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## The Captain

I was with Dora. We were in love. Things were cheap and plentiful and the money from the insurance was going to last us forever. We were in Thailand then Laos then Vietnam then Cambodia then Burma then Malaysia, though not necessarily in that particular order, I don't think. Cities, villages, provincial hamlets. The jungle, the sea, the mountains, the rivers. We looked at temples and saw traditional dancing and tried new foods and petted baby elephants and gave money to beggars and went to a crocodile farm and snorkelled with fishes and shopped in bazaars and haggled with the natives and then we went back to wherever we were staying that night – bungalow, hotel, resort, tent – to fuck with great enthusiastic happiness, to tremble in the tropical dew. Tourism as aphrodisiac; travel as foreplay. First World love, Third World magic. Sunsets, sunrises, stars up in the firmament, waves lapping at the shore. That kind of thing.

There were expats and backpackers and slum children and riverboat pilots and Vietnam War veterans. A middle-aged Scottish widow ran a private monkey sanctuary from her backyard in some generic suburb. Gibbons and macaques ate rice cakes from her hands, swung from her trees, hurled faecal discs at night against the windows of her mansion. She said it was an expression of their trauma and abuse at the hands of poachers and smugglers. We thought it was an expression of something else, namely their hostility towards the woman and her suburban house. We lay in her spare bedroom and listened to the irregular thudding on her windows and that lunatic howling out in the dark and we wondered if the Scottish widow believed that we had needed rescuing too.

We bought pills from a handsome double amputee who got around on a skateboard, propelling himself with his hands down the street as if he were a surfer heading out to catch a wave. He claimed to have learned how to speak English from listening to the BBC World Service and I believed him. He had perfect elocution. He counted out his pills and then counted out our money as if reading the news to the Empire, before paddling down the street into the subtropical night, the wheels of his skateboard trilling against the asphalt. He had one of the most beautiful faces I had ever seen. What a man, I thought, as he disappeared around the corner. What an inspiration. I wanted to be his friend. I wanted to know more about him. I wanted more of that elocution, more of that beautiful face. I wished that our relationship had been more than transactional, which was not an uncommon

feeling for me at the time. Money was a solution that always became a problem. It was constantly bringing us into contact with such wonderful people only to immediately get in the way.

There was a masseuse who came back with us one night to a room overlooking some giant, filthy river. We flopped on the sheets while the river barges lowed beyond the pane and the masseuse attended to both of us simultaneously with startling ambidexterity. It both was and was not the kind of massage that either of us had expected. Pay attention, Dora turned to me and said. This is how you treat a woman, she said, closing her eyes. I take it all back, she said. This was a wonderful idea. She frowned and expelled a long whistling breath and pushed up her hips with yogic concentration and it occurred to me then that she might be serious – that I really should pay attention to what the masseuse was doing to my fiancée – but I was too distracted by the manual miracles being performed by the masseuse's other hand. See you next time, the masseuse said in English before she left, stuffing the money into a fanny pack and leaving us her business card, and afterwards Dora sat naked on a stool and read Anna Karenina out loud for a while and I remember thinking, yes, I remember thinking, all right, I remember looking up at the geckos suspended upside down on the ceiling, all of them regarding me with their beady and lidless and delicately jellied eyes, and I remember feeling at that moment as if I were in the warm, bright centre of heaven.

The Scottish widow, the double amputee, the ambidextrous masseuse: maybe that was one night instead of three. Or maybe that was three countries instead of one. But I suppose that it didn't matter then so it doesn't really matter now.

Listen, I said. I think I'm about to have an epiphany.

Be quiet, Dora said. I'm reading.

I'm serious, I said. I think I'm about to have a profound experience.

I know, Dora said. Didn't I tell you? This book is really very good.

No, I said. I'm not talking about the Tolstoy. I'm talking about me. I'm talking about us. I feel like we're on the cusp of something.

Stop, she said. You're being a jerk. I hate it when you interrupt me. And I hate it when you talk like that. I really don't like it at all.

Something's about to happen, I said.

Something's always about to happen, she said. Something just happened. That woman was incredible. We really should do that again. I feel like I'm still vibrating.

You think I'm joking, I said. You always think I'm joking. Why is that?

Because you're not a serious person, Dora said. Because neither of us has ever been a serious person. Look at us. This is not a serious situation. Sometimes I think that we're incapable of seriousness.

Hey, I said. That is not very nice.

Dora shrugged. She continued reading. Vronsky was doing something and Anna was doing something in response. I'd lost track of the story weeks ago, but didn't have the heart to tell Dora. I

also hated the way she read aloud – nasal and uninflected and careless with her vowels – but I didn't have the heart to tell her that either. Tolstoy didn't stand a chance; she made him sound like a tone-deaf Appalachian with a sinus condition. But I had learned long ago that there were some things you best keep to yourself and that the keeping of those things was somehow important, was some important variety of love.

