and smells like armpits (like us, since we've quit wearing deodorant). We've settled in at a 130-acre plantation run by a man I'll call Gabe, the craziest guy in the country. He talks like the pianist from the movie *Shine*, no kidding, only he is originally from Ireland, so his impossibly fast, disjointed sentences are even harder to understand. He has long grey hair and a long grey goatee. He scampers around his ramshackle

wooden abode in a sarong and rhinestone-studded sweatshirt, and he sparks a doobie approximately every twenty minutes. Evidently he makes jams once in a while, and he has a banana tree and some herbs, but it didn't take us long to figure out what he's really selling. When we got to his house on Friday, he put us up in a 1960s Dodge ambulance with a bed in the back of it which has been parked on his property since its retirement several decades ago. Saturday we worked in the yard a little bit, erecting barriers around his fledgling trees so his chickens wouldn't get to them. Even though he told us he wanted us to work three hours a day, he said to me, after two hours (which included a break), "Isn't it about knocking off time?" because time seems to go really fast when you're stoned out of your mind. Today when we woke up and came into the three-walled space that holds a couch and serves as the main room, he said that it was so nice out that we should go have a swim or visit the markets (that was the gist of it, anyway. There was a lot of gesturing and stuttering). He said we could juggle our hours around, and that we could make up our hours by working an extra hour tomorrow, then made me pick a card from a deck of goddesses (I drew the goddess of healing) and sent us on our way. I found this confusing, but Dan says he likes Gabe's math.

So we've been wandering around Byron Bay, that of the alternative lifestyles and impossibly high real estate prices, reading, and playing gin in the door-less kitchen while we cook dinner made with Gabe's groceries, which Gabe then doesn't eat. He hasn't eaten since we arrived, which at first we thought was weird, but then we noticed a sign in the kitchen that says "USE LSD," which explains more than one thing. Sometimes we play with the joey, as in, baby kangaroo, whose name is Joey, that Gabe keeps as a pet. And Gabe spends his days smoking pot, running suspicious errands, and stocking the fridge with loads of vanilla custard. Being an

organic farmer evidently doesn't have to be that complicated, or time-consuming, if only you've got the right crop.

Date: Wed, 7 Apr 2004 18:32:11 -0700 (PDT)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: holy Thursday

Today is Thursday, the one before Easter, and it poured all night last night, so was chilly, at least by Australian standards, when we woke up this morning. So Gabe gave us the day off. He also told us that we have to get the hell out by tomorrow because he's planning a rave or something and doesn't need any WWOOFers taking up valuable space, or witnessing whatever it is that's going to go on here. Luckily, we found a job several miles away with a yoga instructor, so we'll have a place to go. Her description in the WWOOF book says "accommodation in house," which we're excited about, since the ambulance is really musty and infested with mosquitoes and Huntsman spiders, which are harmless but bigger than a grown man's hand. And yesterday, I developed this really irritating itch on the back of my ear. After picking at it for a while, I showed it to Dan, who said, "Oh, that's a tick." This, evidently, is where I draw the line. I freaked out. Leeches on my neck in Borneo, fine. Gabe's desperately nutrient-imbalanced and so exceptionally stinky composting toilet, whatever. But you can die from things ticks transmit, I cried, alarmed, to Gabe. He gave me tea tree oil to put on it and claimed that the tick would die and then fall off. How long does it take to fall off? I asked him. He gestured meaninglessly. "Oh, you know." No, I don't know. An hour? A night? A month? I couldn't stand it anymore, so I had Dan remove it with tweezers, though now I'm afraid that he missed a piece and its head is forever imbedded in the back of my earlobe and will ultimately cause a deadly infection. An

hour later, I realized that the itch I'd been scratching on my stomach for days wasn't a little scab, as I thought it was, but another parasitic insect. Dan removed that one too. I'm watching the mark it left for developments of imminent disease.

