

IN SEARCH OF HER
AYAH



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In Search of Her Ayah
ISBN 978-1-897435-53-3 (jacketed casebound)
ISBN 978-1-897435-62-5 (electronic book)
Cataloguing information available from
Library and Archives Canada.

Printed on acid-free paper.
Agiopublishing House is a socially responsible company,
measuring success on a triple-bottom-line basis.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

IN SEARCH OF HER AYAH

CHAPTER I



LINDSAY DAVEN

The leisurely walk to work through the deep woods on her way to work at the café in the little town of Beaver on the Oregon coast was one of Lindsay's most cherished simple pleasures – before the stalking started.

She would leave the house earlier than was necessary so she could meander and enjoy the sounds of awakening creatures and observe the changing face of nature in the rising sun.

It was an idyllic interlude of solitude before a busy, noisy day as a waitress in the small café. The sunlight flashing through the treetops created an archway of delicate tinkling light and colour. Chirping birds hidden high above in the foliage and stirring creatures in the undergrowth awakening and busy with their morning chores filled the forest with cheerful bustle. Lindsay would stop and listen, trying to see the source of a song or sight the rustler in the undergrowth. She seldom did. She was the intruder. They too were watching with far better senses of sight and sound and smell and would fall quiet until she moved on. The scent of sap in the balsam trees was like a soothing balm. The low distant thudding of the Pacific surf pounding against the rugged coast provided a backdrop of stability and permanence. Later in the day on her return from work the thick canopy of leaves chaffing high above filtered out the summer heat and she strolled in cool fresh air. As summer waned the air was filled with the soft-brushed sounds of drying leaves. Even in the rain on all but the most blustery days, she felt protected and at peace among the stately trees.

It was a time to dream and contemplate. Often, Lindsay's mind took her back to memories of her early childhood in India, a happy time before a troubled adult life. As a little girl she and her close friend, Ngari, a little Indian boy, had wondered aimlessly in the forest as well. At times Lindsay literally sensed the presence of her ayah, standing on the path smiling comfortingly. She had been more like a mother than her own. Once, the vision was so clear that she had subconsciously called out 'Nina, Nina', the affectionate name used by the children for their warden. When there was no response she was momentarily dismayed, until realizing it was just a loving remembrance from a half a century ago. She would laugh aloud recalling antics with Ngari, the ayah's youngest son. They had been inseparable as playmates, adventurers and confidants. She still blushed when she recalled the day, when deep in the thick woods near Darjeeling, they had compared their different anatomical features. She had laughed at his partial arousal and he was furious with her for days. Many years would pass before she realized that the penis was the one inviolate part of the male's delicate ego that must never be disparaged. She wondered if he still sketched abstract metaphysical images in the sand. Each day the urge to return to her homeland, which was how she thought of India, grew stronger and she would make solemn pledges that she would soon leave Beaver and go back and find her ayah and see Ngari as a grown man. But she did nothing; the care-free life in Beaver as a simple waitress held her in its solemn spell.

All that changed abruptly. Her peaceful life was transformed into a nightmare of lurking images in sinister shadows. The magic pathway through the woods became a gauntlet of fear and trepidation. Each rustle in the trees sent quakes of terror tearing at her mind and physical tremors coursing through her body. Every shadow was the stalker waiting and watching. She seldom saw him clearly, but always she sensed that he was out there, somewhere.

At the same time guilt and shame tore at her conscience. She knew who the stalker was, but also she was well aware that she was partly if not largely to blame. Sometimes at night she would cry out in her sleep in

dismay. “I must have been quite mad. I was the seducer as much as he. I was nothing but a wanton slut.”

When she was up and fully awake she would laugh at the absurdity of it all. An affair between a fifty-plus-year-old proper and well-educated English woman and a young man in his twenties with serious social problems was completely beyond the pale of reason. But there was no humour in her laughter and surges of rage and anger would sear through her head. Often alone, she would moan in self-pity and mumble disconcertedly. “Why couldn’t he have left it alone?” Always the truth re-emerged. She knew all too well.

Lindsay had moved west in 1968 to escape him. The remote and obscure little community of Beaver, the slumbering remnants of a hectic pioneer past, where her mother had come to live after Lindsay’s father died, seemed like the perfect isolated place in which Lindsay could reconstitute her life after her romantic indiscretions.

She had thought, hoped and rationalized, that he’d forget her or not be able to find her – deep down knowing he would come eventually. She’d broken his protective shell. She had made him believe that he could live and be accepted in society as a normal man. That, Lindsay knew, was impossible. In his anguished brain he blamed her and wanted retribution in some warped way.

There was a time when she had waited for him to come almost crazed with desire and lust. Now the thought of him was loathsome. But as the stalker he was always in her mind. Real or imagined, in fleeting glimpses, or in shameful memories, he was watching and waiting.

The notes, with pleading threats and innuendos, left in bizarre places, were increasingly scary. She seldom took the shortcut through the woods. The main roadway wound around a hill and was much further, but at least there were houses and people and dogs about.

The night had been filled with terror. She had thought he was incapable of physical violence. Now she wasn’t sure. Their dog had been found dead. The vet had said the dog must have eaten a poisoned raccoon. She guessed it was the stalker. The garden hoses had been cut. Her mother

passed it off as the mischief of the no-good local vandals that hung around the town. "Why do I stay here among these uncultured, uneducated country hicks?" she lamented, but did nothing.

As the final straw, a note, that somehow had been left on Lindsay's bed, contained a threat that he would tell her children back east about their illicit liaison.