Have we been here before? I said. I feel like we've been here before.

Dora kept reading.

Enough, I said. No more Tolstoy. Let's talk.

No. She absent-mindedly worried her pubic hair and peered at me lying on the bed. Not now. We're just getting to the best part.

I'm trying to be serious now. Have we been here before?

Dora sighed, looked around the room.

I haven't been here before, she said. Nope. Not me. But maybe you have.

What do you mean?

What do I mean? Jesus. Do I really have to spell it out for you?

Yes, I said. Please. I'm lost without your explanations. That is one of the things that I mean when I say that I love you.

Well, Dora said. Her entire face had become a gigantic eyeball staring at me. Well, you're from here, you jerk.

It was clear that we were having an important disagreement about what was meant by the word 'here'. I rolled off the bed and went to stand by the window. Things were twinkling out there in the dark: stars, boats, headlights, buildings. The moon was glowing so bright, so close to my face, that I thought I could feel its refracted solar heat.

Phnom Penh? I said hopefully. Bangkok? Kuala Lumpur? Saigon? I really don't remember any more.

You're unbelievable. She put down the Tolstoy and started putting on her clothes. You make me sick sometimes, you really do.

The next morning Dora was gone. Surprise, surprise, I thought, but I was lying to myself a little, I wasn't surprised at all. She had taken half of the money but was kind enough to leave me a note. She also left me her engagement ring.

You were right, the note said in her characteristic scrawl. Something was about to happen. And now it has. I've had enough. I'm done. I'm getting off this sinking pleasure cruise. This is the way of disaster and doom. We are both of us too old for this shit. Good luck with everything. AND JESUS CHRIST FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS GOOD AND HOLY GET THEE TO A THERAPIST ASAP. You need help.

What did she know about good, about holy? I wondered. But I wasn't angry. I felt OK. I would have done the same. Good for you, I thought, reading and rereading her note. Good for you, Dora, I always knew you had it in you. I admired her sudden sense of initiative, her active participation in her fate. I would have left me too and had been wondering of late why Dora even bothered sticking around. To be honest, I was beginning to lose a little respect for Dora with each day she passed in my company. I was beginning to lose a little respect for myself, too, with each day that I passed with the same, but then again I really had little choice in the matter. I didn't have the luxury. I was the sinking pleasure cruise – as Dora had so wonderfully put it – or, at the very least, its hapless and inattentive captain. Not for me the lifeboat, the freezing Atlantic, the sharks in the water, the rescue team. I was going to have to go down with that fucker no matter what.

There was a maid vacuuming the floor. She kept running the nozzle over the same stretch of discoloured sideboard over and over again. She had headphones on and didn't seem to see me. I stood naked behind her for a while, waiting for her to notice me, feeling like a creep.

Hey, I said. Hey, hey.

She eventually turned around. She looked at me with a blank expression before resuming her vacuuming. My nudity seemed to make no impression upon her. I found myself looking down, running my hands over my body, to make sure that I hadn't accidentally clothed myself in the interim.

Hey, I said again, tapping her on the shoulder. Hey, will you please stop that? Some of us are trying to think over here.

No English, she said, waving her hands at me. I couldn't tell if it was an admission or an injunction. She glanced at my penis with mild irritation and then resumed her vacuuming again.

I got dressed and packed my bags. I walked down steps. There was an old man chain-smoking behind a counter who said that I owed him money. He held up my passport and said that he wouldn't give it back to me unless I gave him some money. I didn't know about any of that. I didn't know that I had given anybody my passport. But I was glad that somebody else had been taking care of it for me. And so I gave him some money and signed some papers and took back my passport and then stepped out into a city whose name I still couldn't seem to recall. I looked hopefully at the street signs, at the baroque fonts around me, as if I'd suddenly become some competent linguist, but this only made things worse. I really had no idea where I was, except that it was a sweltering Asian country with a graphically crazy alphabet. Dora had said that I was from here, I suddenly remembered, and I wondered what she'd meant by that. It didn't look like any place that I might be from; it only looked like a place that I would forever be going to.

Excuse me, I said to the first person that walked by, a beautiful woman in a business suit flanked by two handsome young children.

Please, I said. I think I need your help.

The woman shook her head and covered her children's eyes.

No! she said in English, drawing her children close and quickly pushing past me. No, no, no, no, no!