On the brighter side, we made an excellent soup, as we're becoming quite adept at throwing whatever's available in someone else's garden and kitchen together into wholesome, flavorful dishes. We chopped and fried up an onion, the better part of a head of garlic, and two chilies with some cumin, thyme, and pepper, then added potatoes, grated carrots, and a cubed pumpkin and simmered it in a can of coconut cream until everything was squishy. Besides having time to expand our culinary horizons, we've also been able to rediscover the youthful delights of jumping on a trampoline. I spent a lot of time playing around on the huge spray-painted one in one of Gabe's fields, but I'm not doing that anymore, since it's probably where I got the ticks, and I'm terrified of them. I guess I'm not as rugged as I thought I was.

Date: Mon, 12 Apr 22:24:55 -0700 (PDT)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: life as a house

Erica Callan is a nice, quiet, lonely woman with no furniture. When we arrived, she invited us in and told us to have a seat, though, looking around the living room, I was quick to notice that there weren't any chairs, so we sat on the floor and talked. I thought maybe she'd pull a table out of a closet as a pre-dinner trick, but she didn't. When our meal was ready, she carried it out of the kitchen, spread it out all over the floor, and said, "Let's sit in our Zen circle here."

Whatever, lady. You sit in the Zen circle. I want a goddamn chair. We don't know what she does, because she doesn't go to work, and she does "at least" two hours of yoga a day, plus

meditation (she locked us out for a while while she rearranged her shrine), and she doesn't watch TV, or listen to music, or talk on the phone, so unless I break into song in the shower, it is absolutely silent. She has not one, but *two* flushing toilets, which, though wasteful, is exciting. She follows a diet based on her blood group that doesn't allow her to have meat, or peanuts, or much fat. Here is a nearly comprehensive list of what Erica can eat: lettuce, raw oats, cheese, pasta, and beetroot paste. At Erica's, everyone's intestines get a workout. I caught her soaking her bowl of raw oats before she ate it for breakfast the other day. That's what we eat for breakfast as well, since our other option is lettuce. "Should we be doing that?" I asked her. "Oh, no," she said. "You guys are in your twenties, so your digestive systems can handle more than mine." I told her that her confidence in my body's abilities was inspiring, but that my colon hurt, and so now we're soaking our oats too. But after dinner tonight (we're having beetroot and bok choy!), we'll be making our own food, since we're driving back up to Cairns. Our time in Oz is coming to an end; on Wednesday we're hopping a flight to New Zealand. It's getting cold there now, and the animals and insects aren't nearly as deadly, but the country has its own WWOOF organization, so we should be in for some adventure nonetheless.

In the meantime, we eat all our meals on the floor. And we play cards on the floor. And we sleep on a mattress on the floor. But it's nice to be inside again. Erica lives in a three-bedroom house on a property with a one-room house in the back, into which she's decided to move. We're helping her clean out the studio, which I want to inhabit. It's all timber, just a big room with a kitchen, nice bathroom, and a ladder up to a sort of crawl space that's big enough for a bed, which is what we're going to carry up there for Erica. My attraction to this place makes me realize that a house doesn't have to be big, like my parents' place, or even the mud place, or gorgeous, like the Michaels' place, to be comfortable, and it doesn't have to be

alarmingly rustic, like the Watsons' place or Crazy Gabe's place, to be natural. I hate to believe something so Zen, but I'm thinking that a living space just needs to feel right.

But Erica is doing something, in this kind of simplifying, that most of our WWOOF hosts have done, and that really appeals to me. She's going to rent out the big house she used to live in and just quietly occupy a small, comfortable space with some books and cooking utensils.

Erica's a little ascetic for me, in all aspects of her life, but it's wonderful that she can have so little and be so content. I'm getting closer to being there, and I feel more relaxed, and comfortable, even in these often less than relaxing and comforting scenarios.