Lindsay dosed off. A sound, within the room, startled her awake. She felt the stalker's presence, even sensed his silent breathing. Stiff in fear, afraid to move, she didn't dare turn on the light. For a long time she lay tense, barely breathing, listening. The room was dark and silent. My God, she thought, the sounds were solely in my mind. It was almost worse than an intruder. Finally, calm again, she fell back into a troubled sleep. Something, this time outside, a creak, the crack of a branch or just the wind in the trees, or him, awakened her again. As before she lay tense, too scared to rise and look. All was deathly quiet. It was nearly morning before she finally sank into an exhausted state of semi-conscious sleep.

Bright sunlight streaming through the window awakened Lindsay fully from the horrors of the night. She jumped up in panic. It was her turn to take the early shift at the café. Hurriedly she dressed. Splashing cold water on her neck and face she tied her long coal black hair into a tight bun in preparation for day as a neat older waitress, patiently listening to patrons oft repeated stories and complaints.

Her mother was already up fussing about. As usual she began haranguing Lindsay. The sad old woman, living in her glorified memory of the past as a grand lady in India, had become obsessed by the humiliation of having a daughter working as a waitress. Every morning there was a variation of the same tedious refrain.

"You've got to leave that degrading occupation. What would my friends in India think if they knew my daughter was a waitress? I would be the laughing stock of society. Think of me, even if you have no pride yourself."

Immersed in her own fears, Lindsay said nothing. Kissing her mother's stiff and wrinkled cheek she rushed out.

There was no alternative. She was already late for work. She would have to take the shortcut through the woods.

Her agitated mind was in total turmoil. Each shadow held his profile. Every sound in the undergrowth instead of stirring creatures was the stalker's stealthy footsteps. The rustling in the leaves his heavy breathing. The warm morning breeze his breath. The distant surf roared ominously. She rushed along the shadowy trail looking neither left nor right.

She tried to scream. No sound emerged. She attempted to turn and run. Frozen in fear she couldn't move... She gasped for breath; there was no air. She tried to swallow; adrenalin had turned the saliva in her mouth to a dry and choking powder. Suddenly, the woods were deadly quiet as if the creatures in the bushes had seen the apparition and had fallen still as well. The only noise was the pounding of her heart.

A ray of morning sunlight had pierced through the high trees, penetrating a patch of low hanging mist in a hollow. In the mélange of haze and sun on the path something, someone was standing waiting on the trail.

Petrified she stood transfixed staring at the creature in her way. The rays of sunlight moved on. The hollow of sun-drenched mist dissolved into the crisscrossing shadows of the trees. There was nothing there. The trail was clear and empty, disappearing through the woods into the soft light of morning gloom. The creatures in the bushes and the trees resumed their chattering. Had she imagined that as well? Had there been someone there? Or was it just a fearful image? She didn't know. It was what made stalking such a horrific crime. Her inclination was to turn and run back to the safety of their house, but she was already late for work. She forced herself to continue on down the trail towards town.

She was running as she reached the top of the little hill and broke into the open where the trail ran down to the main road. Her lungs were bursting and her heart was hammering wildly from both the exertion and fright. Then, she saw them at the cross road. A great expulsion of relief flooded over her. She was safe. At the bottom of the slope the police were waiting. She knew immediately by the big chief's beaming face that they

had caught him. She was free at last. “Thank God,” she whispered. “I can live again.”

The entire police force of Beaver was there, the chief, Ben, a big loud and pompous man, and the constable, Pete, a quiet rather dense-appearing fellow. They hadn’t seen her. She smiled at the sight, despite her distress. They were in full dress uniform, standing erectly beside their newest pride, a hand-me-down patrol car recently acquired from some big city. It had been washed and polished, likely for the occasion. This would be a major coup for the force. There had never been a case of stalking in the little community of Beaver before. She tried not to hurry or appear overly-anxious as she descended the slope towards the waiting policemen.

The other worry crept back into her head. The stalking was over but now there was the lingering dread of exposure. She hadn’t gone to the police originally and when she did hadn’t told them the whole story. They would undoubtedly have uncovered the truth in their investigation and interrogation and pieced the sordid affair together. Would they be discreet? In the small community of Beaver nothing was sacred for long.

“Well, Ms. Daven,” the chief stated formally, trying to appear official, while at the same time affecting a suave, nonchalant posture, as if catching a violent criminal were an everyday occurrence for the constabulary of Beaver. “We got him dead to rights this time. We searched the house again where he has been residing. He’s a clever and devious fellow. The first time we didn’t check the old typewriter. It was a hurried oversight. And we didn’t think he’d be so dumb as to leave it in the open if it contained any incriminating evidence. Then, I ascertained upon further reflection that was his intent. Rather like not locking your suitcase on a flight, you know. I saw through his clever ploy. Sure enough! We conducted a high-tech investigation. There was no question. He wrote those threatening notes on it. The letter ‘D’ on the typewriter was skewed, quite distinctively. You don’t have to worry any more. We picked him up late last night. He tried to flee and resisted arrest so he’s classified as a dangerous felon. The judge, when he’s sober enough to hold court, has the grounds on that alone to send him down to the big pen as a threat to society. I can assure you that

with this creep's soft manners and feminine appearance, a few months down there will cure him of any future amorous inclinations towards you. You never know by looks alone, do you?"

There was, Lindsay sensed, a subtle undertone of suggestive inference in the chief's voice.

Despite everything Lindsay shivered at the image. The picture of Shaun with his sensitivities and fastidious manners penned up among depraved criminals was disconcerting.

Thanking the police chief perfunctorily, she hurried on down the road.

The realization that she was finally free of the stalker began to sink in. He was locked away and couldn't harass her any more. She felt as if she had been released from the clutches of an invasive evil. She was still furtive, like prey at a water hole, she guessed, knowing the predator was no longer lurking but still cautious after a long period of nervous drinking. There was oxygen in the air again. The concern for exposure and the humiliation of the affair was in her mind, but that was an intangible. There was nothing she could do about that. The tangible was locked away.