Later that morning I stumbled across a plaza before some gargantuan government building where people had gathered en masse. Hundreds of people were waving their arms and jumping up and down and then falling to the ground in unison while a certain strand of early-nineties techno blared in the upper air and a spry, muscular woman yelled at them from a makeshift stage. I thought it was a political rally at first and then I thought it might be a concert and then I thought it might be a religious tent revival of some kind, but one without any tents. I stationed myself beneath a tree on the plaza's perimeter and watched them for a while. I couldn't really understand what was happening in front of me. I was seeing things without seeing things. This was hardly a new sensation, of course, though what was new was that Dora wasn't there to make sense of it for me. What I'd said the previous evening was true – I was lost without her explanations – and I suddenly missed Dora with a force surprising even to myself. I thought I might begin to weep. This was hardly a new sensation either. It was such an old sensation, in fact, and such a persistent one, that I was afraid that it was becoming a condition. I was always, in those days, on the verge of unaccountable tears, in the grip of a blinding hysteria, full of strong feelings I couldn't name and, to make things worse, there was a man declaiming what I felt were some rather insensitive and unhelpful sentiments from the heavens, his smooth baritone voice issuing God-like from that thicket of throbbing techno bass lines concatenating in the atmosphere:

What is love?

Baby, don't hurt me

Don't hurt me

No more

No kidding, I thought, brushing my hands across my cheeks, but then somehow I suddenly figured it all out. I found that I didn't need Dora's help, after all. I was entirely capable of insights and revelations on my own and I sat there for a while marvelling at my new-found self-reliance as if I'd suddenly sprouted a useful extra limb. The people before me were exercising. They were doing aerobics. They were lifting their knees, clapping their hands, twirling around and punching the humid morning air, while the woman onstage led them by example and encouraged them all in a language I couldn't understand.

So I got up to join them. I felt I needed the exercise. Some self-improvement couldn't hurt, I thought. I left my bags under the tree and went to join the crowd: middle-aged housewives, elderly people, day labourers and maids and teenagers in shimmering sportswear, all moving in synchrony, faces flushed with happiness in their communal exertions. The sun rose slowly over the government building as if summoned by their aerobic supplications. I tried to follow the woman onstage, the people around me, but found that I couldn't keep up. I felt heavy, clumsy, neurologically scrambled. I was always a quarter-step, a half-step, a full-step behind, and no sooner had I managed to catch up than I found myself immediately left behind once again by those around me, eating their awesome aerobic dust. I was making a spectacle of myself, I felt, despite my better intentions, and it occurred to me then, while I tried to keep up with the hale and healthy jigging around me, that this was not only a condition specific to the activity before me but also, in all probability, a more general problem in my life. People were snickering, glancing my way every so often with amusement and alarm. I was afraid that my efforts might be interpreted as disrespectfully ironic, culturally insensitive, and so I tried to arrange my sweaty face into a tableau of sincerity and concentration that would somehow argue against any such misinterpretation. A little girl in a purple velour tracksuit kept looking at me with aggressive condescension. She couldn't have been more than six or seven years old. She effortlessly executed the required manoeuvres, manoeuvres with which I was clearly having terrible difficulty, while managing to hold on her small and pretty and vindictive face a look of grave and obnoxious accusation. *Fuck off, little girl, mind your own business*, I would have mouthed in a former life, the kind of life that I'd been leading just a few days ago – just the previous day, even – but my new-found restraint in the face of her nymph condescension made me feel like things might really be changing after all. I smiled at her. I tried to ignore her, tried to focus on the task at hand,

that task being a complicated series of alternating air punches that ended with a clap and a pirouette and a lift of each knee. I thought that Dora – wherever she was now – would have been proud of me. I got into it, I really did, and as the sun crested over the top of the government building I felt that I was getting the hang of things. I felt like I was moulting out of my skin, sloughing something off. I was going native, in my way, losing myself in the crowd. I wanted to stay there in that plaza exercising with those people forever. But soon enough the music stopped and the woman onstage ceased yelling directives at us and the people around me began to towel off their faces and gather their bags and disperse. I stood there breathing heavily, arms akimbo, watching them leave, squinting at the preternatural glare of the new day's sun. MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR, the sign on the government building declared in English, and I wondered what that meant. I wondered what that was. An old man humping a duffel bag smiled and gave me two thumbs up as he walked past, and I did the same. And I felt that between us had passed, for a split second, a wonderful mutual understanding, a miracle of reciprocity, and I wanted to embrace him in my happiness.

Humanism lives! I thought. That stuff is really real.

The woman onstage was standing before me, shaking a plastic bucket of money at me with great solemnity.

You have to pay, she said. Nothing is free.

Oh, I said. Oh, I see.

I gave her all of the change I had in my pockets. I would have given her more, to be honest. I felt that I couldn't give her enough, thank her enough. But when I looked in that bucket and saw the mess of currency inside I suddenly became distracted by the fact that the money seemed to be telling me exactly where I was.

Thailand? I said. Am I in Thailand?

The woman blinked at me.

I know it's a strange question, I said, laughing. But I really need to know.

She reached into the bucket and picked out a token of lint that I had accidentally deposited along with my change. She flicked it with a look of mild disgust, shook her head and walked away.