Date: 14 Apr 2004 16:08:03 -0700 (PDT)

From: Nicole McClelland

Subject: farewell Australia, normal ideas about what constitutes a life

Up until we left for this trip, all I did was save for it and support Dan while he finished school.

When I was in college, graduating was the goal, and when I was done, earning enough to pay for vacation was the goal, and I don't know now, anymore than I knew then, what the goal will be when we get back. All our WWOOF hosts have been interesting, and unconventional in their

own ways, and some of them are better off than some people who work in offices and restaurants, and some of them aren't. Everyone needs, or at least hopes, to do something rewarding, and though we couldn't, and probably wouldn't, have guessed it, being around cows and vegetables and minimal commercialism made us happy. There are whole ways of living I'd never considered, and now I don't know how to incorporate what we've learned into real life.

Hide from civilization on a beautiful, self-sustaining farm? Live within a twenty minute drive of friends and bookstores and be part of society? Make cheese with store-bought milk in the pantry

of a city apartment? Dan wants to know where the middle ground is, and I don't know the answer. That's what you do when you're WWOOFing, I guess. You encounter people and ideas that shake up what you think you know. And then you take your \$50 souvenir book, and your understanding, and your indecision, and you keep going.



## Shades of Fine

From the window of a shaky, 18-passenger Sun Air plane, Fiji is exactly what romantics and adventurers alike imagine it to be: breathtaking. Its emerald, tree-covered islands emerge from an azure ocean, the flora tall and crowded atop lush, rolling hills. Rain dressed the forests in a gauzy mist the morning Dan and I flew into Taveuni, Fiji's "garden island," from Nadi, which we had reached by way of Auckland. A man with an enormous smile named Setoki met us as we stepped into the small shelter that served as the airport. He drove us to our resort a short ways down a road with jungle on one side and sea on the other.

Maravu Plantation accommodates no more than thirty guests in *buves*, or private thatched huts, amid fifty-six acres of coconut groves, rainforest and gardens across the street from the Pacific. When we pulled up to the structure that houses the dining room, front desk, and gift shop, eleven staff members were standing outside in the drizzle with two guitars. "*Bula*," they began singing as Dan and I opened the doors to the van. Welcome and hello. Our mothers rushed out from behind them. Mine grabbed hold of my pigtail braids, several inches longer than the last time she'd seen me. "Oh," she said. She started to cry, and threw her arms around me. My best friend, Erin, and Dan's father followed closely. They were all exhausted from the twenty hour trip from Ohio; they'd made it because Dan and I would be married in two days.

Four weeks before, I was lying on a bed in Fox Glacier, New Zealand, watching the hostel's evening presentation of *Schindler's List*, when I noticed an itch at the back of my neck. I scratched it periodically throughout the movie, hopped in the shower when it was over, and came out with bright red puffy lesions covering my shoulders, arms, hands, back, and face. I

called Dan into the small bathroom and he looked me over, saying “wow” a few times before going to get the camera.

“Goddamn it,” I whimpered, resisting the urge to claw at the itchy bumps. “What is it? What if it doesn’t go away before we get married?”

Dan frowned sympathetically at me. “I’m sure it will go away eventually.”

I leaned into the mirror close and inspected the splotches on my forehead and cheeks.

“Goddamn it.”

Dan pressed his lips together and watched me unhappily watch myself as I turned around and around in the reflective glass. He shrugged briskly and heavily the way he does when he can’t do anything to help. “How are you, Pal?” he asked.

I scowled. “I’m hardly fine.”