Lindsay was at ease and comfortable with the common people of Beaver, mainly retired or partially-employed labourers. She felt that they had accepted her as one of them even though her background was so vastly different. How, she thought as she hurried on, would they respond to the knowledge that she had had a sordid affair with a much younger and very effeminate-appearing man who was now a criminal as well? How would her co-waitress who had become a trusted friend react?

She didn't look back but sensed the disapproving eyes of the police chief piercing her back. "The lecherous old bastard," she swore. "He no doubt thinks I'm fair game now and is watching my undulating rear with anticipation. He knows everything. Will he be discreet? How could I have been so stupid?"

The little café was busy and she had little time to think about her problems. As usual on Wednesdays the Women's Club of Beaver was al-

ready there waiting for her. They greeted her warmly but were immediately concerned about her haggard appearance.

"I'm fine," she managed say with a weak smile. "But for some reason I didn't sleep well."

With a rude wink, one old girl suggested, "Too much amour, perhaps!"

"Or possibly not enough?" another said, which released a great roar of rude laughter.

As she took their orders and left for the kitchen she could hear them expressing concern. Her appearance was the immediate topic of conversation. Each woman had some theory about the cause of her sleeplessness. "It's the full moon," one woman suggested. "I never sleep well when the moon is full."

Another said, "It's probably the beginning of menopause. I couldn't sleep when I went through that period."

"I didn't think you had gone through that stage of life yet," someone else retorted and there was another great burst of raucous laughter. Their speculation didn't bother Lindsay. Rather, it gave her a warm feeling of belonging.

As she waited on the tables she mused over how these women would react when they heard the full story. She had witnessed how quickly the attitudes and emotions of these direct simple souls changed. There were certain social norms which you didn't violate in Beaver, but also there was considerable tolerance on other matters. Which one of her indiscretions would be considered the worst? That she'd had an affair with the effeminate-looking man? That would be hard for them to comprehend. The idea of a real man in Beaver was a big weathered species with arms like tree trunks who drank whiskey with a beer chaser and swore lustily. That Shaun was in jail probably wouldn't bother them greatly since many men in Beaver had spent at least some time in the pen for some mischief. Stalking would trouble them. That would be an unforgivable sin. They wouldn't understand how she had got mixed up with such an evil character. Also they would be indignant that she had not come to them for

help. Lindsay imagined their reaction when they heard the story. “Christ, Lindsay. We would have run the effeminate little wimp out of town. Why didn’t you tell us you were being harassed by a spurned lover?”

At noon three well-dressed prosperous looking strangers came in for lunch and chose one of Lindsay’s tables, much to the chagrin of Hanna, the other waitress. They were not the usual type of tourists. From Portland or Seattle, Lindsay decided, who happened to have arrived in Beaver at lunch time by chance. Two of them were nondescript, looking and acting like typical rich retired American businessmen – overweight, bald and making tedious, what they believed were clever, suggestive remarks to a common serving woman in a small town. The third man was, however, strikingly different from the others, so much so that Lindsay was puzzled over why he was travelling with the two bores. He was not young although he still maintained the strong appearance of virility of a much younger man; in his mid-sixties, she guessed. He was quiet with an indifferent, haughty, rather superior attitude, which at first had annoyed Lindsay. Then, she heard him say he was going to visit India soon. She had responded impulsively and quite inappropriately, like a silly school-girl, injecting herself into the conversation.

“I was born there,” she blurted out with excessive enthusiasm.

He had looked at her sceptically, and Lindsay flared anew with a flash of anger. Apparently realizing that he had hurt her feelings, thereafter he spoke to her directly with deference, asking her opinion on where he should go and what he should see in India. She had kept coming back unnecessarily to their table asking if everything were alright.

After the lunchtime shift, sitting on the old wooden bench behind the kitchen, the sordid business of her tragic affair, the stalking, and now the danger of the police chief or deputy revealing her background came crashing back into the forefront of her conscience.

The stalking had been a nightmare seemingly without reason or an end. She had become the subconscious victim of his social ostracism. She guessed that was what it was, some kind of compulsive behaviour. He knew her well. With sinister patience he had played with her mind, in-

vading her inner-most self. She guessed he was no longer interested in her physically, possibly never was, but in some sense in his brain he needed her and wanted restitution for the damage she had inflicted on his psyche. Now, the most troublesome part was her susceptibility. Over and over she asked herself how she could have succumbed to such sheer sexual craving. What she had first feared had happened. The stalking was over but her quiet life in Beaver was imperilled.

The affair now seemed like another time, from another life long ago. At the time she had never known, or imagined, such ecstasy. Even now sitting on the bench behind the kitchen with her bare legs stretched out in the warm sun she remembered the passionate moments and writhed, feeling an embarrassing dampness. How, and where, she wondered, as she often did, had he become such an accomplished lover? He had seemed to know how to excite every facet of her longing. She shook her head violently trying to destroy the memory.

She guessed the die was cast and she would have to move on. Her incongruous but highly gratifying interlude in the little town of Beaver would have to end. The job as a waitress in the small café in a stagnant town on the remote coast of Oregon had been what she needed for a time, but now was totally inappropriate; in any case quite likely she would no longer be accepted. The waitress's job was a complete waste of her intellect and background.