I went back to get my bags. But I couldn't seem to find them. I couldn't remember where I'd left them. I must have walked around the tree-lined boundaries of that plaza a dozen times that morning, looking for my bags. Men and women in tan and beige uniforms were streaming off city buses, walking across the plaza, entering the Ministry of the Interior. Oh well, I thought. Life can be like this sometimes. You get one thing only to lose everything else. I felt so good from the exercise that I decided I wasn't going to panic or cry about it. For a moment, I thought I saw Dora across the plaza, but when I approached her I saw that it was just a woman with a camera taking pictures of the place. I waved at her anyway. She frowned, took my picture and beat a hasty retreat.

After a while, I noticed a group of teenagers stationed beneath one of the trees, laughing at me, pointing in my direction. Every time I passed they seemed to fall silent, only to snicker and titter and laugh once more as soon as they thought I was out of earshot. I circumnavigated the plaza a few more times, looking for my bags, until I finally couldn't take it any more. I approached the teenagers – a

girl and three boys, one of whom seemed to be doing a series of impressive one-handed pull-ups from a tree branch – and stood before them for a while.

Excuse me, I said. Do you guys speak English? Have you guys seen my bags? I'm looking for my bags.

Confusion briefly passed over their faces. They looked at one another, said some things in their language, laughed among themselves once more. The boy did a few more pull-ups and then lowered himself back down to the ground. The girl stood up, smiled at me and offered her hand. But when I reached out to take it I noticed that she wasn't interested in a handshake. She was pointing a switchblade at me. For a ludicrous moment I thought that she might be offering it to me but then I saw that her male colleagues had surrounded me now.

I had made a terrible mistake.

They weren't teenagers.

They were much older than I'd initially assumed.

We are very sorry, the woman said, smiling. Our English is not very good. We did not expect to have to use it. We did not think you were a tourist. We did not know you were a foreigner.

Oh, I said.

You are looking for your bags, yes? You would like them back?

Yes, I said. Do you have them?

We don't know, she said. Maybe we have them, maybe we don't. We will have to see. Maybe you can come with us. Maybe we can look for your bags together.

She gently tapped the flat of her switchblade against my abdomen. One of the men put an arm around my shoulders. They all laughed artificially, patting me on the back and clapping their hands, as if I'd just told them all a very funny joke and was now revelling in their mirth and congratulation.

Oh, wow, I said.

We hope it's not an inconvenience, the woman said. Please come with us now. We will help you look for your bags.

I blinked. I found that I'd been holding my breath. All around us employees of the Ministry of the Interior continued to stream across the plaza.

We will put this away now. The woman closed her switchblade and pocketed it. We can see that it will not be necessary. We can see that you are a very nice person.

Wait, I said. Am I being mugged? Is that what's happening here?

No way, she said. Of course not. Why would you say that? You are hurting our feelings when you say that. We are friends now, yes? We are friends. We are friends and we are helping you look for your bags.

Please, I said.

Now it is our turn to ask some questions, she said. Is there anybody with you? Do you have a friend? Are you here with your family? Will anybody miss you? You are travelling alone, yes? I had a fiancée, I said. But I don't know where she is. I lost her this morning. How sad, she said. Perhaps we can help you look for her too. But we must ask you to be quiet now, she continued, nodding at her colleagues. We must ask you to come with us to our van. We can continue this interesting conversation there. Perhaps you can tell us about your fiancée. Don't look so worried, please. We are friends. We will help you find your bags.

And what if I say no? What if I don't go with you guys?

She smiled, said something to the men, and they all howled with laughter and patted me on the back and clapped their hands once more. One of them tousled my hair, tousled it so hard that I felt like he was checking the integrity of my neck.

In our culture, the woman said, we take friendship very seriously. Friendship in our country is a very serious business.

They shepherded me across the plaza, the woman leading the way while the men flanked me on all sides. One put his hand upon the small of my back; another whistled a shrill chromatic song as we walked; another kept swinging his right arm back and forth, as if he'd tweaked a muscle doing his pull-ups. The Ministry of Interior employees parted around us. I tried to make eye contact with one of them – with anybody, really – but nobody seemed to want to acknowledge us. We were just riff-raff wandering around the plaza on a workday morning. We were to be ignored. I looked around for the local police and nearly laughed out loud. Dora and I had spent so much time avoiding them in our travels and now they were nowhere to be seen. I thought about running. But, as if reading my mind, one of the men put me in a headlock, dragging me across the plaza, while the others laughed around me.

There was a minivan with tinted windows parked across from the plaza. One of the men opened the sliding door while another shoved me inside after the woman. I heard the door shut behind me, running along its rails and clicking home with a shuddering finality.

The woman patted the seat next to her.

We would like you to sit down next to us now.

My bags were in the seats behind her. It looked like somebody had disembowelled them.

Please, I said. Please, just let me go.

But we are friends, she said. We thought that we would help you look for your bags.

Well, I said. They're right *there*.