Since our arrival in Australia four months prior, Dan and I had been describing our emotional and physical well-being in degrees of fine. The forecasters there report the weather according to fineness; when they stand in front of the big weather map on the news, often cities are labeled, rather than with a little sun or small picture of a thunderstorm, by a neat adjective. The weather is expressed the same way in the newspapers: it’s mostly fine in Darwin (there are rare patches of fog), partly fine in Perth (there are some remaining coastal showers), becoming fine in Brisbane (strong southeasterlies are dying down), mainly fine in Cairns (showers are developing toward midday), and fine in Sydney (sunny, and the winds are easing). A couple we stayed with in Queensland began arguing, upon our mention of it, over the accuracy of the word. He was a Californian, originally, and thought that the meteorologists should just say what they bloody well meant, like that it was raining, or it wasn’t. She was an Aussie who didn’t like Americans who thought everyone should do things their way. Could we, she wanted to know,

think of one single more appropriate word in the English language to express an ideal atmosphere?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, whose offices are in London, fine has meant “Of the weather, a day, etc.: In which the sky is bright or comparatively free from cloud” since the eighteenth century. But the only definitions of the word in my *Merriam-Webster’s 10<sup>th</sup> edition Collegiate Dictionary*, whose offices are in Massachusetts, that could possibly relate to weather are “superior” or “excellent.” The Crown Colony’s usage may have been novel and somewhat useless to us (does “somewhat fine” call for a sweater?), but it’s wonderful to be in a place where the climate is described entirely by the extent of its loveliness.

In fact, I’d begged Dan to settle permanently with me in nearly every town we passed in the country. Driving through long stretches of gradually developing coast, I tried to convince him that trading in our savings for a deed was a wise investment: we didn’t have any property or significant material belongings in America yet, our money was worth more in Australia, and that waterfront land, of which there is a finite amount on the planet, wouldn’t be available forever. Dan, who prefers thinking things through and acting rationally, didn’t find me particularly persuasive. He wasn’t ready to sink everything we had into owning a piece of foreign soil, and he wasn’t ready to leave home forever. “Everyone we know is in the States,” he said. “Our families are in the States.” We may have been moving to a new state when we got back, but at least we would be only a relatively cheap plane ticket away.

I shrugged. “We can make new families,” I said.

I wasn’t fine in the Fox Glacier bathroom because my skin was blemished and on fire. But I wasn’t fine in the Fox Glacier bathroom, too, because it was almost time to go home. A year and a half before we’d left, my father left my mother for a couple of mistresses and then, in

a bit of unhappy timing, was exposed as a criminal. Slowly, the facade of my parents' upstanding, cheerful, successful world began to crumble around them as they separated and banks seized their possessions. Though I had graduated from college, I didn't have any real career desires or plans. I worked twelve hour days at multiple jobs saving for our trip and paying off loans my father had taken out in my name but could no longer pay himself. I knew my in-laws only well enough to know that they shared little common ground with their son and me and that my interactions with them were rarely easy. I hadn't been fine since my family had fallen apart and my childish, naïve security had made way for new questions about where I'd come from and inevitable questions about where my life was going. Dan and I wanted to travel, sure; we were avid scuba divers and explorers. But I was also running away. My mother's emails about being fifty and penniless and trying to find a place to live weren't so real across ten thousand miles. I was sorry to hear about the impending disasters that had long filled me with a heartbreaking powerlessness to help my parents, and I felt a little like a deserter, but for the six months we were flitting around Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and South Pacific islands, I couldn't be a shoulder to cry on. There was nothing I could do for them, and the only thing I had to do for myself was find the next bed and bowl of Pad Thai.

Now, sitting in the dining room of a Fijian resort, my rash having cleared up as mysteriously as it had come, I was overwhelmed simply by the presence of people I knew and loved. Though I had never been lonely while Dan and I interacted with only strangers over the months, I felt instantly the difference of the comfort and ease of old friends. We all sat at a polished wood table, intensely green jungle beyond the mostly wall-less wood and bamboo structure around us, talking about haircuts, laughing at the inefficiencies of island airlines,

looking carefully at one another as though through a fog. Dan smiled patiently while his mother doted on him. Erin and I watched the staff members who collected a few hermit crabs from a large wooden bowl in the corner of the room and set them to racing on the floor.