What would she do? Her life had been a series of dichotomies. In India as a child she had had all the privileges of servants and an ayah. The strict girls' school in England had temporarily suppressed the freedom of her childhood. But she had received a superb education and was highly articulate and possessed refined English graces and manners. She had married badly, responsively, without reflection after the long frustration of the strict girls' school, to the first man who pursued her. He was far below her in intellect and without any *savoir faire*. Soon there was resentment and then avoidance. The only good things that had come out of the marriage were two attractive children. But they too were grown and off on careers and lives of their own. After a virtually loveless marriage, and having been

subjected to crude animal sex by her husband, the affair with a young and considerate lover was not unnatural. But, my God, she thought shaking her head, a twenty-some-year-old, troubled, effeminate-appearing man and a fifty-five-year-old woman was utter madness. Nevertheless, despite the incongruity of the mix, after a long period of sexual deprivation she had for a time become totally obsessed. He, she now realized, had been equally obsessed, but not with sex. Acceptance and social normalcy and belonging were his motivations. The rupture, of course, had been inevitable. Such relationships were impossible for long periods. The break was not clean. Her obsession was physical and as such could be severed painfully but cleanly. His obsession was in his head and embedded in his being as a part of a troubled life and could not be easily forgotten. The stalking, first in the east and then in Beaver, was the extreme reaction of an unbalanced severely, suppressed and rejected man. Her escape to Beaver had been delusory. She had known sub-consciously that ultimately he would trace her flight and come to find her. When he didn't appear for a time she had almost forgotten and fallen into the peace and solitude of the remote community, feeling content in the menial job as a waitress serving others far less cultured and worldly than she. For the first time in her adult life she had a warm sense of truly belonging.

At first, there naturally had been some resentment in the town; she, a stranger, was taking someone's place who needed the work more than she. As the town people got to know her, however, she began to fit comfortably into the subdued environment; she filled a void, and the town embraced her. The locals, most with little education, were homey, considerate simple souls. They possessed a slow easy sense of humour and were refreshingly self-deprecating. There was no striving for material advancement. A wonderful relaxed lack of ambition pervaded the small town. They knew they were the residue of a former prosperous period and that was enough. Proudly they referred to themselves as the tailings and laughed without a shred of shame or complaint. There was even a touch of pride in their designation as dregs.

The small establishment where she worked was owned and run by a

couple from Seattle. They had given up successful careers, left their respective spouses and turned part hippie. The man had been a prominent, highly successful investment advisor. His vocation was essentially one of trying to make more money for retired rich people, inheritors and overpaid executives, most of whom already had too much wealth. His clients were never satisfied. Even when he performed well, some always complained. They had heard of another advisor who had performed better. When he raised cash or took a position in safe bonds, they said they weren't paying him to manage cash. They seldom were complimentary. One day when an old dowager, who never done a constructive thing in her life, started complaining, he suddenly broke, he'd had enough. He threw up his arms and told her to go elsewhere among other things and said he was quitting the business. He wrote a letter to all his clients informing them that he was finished. A few begged him to stay. Most said good riddance. He'd broken the business and social code. That night he went home and told his estranged wife he was leaving. She was disturbed because he was disrupting a planned dinner party. The next day he went to see a high-priced divorce lawyer to protect what he could of his assets. The ruthless lawyer and the disgruntled investment man became lovers.

Then the lawyer decided she had had enough of a boring husband and representing greedy, embittered women and men trying to extract as much money as was possible out of a failed marriage. She had thrown away her bras, let the hair grow out of her armpits in coarse black tufts and bought a pair of granny glasses.

Her client and lover, the big-time successful investment man, had let the few remaining strands of his thinning hair grow long, pierced his ears and dangled golden rings from each lobe. Their respective spouses left them enough to start the little café business.

The once thriving and boisterous town of Beaver on the Oregon coast, left behind by the mad material rush of America, was the perfect setting for their new idyllic life. They bought an old warehouse and converted it into a small restaurant with a little library attached. Situated back among the tall pine trees with a distant view out to the sea it was tranquil place.

The scent of the forest and the soft thud of the surf in the distance created a wonderful relaxing atmosphere. They transformed the old building into rather elegant place for such a remote location. There were lacy curtains and real table cloths. On Sundays they used the silverware from their previous lives. The little library had a small, but quite a remarkable collection of books that had been collected by the owners in their former lives. Much to everyone's surprise the enterprise flourished. It became the community's cultural centre. And soon it was recognized as the place for tourists to stop on the way north or south on Highway 1. The two proprietors had given Lindsay the job because of her obvious grace and sophistication. They were practical. Despite their desire to escape their big city pasts they hadn't lost all their cultural roots or business acumen.

Lindsay attracted the cultural elite of the town. The other waitress, a local girl, well endowed with large firm breasts which she exposed as much as was permissible, attracted the men, both old and young. Lindsay and she had, despite the extreme contrast in their backgrounds and appearance, become close friends and confidants.

Customers viewing the alternative table choices would shake their heads in wonder at the contrast between the two waitresses. Lindsay dressed modestly; Hanna said, "Drably. Like a bloody nun." Loose comfortable clothes obscured what actually was a rather elegant and graceful figure. At work she always kept her hair tied up in a matronly bun and wore old granny flat shoes, which made her legs look straight and featureless. That picture of Lindsay was complete deception. Sometimes, at night in the solitude of her room, she would release her coal black hair, which fell to her waist in a great flowing mane. In semi-darkness she would stand naked in front of the mirror and slowly brush the silky strands with one hand and stroke the soft curves of a highly sensuous body with the other. Long walks in the solitude of the beach in the evenings, out of her waitresses' attire, before the stalker came, had turned the exposed parts of her sleek body bronze. Locals sensed that there was mysterious, mystical aura about her even in her drab attire at the café. Her eyes were like distant beacons; anyone caught directly in their focus was drawn in with

an irresistible force of calm. Her cheekbones conveyed a hint of oriental origin, even though her bloodlines were pure, going back to English aristocratic roots, at least her mother claimed. Lindsay liked the idea that she was really the offspring of an illicit affair between her father and an Indian princess. Few guessed her age. They all secretly speculated about why she was a waitress in the small town café.