Somehow we were already moving into traffic. Somehow I found myself sitting between the woman and one of the men. The other two had gotten in the front seat. They all put on their seat belts. Somebody secured my lap belt for me. The sun was a dull disc through the tinted windows. A plaintive, down-tempo song was playing on the radio. The entire van smelled like potpourri. Relax, the woman said. We are not going to hurt you. She reached behind her, grabbed one of my T-shirts and handed it to her colleague beside me.

We are very sorry about this, she said, at which point her colleague wrapped the T-shirt around my eyes, tying it in a tight, painful knot at the back of my head.

The world became a darkness garrotting my eyeballs. Somebody gently rubbed one of my shoulders as if to console me. The men in the front seat laughed. One of them started whistling along to the song on the radio.

Are you comfortable? Is that too tight? Your comfort is important to us. Your comfort is our priority.

Please, I said into the darkness. I may have been crying, weeping into my unlaundered T-shirt, into the rancid stench of my own body odour.

Please, I'm begging you, I said.

You seem like good people, I said.

You don't have to cover my eyes, I said.

I wouldn't know about where we're going, I said. I don't even know where I am.

**T**he van took so many abrupt and nauseating turns that I wondered if we might be driving in circles. At first, they all just sat there listening to my weeping as if I were a child having an unreasonable tantrum. I eventually managed to regain some composure and found, after a while, that in my blindness and panic I had become aware of my surroundings in a way I hadn't been in a very long time. I once was blind but now I see, I thought ridiculously, absurdly, the blindfold tight against my eyes. I became acutely aware of the street's modulating textures scrolling beneath my feet; the faintly chemical breeze luffing from the air-conditioning vents; the plaintive wailing of a woman's soft alto voice warbling on the radio; the spectral stench of something rotten and foul – my own bags, perhaps – for which the van's potpourri suddenly seemed a comically inadequate mask; the dull throbbing of the twice-obscured sun imperceptibly rotating around the van; that chalky, adrenal taste coating my tongue. The four of them had been engaged for quite some time in a heated exchange. They were having a conversation about me, I realized after a while. In the thicket of that language I thought I heard them uttering my name.

They were saying my name in a way that I hadn't heard in a long time. They said it in a way that only my parents, I realized, had been able to say it.

I can give you money, I said. Just take me to a bank. Just take me to an ATM. I can make you rich.

We have some good news. We have found your wallet, the woman said. But we have a few important questions for you.

OK.

You are American, yes?

Yes, I said. Yes, I am.

You are telling us the truth?

Yes, I said. Far as I know.

But you do not have an American name.

I felt myself nodding. This was not the time, I thought, for a discussion about semantics, about politics.

Your name, she said, is not a foreign name. We are a little surprised, to be honest. We are a little worried. We are worried that you are lying to us about who you are. We hope that this is not the case. Friends should not lie to each other.

Friends shouldn't blindfold each other either, I said. A blindfold is not the best way to start a friendship.

Ha! You are very funny! the woman said. We can see that you have a big sense of humour.

But we must know about your name, she went on. Please explain. Let's get acquainted.

So this is Thailand, I thought. So that's what Dora had meant.

But I didn't think those things at all. I had said them aloud instead. I began to laugh. I once was lost but now I'm found, I thought, and the irony of it all only redoubled my laughter; I felt that I was practically choking on it.

A long expressive silence ensued. Somebody switched off the radio. The muffled noise of the traffic outside issued around us as if we were underwater. I felt an imperceptible shift in the air, a darkening of the van's collective mood.

Yes, the woman said. Yes, you are in Thailand. Welcome to our beautiful country.

My parents were from here, I said.

How interesting.

But I was born in America, I said. I have lived in America all of my life.

How interesting, the woman said again. And then: We must say that we do not like to make friends with Americans. Americans, we have found, can be very troublesome friends.

Another discussion ensued between them. The van stopped and lurched and stopped and lurched again. I found that I could abate the pressure around my head if I squinted hard against the

blindfold. I was relaxing a little. I felt, in some strange way, that the laughter and the talk had done me good.

We must ask you to stop smiling now.

I felt the switchblade hard and cold under my shirt, against my abdomen.

We must ask you to respect the seriousness of our friendship, the woman continued. You will answer a few more questions, please.

OK.

Where is your mother? Where is your father?

They're gone, I said.

Gone?

Dead, I said.

We are very sorry to hear that, she said.

Me too, I said.

And you are here to collect your inheritance? You are here to pay your respects? You have come to visit the homeland of your parents?

I suppose, I said. I suppose that's why we came here. I suppose that was the intention. But we got a little – well, we may have gotten a little distracted.

We?

Me and my fiancée.

The one you misplaced?

Yes, I said. The one I misplaced. That's actually a wonderful way of putting it.

You will be quiet now, she said.

OK.

Silence, please.

Sure.

You will shut your mouth, she said. You will shut your mouth or we will have to shut it for you.