Dan and I were shown to our room, a personal deluxe honeymoon *bure*, a short walk through palm trees across a luxuriant lawn. A hammock, slung from the beams of the overhang, stretched across an edge of our front porch. We left our flip-flops at the door. Inside, the coffee table of the sitting room was set with champagne and fresh fruit. To the left was another room containing our four-poster canopied bed. Straight through, past the writing desk and leather lounge chairs, was the bathroom. I dropped my bag and ran into it, locating on the far right end the door to one of the reasons we'd come here: the private open-air courtyard. The wooden deck was surrounded by stone walls, a showering platform built into one of them. Set into the other end of the deck was a concrete and tile hot tub that could seat several people. Water from an unseen source cascaded down a pile of stones into it in a gentle waterfall. I jumped up and down, pleased that Dan and I could share this gorgeous, concealed space, and excited to thrill Erin and my mother with the enjoyment of it as well.

In the early evening, the Maravu Band Boys, four Fijian men in *sulus* with ukuleles and guitars whose CD was in our room for our listening pleasure, spread a sizeable straw mat out on the floor of the dining room and prepared a batch of kava in an enormous wooden bowl with legs. Our sixsome resumed our places around a nearby table and watched as Saimone, a stout native with a broad, dark face and childish chubby cheeks, mixed the powdered root of *Piper methysticum*, a type of pepper plant, with water until the liquid turned the color of mud. The Band Boys took turns drinking from half a coconut shell, clapping once before each swig from the shared receptacle and three times after, and encouraged us to join them and do the same.

Believers claim that kava relieves anxiety and depression and facilitates calm and peaceful thinking, but we still felt little but tingling lips and a light buzz after our third round.

We rejoined Dan's parents, who weren't ready to imbibe unappetizing, unknown substances, at the table. I talked with my mother and Erin, whose voices I'd missed, whose voices meant something, voices that had, throughout our history, made me laugh, or punch things, and I began to feel effusively, almost embarrassingly affectionate toward them. Dan had understood that he sometimes needed to be with his loved ones – not to just know them, but to look at and touch them – when he was resisting my urgings to hastily emigrate. I hadn't realized it, or admitted it, until Erin and I stood up to get a bottle of wine, and for a moment we faced each other squarely, her shorter, thickset frame across from my tall slender one, for the first time in half a year. I reached my arms out and around her and pressed our torsos together. "It's so good to see you," I said, falling well short of expressing my sentiment, which was that no two people would ever relate quite the same as we two people for as long as people went on being friends. We visited as the band intermittently played, tuned, and chatted. We sat in the darkened room and drank Shiraz and sporadically partook in the kava until someone softly beat the *lali* drum, and dinner was served.

The next morning, Erin, Dan, my mother, and I were on a dive boat speeding toward Somosomo Strait at eight a.m., watching the sand and trees that we rushed past. "It's good to be diving with you again, little girl," my mother said, and Erin nodded in agreement and smiled at me.

We moored at the site, where we geared up and jumped into the eighty-degree water. The Great White Wall is a stunning vertical mass of soft coral, almost all of it colored the palest lavender. We descended to ninety feet and swam along the drop, the lightly undulating whitish

blanket interrupted now and then by orange, red, and green fan coral, the reef teeming with bright fish big and small, our eyes wide behind our masks.

We filed through a tunnel, and I inverted myself to look behind me, bending at the waist until I was upside down, facing backwards. Erin, then my mother, emerged from the swimthrough, giving me emphatic OK's with their thumbs and forefingers. Divers have a multitude of underwater signs, holding up fingers to indicate how many bars of air are left in their tanks, giving thumbs up when it's time to ascend, moving their horizontal forearm back and forth in front of their chest to suggest maintaining the current depth. Over the course of several trips, I had developed my own languages with the divers I was with now. I'd seen my mother take her regulator out of her mouth and puff her cheeks up at me when she spotted a pufferfish in Mexico. A few minutes after we'd entered the water here, I'd made a fist with the three middle fingers of my right hand, sticking the outside fingers out, put my left palm on the back of my right hand, wrapped my fingers over the closed fist, and wiggled the free thumb and pinky of my bottom hand. Then I'd pointed a little behind me and to my right. *There's a turtle over there.* After we'd been underwater the better part of an hour, we congregated fifteen feet below the surface to let the nitrogen dissolve out of our systems and explored the area where the reef plateaued. Erin cocked her pointer finger to bid me come near. When I kicked over to her, she pressed her palms together, her fingers pointing down, in front of her crotch. She pushed her hands down, and then away from each other and out from between her legs. *I'm peeing on you.* I laughed through my regulator, the sound louder but familiar in my pressurized ears.