Hanna, the other waitress in the café, was a borne and raised local girl. She imagined herself as the town's belle and played the part, dressing in revealing clothes which displayed virtually all of her voluptuous and seductive curves. Unfortunately, she loved hamburgers and fries and the curves would soon turn to rolls of fat. Her hairdo, a high buffoon creation that she had copied from an old fashion magazine, made her look a bit like a floozy, but she didn't mind as long as men thought she was sexy. Her eyes held no secrets. When she looked directly at a man she conveyed the feeling that she would be great in bed. It was a game with her because she was actually completely faithful to the forest worker with whom she lived and had reared a child. She affected everyone with her bubbly spirits. But she was also highly mercurial. When she felt she had been slighted or wronged in any way she displayed her frustrations and displeasures openly. But, her moods were highly ephemeral; she flared easily but forgot and forgave just as quickly.

The screen door on the kitchen slammed shut with an angry crash. Lindsay braced for Hanna's onslaught. She knew that she would get a full measure of Hanna's pique today. She would have taken it as a personal affront that the three prosperous appearing strangers would have chosen one of Lindsay's tables. In her direct and simple mind she would have determined Lindsay somehow had enticed them. Adding to the insult she had got three niggardly old women who tipped sparingly if at all and sat and talked long after all the rest of the customers had left the restaurant.

Through half-closed eyes Lindsay watched Hanna approach in purposeful angry strides.

Hanna slumped down on the bench opposite Lindsay, spreading her legs out in the most unladylike way, exposing the full reach of plump

white thighs and coarse grey panties, fringed with lace. Vulgar and crude mockery of what she considered high society's pretentious graces was her most explicit way of conveying her irritation to Lindsay. She reasoned that a grand and proper lady like Lindsay, born in India and educated in a fancy girls' school, would be incensed by such low-class behaviour. She utilized different ploys, depending on the occasion, to show her irritation. If they were eating she would tip her soup bowl back and slurp the dregs noisily. She would pick her teeth without making any attempt to cover the *gaucherie*. But sitting crassly with her legs spread like an old dray horse relieving herself was the ultimate sign of vexation.

Lindsay said nothing, keeping her eyes shut against the sun's brightness. Getting no response from Lindsay, as a further display of aggravation Hanna pulled a soggy packet of cigarettes out of her sweaty uniform and lit one with impatient, slow snaps of an old Bic lighter, low in fuel. Inhaling deeply she blew out a great cloud of dirty grey smoke into the pristine air. She knew Lindsay abhorred smoking.

Lindsay still said nothing.

A car door slammed and gravel crunched from a car leaving at the entrance of the café, quite likely the old ladies who had so incensed Hanna leaving finally. The wind whispering through the tall pines and the occasional clang of a pot in the kitchen were the only sounds besides Hanna sucking on the damp cigarette. At regular intervals in the distance the low throbs of waves crashing on the coast were just audible.

"Don't say it," Hanna snapped, unable to control herself any longer.

"Say what?" Lindsay asked nonchalantly. That irritated Hanna more than ever.

"You know your tedious self-righteous refrain that smoking is bad for your health. That lecture that I'll end up coughing and gasping, my lungs full of black holes, connected to an oxygen tank in some run-down nursing home, complaining about the dangers of second-hand smoke, with nobody listening but other hackers."

"Hanna, my dear, I have no intention of saying anything. If you want to destroy your health, go around stinking like a pile of burning tires, have

your fingers stained jaundice-yellow and have the prematurely wrinkled skin of a prune, without any care about afflicting others with the filthy habit, that's your privilege. Just don't blow your smoke in my direction.

"My, you paint a lovely picture. Now I know who writes the government's health warning on cigarette packages."

There was another strained silence with which finally Hanna couldn't cope.

"Why do I always get the gossipy old women? My God, they think they are grand ladies. One old girl wore white gloves no less, with holes in the fingers, for Christ's sake. They treat me like a servant, as if they are better than I am. Their husbands were labourers just like my father and my man. They left a lousy quarter."

"You get all the younger men. I get the older lechers," Lindsay said quietly, trying to calm her friend.

"I suppose that implies that I flaunt myself. You should talk. I watched you. You were virtually throwing yourself at the older handsome gent; and he couldn't take his eyes off you either. I got to admit you cover the full age scale. First you rob the cradle and now you're after an old retirement plan. Who were they? They looked rich. Did you see the Mercedes they came in? It was at least an 820."

"There is no such car," Lindsay said laughing. "They came out to see a friend who is house-sitting at that big new house down by the bay. And don't worry, my only interest in the distinguished man was when I heard him say that he was going to India. I couldn't control my curiosity. I told him I was born there. Quite naturally he pretended to be interested. I don't think he believed me. As you know I can never resist talking about my homeland. He probably thought that I was a complete ninny."

Hanna had already forgotten her earlier annoyance. "Far from it," she said. "I can tell a lonely man. That old guy has the hots for you. He'll be back. Play it right and he'll take you India. And by the way, where is the hermaphrodite who was mooning around the café for a time?"

"In jail." Lindsay had only told Hanna that she had known the creep,

as Hanna called him, back east. She hadn't told her anything about their relationship and the stalking.

"In jail!" Hanna cried, breaking into a smug smile and nodding in a self-congratulatory manner. "I knew it. That's where he should have been put a long time ago. He was disgusting, trying to deceive everyone, by masquerading as man with a woman's body. What did he do, kill someone's cat or molest a child? You didn't try to get it on with him, did you?" Hanna said looking at Lindsay in shocked incredulity.