**T**he van stopped and they finally took off the blindfold. We were in an anonymous bedroom community far from the city centre. They ushered me out of the van and we stood before some town-house row while one of the men unlocked the front gate. A mangy stray dog was licking its wounds under the shade of the property wall, eyeing us piratically with its one good eye every so often, flies orbiting its scarred and spotted flanks. A woman cycled by with a basket full of fresh produce. She smiled and rang her bicycle bell as she passed. The men waved at her and said something in response, pointed at me as if I might be a friend or a relative visiting from out of town, and the woman cycled away. Welcome to our home, the woman said.

Once inside, the men turned on a television and slumped onto an old leather couch. A soccer match was on. They groaned at the scoreline, lit cigarettes, leaned forward on their knees, waving their hands every so often in exasperation.

Move, please, the woman said, nudging me in the back.

I went up a set of dark stairs, the woman close behind me.

Which room would you like? the woman said, as we stood on the second-floor landing before several gaping doors. You may choose.

Please, I said. Just let me go. I swear I won't say a word to anybody about this.

How about this one? she said, pointing at one of the rooms. There is a nice bed inside. It also has a nice view. It is the nicest room in the house. We think that you will find it very comfortable.

Please, I said again, but the woman had shoved me inside and closed the door behind me. I heard her locking the door from the other side, heard her footsteps going back down the stairs.

The room was empty save for a small bed. The windows were barred.

I tried the door handle to no avail.

I started knocking on the door.

Please, I said, knocking with greater and greater force. Please, I'll do anything you ask! What are you going to do to me?

From downstairs came the sound of the men cheering and clapping at the game, at the desperation in my voice.

You will stop that, please, I heard the woman say eventually. You will calm down. If you are not satisfied with your room, you do not have to shout.

What are you going to do to me? What is this about? Where am I? And why won't you just let me go?

We thought that we already told you, the woman said. We thought we made ourselves perfectly clear.

I stood with my head against the door listening to her voice, to the woman's strange, untraceable accent talking on the other side of the wood, and it occurred to me then that I might be dead, that this is probably what happened to souls such as mine in the afterlife. No harp-bearing angels. No pearly, luminescent gates. Just a small, dark room in some generic suburban development and a lunatic woman talking in plural pronouns.

Thank you, the woman said. Thank you for calming down. Thank you for your understanding. I don't understand, I said. I don't understand what this is about. We want you to be comfortable, she said. We want to be your friends.

The woman went back downstairs. I moved to the window after a while and looked out onto the street before the town-house row. Nobody was out there save for that mangy dog now dragging herself across the asphalt. I lay on the bed, listening to the sounds of my captors' voices below me. Time somehow passed, though it didn't seem to pass at all. I wondered what Dora was doing, where she was, whether or not she was thinking of me.

I must have fallen asleep. I woke to the woman's voice at the door, to the evening sky beyond the window rioting with colour.

We are hungry and we were wondering if you were too.

She opened the door. She was holding that switchblade again, twirling it in her hand as if she might be some circus performer. One of the men dragged me to my feet.

Let's go eat, she said, smiling. What kind of cuisine do you like? Would you like some Japanese food? We have never eaten Japanese food. We would like to try.

So into the van again. So into that garrotting darkness. They blindfolded me once more and we drove in silence for a while.

We have more good news, the woman said. We have finally found your bags! There was quite a lot of money in your bags. We have put it in a safe place for you.

I didn't say anything.

You should be polite, she said. You should thank us for finding your bags and your money. Have we done something to make you angry? she continued, when I didn't respond again. Have we done something to offend you? Friends should talk to each other. Do you guys do this a lot? I finally asked. Rob and abduct people?

Who is robbing? Who is abducting? she said. Do we have a gun to your head? We do not have a gun to your head. We have a gun, yes, but we do not have it to your head.

We also found a beautiful ring in your bags, she continued. We will give it back to you now. It is a diamond ring, yes? Your fiancée's ring? We do not understand why she would leave a good man like you, a man who would give her such a good ring. But we will give it to you now. We will do this to show you that we are not robbers, that we are your friends.

I felt her pressing the ring into my hands, closing my fingers around it. I didn't know what to do with it. After a while, I just slipped it onto my finger, as if I might now be engaged to myself.

See? she said. We are friends.

I really wish you would stop saying that, I said.

We have also found your ATM card, she continued. This is another piece of good news for you.

The van had stopped moving.

Please tell us the code, she said. We would like to borrow some money from you now.

I told her. Somebody exited the van and returned after a few minutes.

Thank you, the woman said. You are being very good. You are being a very nice, a very generous American.

You're welcome, I said, and I sort of meant it, I didn't care about the money any more, had never cared about it in the first place.

The van started moving again.

Just drop me off, I said. Just stop the van. I'll find my way home. I swear I won't make trouble for any of you.

But we are just becoming acquainted, the woman said.