Back on board, the captain, Harry, an older Fijian with a round belly, started the boat up and told us we were going to a nearby beach to pass the time we needed between dives.

“Can’t you go any faster?” Erin, teasing, shouted over the noise of the wind and the motor after two minutes.

“You want to drive?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure!” she said. Harry laughed, but I saw the way Erin watched him, expectantly waiting for him to step aside and give up the steering wheel. She was never held back, as most people are, from trying something, from doing anything, by the fear of looking stupid. Harry went back to concentrating on where he was going, so Erin turned her attention back to us, but I knew she wasn’t bluffing. I’d seen her take the wheel of an enormous vessel from a captain who had foolishly offered it to her as a joke two years earlier in Grand Cayman.

We drank hot chocolate and ate pineapple on a deserted beach. After we’d chatted with them for awhile, Harry and our divemaster, Paul, packed up the fruit and thermos and powdered drink mix and returned to the boat we’d anchored fifteen feet from the shore. We stayed on the beach, waiting out the rest of our surface interval. My mother and Dan gushed in guileless wonder over the nudibranchs, unicornfish, pipefish they’d seen on the reef. I sat on the hot sand, baking in the neoprene I’d left on for protection from the sun, listening to my mother exclaim about the rare find of the day, the burgundy leaf scorpionfish, to my equally endearingly earnest future husband, as Erin practiced cartwheels on the sand.

I woke up the next morning at dawn, and, after kissing Dan lightly enough that he wouldn’t wake up, ran over to my mother and Erin’s *bure* to hang out before breakfast. We eventually met Dan and his parents in the dining room for muffins, omelets, papaya juice, and fruit. Erin and I ate quickly because we were scheduled to get massages before we would congregate in her room to get ready. I walked back to my *bure* to brush my teeth before my fifty minute rub, passing Laite, a slight, smiling housekeeper, on the way.



“What are you going to do today, Nicole?” she asked.

“Well,” I said. I laughed a little. “I’m getting married today.”

We had chosen to be married at Tavoro Falls in Bouma National Heritage Park. Erin, my mother, and I got dressed and fussed with our hair and danced around their *bure* with a couple of housekeeping girls, who brought me a colorful tropical bouquet and a white flower to place behind my ear, until someone came to tell us that the vehicles were ready to go. I emerged from the *bure* in a simple long white dress, my skin and hair shining with coconut massage oil, and we piled into the van, we girls in one, Dan and his parents in another.

Four men dressed as warriors, stripped to banana leaves around their waists and carrying large wooden war clubs, were waiting for us as we pulled up to the mouth of the trail into the park. Dan and I, who hadn’t seen each other all morning, embraced and kissed to the disappointed groans of our guests, who wanted us to wait until the climactic prompt during the ceremony. We held hands as we walked twenty minutes down a jungle path beset by palms and thick ferns and bushes. We talked about nothing in particular with the easy contentment that characterized our exchanges, the quiet respect and cohesion that had kept us virtually without quarrel for two years, as on any other day. Dan wore the white linen collared shirt that I’d gotten him for the occasion, which was, I realized now, a little too big. He was uniquely – and unlike me – entirely without vanity or pretensions, and would’ve been happy to wear swim trunks had I not pointed out to him that it would make his mother cry. To her chagrin, I was sure, and with utter disregard for both of our respectable upbringings, his tattered brown leather and cork sandals poked out from under the ankles of his khaki pants. “You look nice, Buddy,” I told him, and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of my hand.