"You really are a bitch sometimes," Lindsay retorted, now slightly annoyed herself. "He was not all bad you know; you have to feel sorry for him with his unfortunate feminine appearance in a stereotyped world. He has a good heart." Much as Lindsay had been terrified by Shaun as a stalker she was still sympathetic and understanding of his sad situation. She hadn't intended to tell anyone the full story but now she felt a great need to release the pent-up guilt that had weighed on her so long.

"I knew him back east as I told you. We were close for a time. Then he became obsessive, following me and harassing me. I don't know whether he is possessed by demons, or is just desperate for some kind of recognition and normalcy. He wanted to control, own and consume me. It became so bad that I decided the only solution was to move west. Somehow he found out where I'd gone and followed. When I wouldn't have anything to do with him again he started stalking me. I'd see him watching in the shadows, like a phantom only all too real. He wrote and left notes in the most intimate places. We got phone calls in the middle of the night. Then weird things started to happen around the house. He became ever scarier so finally I went to the police."

Hanna's eyes were wide in fascinated disbelief. "Why didn't you come to me? I'd have set my burly hulk on him. He would have soon sent the creep scurrying back east with his tail, or whatever else he has down there, between his legs. My God, did you really have a thing with him? Could he get it on?"

"Oh my, yes! I can assure you his appearance is deceiving. He's all man underneath that girlish face. He's not a hermaphrodite in any sense. It's

really society's fault, requiring everyone to fit into an acceptable mould. I guess I felt sorry from him originally. He was being cruelly ostracized. Then, I became addicted. For the first time I experienced real sex after an unfortunate marriage to a crude demanding boor." Lindsay hadn't intended to tell Hanna that part of the story, but once she had started it was such a relief to unburden herself of her shame that the entire unsavoury affair poured out.

Hanna sat dumbfounded, unable to speak. This was beyond anything that had ever taken place in Beaver or anything she had read about in pulp romance novels.

Lindsay continued. "The police got a constraining order. But they couldn't do anything until they caught him in the act of peeping or had some solid evidence that he was harassing me. All the time I knew I was partially if not largely to blame. I obviously led him on. The threats became more personal, scary and bizarre. At first I didn't think he was dangerous. Then I wasn't sure. Our dog was poisoned. There were acts of vandalism. I thought my children back east were in danger. The police chief, who I think had a thing for me, finally approached the case as a personal matter. They found an old typewriter he'd used to type the notes that had a distinctive key. They picked him up last night and he's in jail waiting for the judge to sentence him. He'll probably be sent down to the big state prison which in itself will be a travesty with his looks."

Hanna, who had been struck dumb by the incredulous story, was now full of pity and concern for her friend. "My God," she gasped. "That's the worst story I've ever heard. The guy is obviously sick and dangerous and should be locked away for good. Only now you must worry about when he gets out of prison. He'll want revenge. Those types always do. Much as I'll hate to lose you, I think you should go back east, take on a new identity, have a face lift."

"Thank you. You are a true friend. Don't worry. The chief says the big pen will cure him of all romantic tendencies. I think he'll just disappear, assume a new life far away." Lindsay wasn't at all sure. She had broken Shaun's protective shell. Hanna in her simplified reasoning was undoubt-

edly right. “Thank you, but don’t worry. Will the town still accept me after this episode?”

“Of course! This just adds some real spice to your Indian mystic. But I wouldn’t talk too much about your sex with him. In Beaver a man is a man who displays real hormonal characteristics.”

She squeezed Lindsay’s hand reassuringly as they parted. There was a troubled frown on Hanna’s brow. She now seemed almost more concerned than Lindsay.

Despite Hanna’s warning, Lindsay felt better as she walked home, taking the trail through the woods without fear. The forest was peaceful in the afternoon sun. Little puffs of dust rose up and hung in the still air like small grey clouds as she scuffed along the pathway. She felt reborn and renewed. Most of all she no longer felt alone after sharing the dirty tale of her indiscretions with Hanna. As an embarrassing secret it had weighed upon her mind and body like a debilitating disease. The inhibitive bindings imposed by the stalking had been shed, like the shackles on a released prisoner, she guessed. She kept telling herself that it was over. It had been nothing but raw, unadulterated erotic sex. A wild passion had been released within her after years of frustration and sexual crudity. It was quite natural. Having shared her sordid story with Hanna she was no longer as ashamed. All that was left was the mystery of how he had become such an expert lover. It should have been a red flag. At least now she knew she was vulnerable and susceptible.

A patch of deep shade covered the narrow path. The sun’s warmth suddenly carried a clammy chill. Lindsay’s heart raced. Her warm thoughts of erotic sex turned into revulsion. She felt his presence again and she started to run. Re-entering the sunlight her fears vanished just as quickly as they’d come. How silly, she thought, he’s locked away. Her mind calmed. It was only natural that the qualms continued after the long ordeal, like the feeling of an amputated leg. Was this what she would be subjected to mentally when he got out? He was methodical. In his twisted mind was he already planning dreadful forms of revenge? She cursed Hanna.

Her mother greeted her impatiently, aggravated because Lindsay had

not come home immediately after her shift. The disillusioned old woman who had once been a sparkling English beauty with the clear complexion of the English countryside was now a dour, wrinkled complainer, consumed with self-pity. Deep furrows were etched into the once fair soft skin.

“Where were you? With that little tramp you work with, I suppose. She’s no good, you know. She had a child out of wedlock and now lives openly, unmarried with a man. That crazy crank that was making all those telephone calls could come around when I’m home alone. You should cultivate some new friends from among those people in the big houses down on the bay. They are no doubt *nouveau riche* but more refined than the ill-bred local riffraff. Where is that young man from back east who came to visit you? I know he is too young as a suitor, but you should have cultivated him as a friend instead of being so aloof and rude and driving him away. He’s one of the few Americans I’ve met who had some breeding. Have you heard from him?”