Somebody turned on the radio. The men began to hum along to a song.

Can I ask you a question? I said after a while. Am I dead?

The woman laughed.

No, she said. You are not dead. You are alive. You are alive and we are now at a Japanese restaurant.

**T**his went on for a quite a while.

Over the next few days it seemed like we ate at all the best restaurants in town. Just my luck, it turned out that I'd been abducted by a bunch of gourmands. They really knew how to live, those lunatics. Japanese, French, Korean, Ethiopian, Chinese, you name it. We ate it all. We sat in those restaurants like a bunch of siblings while under our table the woman played with her switchblade and the three men ordered everything on the menu, stuffing their faces and talking in loud, enthusiastic tones, while an endless parade of entrées materialized before us as if conjured by so many celestial hands. At a dim sum palace the waiters put a candle in an egg custard and sang me happy birthday and when I blew out the candle my captors all applauded and congratulated me on the fake milestone.

Happy birthday to our very good friend, the woman said.

By that point so many waiters at so many restaurants had sung me happy birthday that I was beginning to get a little annoyed. I stared at the egg custard and told her it wasn't my birthday and she told me to shut up. She produced my passport and showed it to me and I saw that she was right – that it actually was my birthday that day – and I couldn't tell if I was touched or afraid for my life. A lot of time seemed to pass like that. When I needed to go to the bathroom, one of the men always accompanied me, as if we might be teenaged girls going to gossip, or lovers heading for a quick, dirty tryst. The men usually checked their hair and their complexion in the mirror while I went about my business, although once – in a shiny marble bathroom in some Italian place – my escort suddenly produced a handgun, pointed it at me and urged me to wash my hands, as if my hygiene were a matter of grave importance.

They were having a pretty good time.

Now and again we went back to the town house and I was made to sit in that horrible room. But mostly we were out in the van. Mostly I just sat blindfolded while they drove around looking for new and ingenious ways to spend my inheritance. We went to restaurants and bars, department stores and hardware emporiums. We went to open-air markets and furniture warehouses. We went to several shopping malls and they all bought themselves a new wardrobe, a computer, a sound system, houseplants, cookware, books, DVDs. The men and I sat around in the waiting area of a department-store dressing room while the woman tried on business suits, and after she was done we all headed up a set of escalators to the mall cineplex to watch an American action movie.

It was a relief to be sitting in the darkness of that theatre. I could almost forget about what was happening to me. I wanted that terrible movie to go on forever. I wanted the alien apocalypse prolonged indefinitely, the world to keep on exploding, remain mired forever in its doomsday despair, so that when the aliens were vanquished and the world was invariably saved and the house lights went up I burst into tears.

There, there, the woman said, patting me on the back and offering me a handkerchief. All around us our fellow moviegoers looked on in bewilderment as they made their way out of the theatre. Don't cry, she said. It's just a movie. If you keep crying, we're going to leave you in the van next time.

What are you going to do to me? I said. Are you going to kill me?

Don't be hysterical, she said. We are not going to kill you. We are going to drop you off at the airport. Your flight leaves in a few days, yes?

I don't know, I said. I don't know about any of that.

It leaves in a few days, she said. There was a plane ticket in your bags.

Later that night we ended up at a nightclub. I was pretty sure that Dora and I had been to that nightclub before. And as I sat between my captors in a leather booth – drink after drink after drink appearing before us – it occurred to me that everything that had happened to me once was somehow happening all over again. First time tragedy, second time farce, and all that ridiculous stuff. Though perhaps that wasn't quite right, I thought. Perhaps it was actually the other way around.

They told me to drink and I drank. They told me to smoke and I smoked. The men headed out to the dance floor and the woman urged me to do the same. But I told her I didn't feel like dancing.

You will dance, she said. You will get up and dance with us now.

She grabbed me by the hand and led me out to the dance floor. The crowd around us seemed a single epileptic organism heaving to the music, to the lights flashing and sweeping around us. We found the men out there and they all smiled and yelled at us with great happiness, waving their arms to the music, welcoming us to their circle. The woman began to shimmy her shoulders and move her hips and twirl her hands in the light-speckled air. We must have seemed at that moment like so many friends out on the town for the night, and I found myself paralysed among them, overcome with a sense of my own smallness, feeling myself as a still, unmoving point around which the crowd seemed to convulse and to rotate, watching the faces of the dancers around me appearing and disappearing under the fitfully strobing lights. Here I was, desperate for help, afraid for my life, and yet nobody around me could detect any of it. And it occurred to me then that under the cloak of everyday life – a birthday dinner, a shopping excursion, a trip to the cinema, a night out on the town – this other thing was going on in plain sight, had perhaps always been going on, was perhaps going on with so many other people on this dance floor, and that there was no alibi quite so perfect as an ordinary good time.