We weren't religious, but rumor had it the only legal way to be married in Fiji was the Christian way; none of those hip judges or matrimony-certified best friends officiating here. The priest, who wore the ubiquitous unisex wraparound skirt in what looked like grey flannel, walked along with the rest of the parade. "Where is the father?" he asked my mother.

She regarded him steadily. He probably wondered why she stared him down, when really she was just trying to figure out what to say. She considered, she told me later, telling him that my father had left her against her will, and so hadn't been invited because it was too hard for her to see him. She considered saying that he was dead, which she did sometimes, and often told me she wished were true, though she knew he was still one of my best friends. She refused to ever speak to or see him again because she had to, because she would never get over what he had done, would never find someone to take his place and completely fill the deep, bitter void that he had left. I had been stunned, and furious, when my father destroyed my family, and though I'd berated him, and tried to hate him, for bringing so much pain into our lives, nothing changed the fact that he had been a loving, supportive father to me. I ultimately accepted that I had been, as I was now, unable to stop missing him. I was disappointed that he wasn't at my wedding, in which we had both always imagined him participating. But my mother had had to cut my father out of her life as a matter of survival, and I had no choice but to respect her wishes. "He's not here," she said.

The path opened into a clearing where seven men, women, and children, in best Sunday skirts all, stood singing hymns in a language we didn't understand. A wide, shallow pool spread around the base of the waterfall. A wooden arch covered in dark green leaves and pink and red flowers had been erected at the edge of the water, several dozen yards from where water gushed loudly and heavily into the basin from a cliff eighty feet above. We steeped our ankles in the

water and stood underneath the floral arrangement, and there, with sweat and flush on our faces and no one but my mother, Erin, and a few curious locals in my party and Dan's parents in his, we got married.

I told my father once, just a little over a year before, that people were expendable. I had an idea, based perhaps on a penchant for self-reliance and militant independence, that no matter who the people in my life were, I would always be able to find new people, just as good people, if I needed to. I had youthful aloofness informing my theory, and it was highly ignorant; I had never tried to permanently leave anyone who was a critical part of my life before. Evidently, I still wanted to believe in this sort of robotic, invulnerable autonomy as I'd been recently telling Dan that we could replace our families like goldfish, or broken dishes, if we expatriated. The irony didn't strike me until later that I was, of course, grossly contradicting my own conviction in even speaking to, much less still adoring, my father, who was, by all lawful and moral standards, an asshole. And in planning to legally bind myself to one particular man until I died. And in rushing to internet cafés in Chiang Mai so I could get news to and from my loved ones. Though I'd missed them, I hadn't realized that what made it bearable was that I knew it would only be so long before we were reunited. As we cut through orange and chocolate layers of cake in the dining room hours after the service, our guests and a few staff members teary-eyed from the personal vows we exchanged at the table since our priest had forgotten to let us recite them during the ceremony, I wondered how devastated I would be if I knew I was never going to see them again, how long it would take before I went a whole day without being acutely aware of the loss of relationships I'd spent much of my life cultivating, that I'd clung to because they were irreplaceable, imperative.

Though we did little but dive, lie around the pool, eat, and visit for the next four days, they flew past. The evening before we left, Dan's parents opted to go on the sunset boat ride the resort offered to any of its guests who were interested. We remaining four decided to climb up the long, steep path at one corner of the resort that led to a cliff top ocean view. We crested the wide, grassy plateau an hour or so before dusk. Erin and I had earlier discovered a plant that looked like a cross between a fern and cannabis, the fringed leaves of which wilted defensively when touched, and we took to pestering the clusters of them that hedged the hilltop. My mother snapped pictures while Dan tried to open a coconut he found on the ground with nothing but his bare hands, naturally-occurring tools, and some ingenuity. A hammock hung between two of the many tall palms that dotted the landscape, and Erin and I settled into it, our heads at either end, our legs slung across each other's. My mother came over near us and sat on the ground, and we looked for the outlying islands, and felt the breeze.