“He’s in jail.”

“In jail!” her mother shrieked. “What for? There is some terrible mistake. He’s sophisticated. He wouldn’t hurt a flea. We’ve got to get him out. I hear atrocious things happen to nice-looking, refined young men in those terrible places. I’ll post bail and then we’ll clear up this dreadful mistake.”

“Leave it alone, Mother. There is no mistake. He’s deranged. He was the one who was making those phone calls and cut the garden hoses. I think he killed the dog.”

“Killed the dog? Preposterous, he loved the dog. You are imagining all this.”

“No, I’m afraid not. The police traced the threatening notes I received to an old typewriter in the house he has been renting. Apparently he had some crazy obsession about being in love with me. I didn’t want to worry you so didn’t tell you that he has been stalking me.” Lindsay of course hadn’t told her mother that they had been lovers back east. As far as her mother knew they were just acquaintances.

The old woman was completely devastated. She had been taken in completely by Shaun's gentle manners and the conditioned cultural graces.

After a tense, silent dinner, neither of them broaching the unpleasant subject again, her mother disappeared into her room without another word. Lindsay slipped out of house silently and headed for the beach. She felt badly about her disillusioned mother but was glad that the nasty business was out in the open with her as well. She could wander aimlessly and breathe freely again.

Sunlight was dimming in the soft glow of evening. In Beaver, situated so far north, the light in August still lingered well into the night. The ocean, restless and noisy during the day and later in the night, was often calm and placid in the early evening hours. It seemed to Lindsay that it was taking a respite, resting after a restless day and before turbulent night. The long stretches of white sand strewn with parched logs and grey-washed boulders seemed to be at peace with the mighty sea.

Perched on a high rock outcropping she surveyed the placid scene. There was no one else about. She couldn't entirely remove the image of Shaun from her mind and from time to time glanced nervously about. But at least now her mind wandered freely without dread or remorse. She tried again to rationalize her actions. She had really liked him for a time. No, she decided, 'like' was not the right word. She had needed him or someone to plumb the full depths of her longing. She had escaped from the emptiness of a tragic loveless marriage. She had needed someone to fill the void left by her departing children. If it hadn't been him it would have been someone else. Only he was good, more than good, the consummate lover. She squirmed in memory. How had he become so adept in the art of love?

CHAPTER 2



SHAUN STERLING

The flashing red lights of the police car startled Shaun awake. He believed he had nothing to fear, yet he leapt out of bed in near panic. The terror of prison that his father had implanted in his mind when he was a small boy still haunted him. He recalled precisely the menacing warnings of his father when he was grossly disobedient. “If you don’t behave you’ll go to prison. I can’t even tell you about the vile things that happen to effeminate-appearing boys in there.” When Shaun was older and had learned the full significance of the ominous threats he was naturally appalled, but in some strange innate way he blamed himself. It was not until he was grown man that he shed his sense of guilt and realized that his father’s frightening admonitions were responsive reactions of self-mortification for his own perceived male shortcomings for not rearing a manly boy in his image. Notwithstanding, Shaun had never really been able to dispel the deep fear of prison.

Shaun took a deep breath and tried to calm himself and think rationally. He felt quite sure that the police had nothing to go on but Lindsay’s undoubtedly hysterical contentions that he was stalking her. They could not possibly have found any evidence that would incriminate him. He’d been, he thought, inordinately careful and cunning. He had researched the laws and knew they had to have some tangible piece of proof to arrest him. He’d covered every facet. The late night phone calls had been made from other towns on pay phones in case they employed hi-tech tracking,

which he thought was highly unlikely. He had paced the duration of his heavy breathing so they wouldn't have time to trace the source of the caller. He'd typed the notes on an old typewriter he found in a pawn shop in Portland. It looked more like a museum piece than something that actually worked. He'd purposely left it sitting on a shelf in full view covered in a thick layer of dust. He guessed the police had searched the house when he was out but they would have found nothing there but some dirty clothes, a little stale food and the old dusty typewriter. That bit of clever subterfuge had amused Shaun greatly. The police would never think of examining the antique.

He tried to think reassuringly. He was confident they would have found nothing. As a social misfit Shaun had lived his entire life carefully on the edge of anonymity and had been overly cautious.

Pulling on his pants he swore angrily, "This is just police harassment. The amateurish scare tactics of the local bumpkins." Yet cold tremors of fear ran down his spine as he grabbed his jacket and rushed towards the back door, his mind racing.

When Lindsay had told Shaun to get out he was distraught and desolate. Before that, for a time he had felt like a normal man, waking early, making love, getting up and leaving for work and reappearing in the evening to be met with her warm greetings. He'd even rented a small space as an office where he could hang out during the day, although he had no real job. He realized he was being dishonest and deceptive, but couldn't help himself. A lifetime desiring to be accepted as part of the normal social paradigm in an established relationship overpowered all reason. When she disappeared, without a word, he was totally devastated.

He'd tried to resurrect the life he'd led before he met Lindsay – living inconspicuously and unobtrusively on the edge of society. He even attempted to pursue his previous escorting activities. All to no avail. His long, carefully nurtured protective shell had been broken. He had experienced a short period of normality. When she told him to get out and then had disappeared without a word, he was left exposed, vulnerable and desperate.

Shaun went to see Lily, the madam at the whore house he frequented, to get her practical advice. She had been most helpful in advising Shaun, first on how to woo Lindsay and then subtly seduce her. Lily as usual was blunt and forthright.