Dance! The woman had grabbed my hand, was swinging it in time to the music, the floorboards thrumming beneath us. Dance, American, dance!

I decided then that I would try to walk away. I would just put one foot in front of the other and walk away from them all. This was all a colossal bluff, I thought. It was all a terrible joke, a joke for which I was the unfortunate punchline. What were they going to do? Stab me on the dance floor? Shoot me in front of all of these people? Murder me in a crowded nightclub? I eyed the exit. I tried to gather my wits, my strength, my courage, all the rest. I began to push my way past the woman, past the men, slowly negotiating my way through the crowd.

Where are you going?

A large white man was grinding himself against a small Asian woman. He shot me a look of disgust when I tried to shoulder my way past him.

Please, I said to the man. Please, you have to help me.

Keep moving, the man said in a Germanic accent, pulling the woman closer, as if I'd tried to steal his dance partner. Help yourself.

You don't understand, I said. I've been abducted. They're coming after me.

The man rolled his eyes and pulled his partner closer.

Where are you going?

I kept walking. I didn't look back to see what was happening, to see if they were following me, though I heard the woman's insistent voice calling after me beneath the clamour of the music. I kept walking through those pinpricks of swirling light, towards the exit, towards whatever freedom awaited me beyond that door. But when I finally got to the edge of the dance floor I found the three men waiting for me.

Somebody kicked my feet out from under me. I felt myself falling to the hard, sticky floor. One of them leaned over me and pretended to pick me up – to help up his drunk and hapless friend – but he was actually slapping me repeatedly, his blows landing flush against my cheeks in time to the rhythm of the music. The others stood around with looks of grave concern, as if I might be an embarrassing



friend – the kind of friend who habitually caused such unseemly and disastrous scenes – the sort of person who always turned a good time into a bad one – while the man sat there straddling my chest and slapped me around in the dark, his blows landing swift and imperious against my cheeks. I lay there receiving the man's blows and I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry or to howl out in pain, for I felt that I was a little drunk, actually, and I knew that I had been that person, that embarrassing friend, and I suddenly missed everybody then – Dora and my parents and everybody that I had ever loved – and I wanted very badly to see them all again.

They picked me up and carried me out of the nightclub, slung between two of the men, my face a throbbing and insensate thing.

We must say that we are very disappointed, the woman said when we all got into the van again. Very, very disappointed.

I'm sorry, I said. I had to try.

What terrible manners, she said, shaking her head. What is it with you Americans? We were having a perfectly wonderful time.

I really don't know how to answer that question, I said.

We should punish you, she said.

Please, I said.

We should punish you for your misbehaviour, she said.

That won't be necessary, I said.

We should teach you a lesson.

You really don't have to do that, I said. Lesson learned.

**W**ho knows what that lesson was? Who knows what I managed to learn from it all? Who learns anything from anybody any more? I didn't know then and I still don't know now. But three days later they dropped me off at the airport. They parked the van and carried my bags to the kerb and then they each embraced me as if they were friends bidding me bon voyage. The woman handed over my passport and my plane ticket and then she hugged me for a while, as if she might be my girlfriend, and I thought that there might even be tears in her eyes.

Thank you for everything, she said. Thank you and good luck. We hope that you've enjoyed your visit to our beautiful country.

By that point they'd taken me for all that I had. They'd emptied my bank account, maxed out my credit cards, and one of the men had even taken most of my clothes. I stood there with the woman's arms around my waist, with her face looking up at mine, strangely afraid that she might try to kiss me. I simply didn't know what to say. I suppose that I wanted to thank her too – thank her for sparing my life, or something, though I don't think they ever intended to kill me – but by then she'd

disappeared into the van and I soon lost them in the throng of kerbside vehicles pulling away from the terminal, heading back into the city.

And so I had my freedom again, in a way.

There was a policeman directing traffic nearby. It occurred to me that I should talk to him, maybe report the ordeal. But I didn't know what to say, didn't know how I would ever explain any of it, and besides I'd always hated talking to cops. Those people had never done anything for me.

I found Dora sitting at the gate, reading Anna Karenina. She was wrapped in a sarong of some kind. She had a suntan. She had a new haircut. She'd never looked so beautiful to me as she did then.

I walked up to her and waited for her to notice me.

How does that thing end? I eventually asked.

She looked up at me for a while, blinking.

Poorly, of course, she said. Wonderfully, but poorly.

I wish you hadn't left me like that, I said.

She shrugged.

I missed you, I said. I really did.

Sure, she said. That was the point.

I love you, Dora, I said.

How nice, she said, laughing. Good for you.

And so I got down on my knees.

And so I took off the ring and asked Dora to marry me again.

What happened to your face? she said afterwards, the applause of our fellow passengers dying down around us.

Are you being serious now? I said, brushing the tears from my eyes. Do you really want to know? For some reason, I don't think that you really want to know.

You're right, Dora said. She turned back to the novel. I don't. v