"Look at the water," I said. From such height, the waves appeared still, like the wind-blown ridges on a wide expanse of blue sand. "It looks like a desert."

I reminded Erin, apparently, of some America lyrics. "The ocean is a desert with its life underground, and a perfect disguise above," she sang. I joined her, and we lay swinging in the hammock singing "A Horse with No Name" while my mother cheered on Dan, who had finally overcome the obstacle of the coconut shell by beating it against a tree. He held it up triumphantly with his head tilted back, the liquid pouring into his open mouth. We laughed, and clapped, and drank coconut juice, and loafed. We realized at twilight that we had somehow missed the sunset, but we didn't care.

After breakfast on the last day, we sat quietly around the dining room with our luggage. We watched an attractive, garrulous staffer named Albert make coconut milk and palm leaf purses in the middle of the floor. We waited for lunch and then, after, for our ride.

Six resort employees, two with guitars, gathered around the gravel drive, preparing to see us off. The airport van arrived. Setoki began strumming a guitar, and the group clapped leisurely as they started a slow, solemn song. Another staff member told me that *isa* is a sound of fondness, made for a cherished memory, or longing. She translated the words.

*Isa isa, you are my only treasure*

*Must you leave me, so lonely and forsaken?*

*As the roses will miss the sun at dawning*

*Every moment my heart for you is yearning*

Several women walked around, tying voluptuous leis around the guests' necks. My mother, Erin, and I joked about the lack of amenities at the airport, and the two staffers playfully swatting at each other as they sang, while we tried not to cry.

*Isa isa, my heart was filled with pleasure*

*From the moment I heard your tender greeting*

*'Mid the sunshine, we spent the hours together*

*Now, so swiftly, those happy hours are ending*

In our fragrant necklaces, we stood, Dan's parents unsmiling because they were tired and out six thousand dollars for a vacation they hadn't wanted to take because their eccentric new daughter-in-law had insisted on getting married abroad, my mother depressed at the prospect of going back to a minimum-wage-earning, more solitary life, Erin and I aware that we wouldn't

spend that much time together again for a long time. I wished my father were there. I wished he and my mother were still taking care of one another, that I could make Erin relocate with us.

*O'er the ocean, your island home is calling*

*Happy country where roses bloom in splendor*

*O, if I could but journey there beside you*

*Then forever my heart would sing with rapture*

Our relationships weren't going to be that simple. My father hadn't been at our wedding, and wouldn't be at our reception in the States either, but I'd see him before the party, and afterward. Dan and I would continue to find a way to bridge the space between broken families and long-distance-living, strike a balance between who we were and who our parents needed us to be, between moving to wherever our careers took us and flying back home, between each other's needs, Dan perhaps sacrificing a better job in a city I couldn't find work in, I accepting that he would generally wear holey flannels to special occasions. I knew we would miss everyone in the gaps between Christmas and birthdays. But I knew we could move on with our life, emotionally, and even physically, while still keeping them in it.

Dan, sensing potential tears, put his hand on my forearm. "How are you, Pal?" he asked.

I smiled at him. "Fine," I said. I nodded. "I'm fine."

The driver dropped us off at the airport, and took pictures of our group standing together before handing us back our cameras and pulling away. We sat close on plain wooden benches, talking sometimes, and not, while we waited for the unsteady plane that would take us back toward our lives.

## Vita

Nicole McClelland received her B.A. in English and Psychology from The Ohio State University in 2002. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Orion* magazine and *The Dos Passos Review*, and in the anthology *Are We Feeling Better Yet?: Women's Encounters with Healthcare in America*.