“She is obviously not appropriate for you. Find her and confront her for your own peace of mind if you must, but then forgive and forget her and get on with your life. Otherwise, if you cling to the impossible you’ll destroy the only vestiges of any happiness you’ve ever had or could have with your unfortunate physical affliction. I know the sequence all too well. Many girls that come into my house of pleasure have gone through the same kind of disillusionment as you are encountering. They found what they believed was normality. Then, promises were broken and the rays of false hope were gone, leaving them lost and bereft. Those who continued to reach and strive for a life beyond their destiny usually suffered through recurring tragedies. Only occasionally did one get out.”

Shaun took Lily’s advice to heart, but he felt he needed closure. He went west to find Lindsay. He would confront her directly and make her fully cognizant of the damage she had done to his delicate psyche. She must be made to at least suffer with her guilt.

As the slow train crossed the prairies, however, and he had more time to mull over his unfair life, waves of bitterness towards her welled up in him like sour bile. He twisted the fault and shifted the blame. In his mental distress, like a mad man, he unknowingly began mumbling and cursing aloud.

“It was she who led me on and then callously abandoned me. She drew me into a way of life that I’ve always longed for; before her I accepted my fate and had learned to live with my affliction. She took advantage of me. She induced me to let down my defences. She destroyed my well-ordered existence for her own selfish pleasures, and then crassly discarded me, like an old sullied suit, or a used condom. I was simply a sex toy to her. She must have known with my looks I had a fragile shell. She lured me out of my unobtrusive existence. It was all her doings. She must be made

to suffer with her guilt. Mere confrontation is not enough,” he rasped mournfully.

Other passengers looked at him with alarm and moved to other seats. He barely noticed in his anguish.

“You callous bitch, you heartless creature,” he swore over and over in frustration as the train climbed from the flat lands into the mountains and descended towards his destination. “It’s only fair that you be made to bear the responsibility and suffer for what you have perpetrated so blithely.”

The train was nearly empty and obviously Shaun didn’t appear to be dangerous in any way. So he was left alone in his ranting. Periodically, the conductor would stop and try to placate the disturbed man.

When Shaun found Lindsay at her mother’s house and she summarily rejected any possible reconciliation and gave no indication remorse, Shaun seethed with renewed anger. His good intentions of merely confronting her and admonishing her for her insensibilities changed to the need for more severe retribution.

She had been hostile and rude, acting as if he were the sole culprit. When she left the room abruptly after dinner, leaving him with the silly old mother pretending to be a grand cultured lady, he was furious. Only his long life of forbearance enabled him remain calm and sit quietly, pretending to listen to the old woman.

Now Shaun wanted revenge; he wanted to hurt Lindsay, not physically but emotionally, just as she had disturbed him. He determined he would destroy the tranquil life she had apparently made for herself in the remote community of Beaver.

Already, as he sat pretending to listen to the prattle of the old woman, a plan began formulating in his mind. He would harass and terrorize Lindsay with a subtle program of evasiveness. Beaver was, he determined, the perfect setting. The police in the small town would not be particularly bright or diligent. It would not be difficult to confound them. The houses where people lived were scattered widely. There were usually few people on the streets and roads.

He had stayed for a long time sitting calmly in the parlour letting the

old woman ramble on about India, thinking that in some way she might be useful in his carrying out his vendetta on Lindsay. He was somewhat of an expert on snowing lonely old women. As he left the house it was well after midnight. Walking away in the darkness he chuckled dementedly. The old bitty had virtually tried to seduce him. No one was about. Yes, he was sure she would be helpful.

For several days he wondered around the town making sure that he was seen. He even went to the café where Lindsay worked and sat quietly reading while eating lunch. He knew he was immediately the talk of the community. The other diners would fall quiet when they saw him enter the café. He would hear the whispering and laughing. It was not difficult to imagine their conversations. "Why was this woman dressed as a man?" Transvestites were obviously not a common sight in Beaver. "Why was he here? Is he dangerous?" Shaun didn't care. That kind of speculation and malicious talk had been the story of his life. Their speculation was part of his grand plan.

In his free time he noted Lindsay's routines and he observed the casual activities of the police. Lindsay, he soon discovered, was the perfect victim. She led a life of solitary tranquillity, often wandering alone along the seashore in the evenings. Much to Shaun's anticipatory delight she took an isolated shortcut through the woods to and from work.

Just as he'd arrived in Beaver unannounced he disappeared suddenly. He found and moved into an abandoned, isolated house on the outer edge of the community. His plan was sinister and simple. He would harass her from a distance with fleeting images in the shadows. She would think she saw him, but would never be quite sure. He would implant himself as a spectre in her mind. But there would not be a single thread of tangible evidence to prove that it was he who was out there. If she went to the police her claim that she was being followed would be solely based on her hysterical contentions. The police would be completely hamstrung without a scrap of even circumstantial evidence that there was a crime at all. Eventually they would wonder if it were just a woman in her menopause suffering from delusions.

He started making anonymous phone calls late at night, never speaking, with intermittent pauses of silence and heavy breathing. He left notes in inconceivably intimate places so that in addition to the gnawing fear induced by the stalking, she would also be in near panic, wondering how he could have possibly invaded her privacy so completely. He anticipated the whole scenario playing out with satisfied delight. The police would be searching fruitlessly for the machine that typed the notes while all the time the old artefact from the distant past was sitting in plain view. She would be close to hysteria but wouldn't dare tell the police the whole story, of how she had had a sordid affair with the effeminate-appearing man who the cops as well as most of the residents had seen at the café. That was the key. Alone in his house at night he would laugh with malicious pleasure at the clever intrigue.

At first he had employed a pleading tone in the notes, as if he were asking for forgiveness. Then, there was an undercurrent of menace. Then veiled threats. By Shaun's diabolical reasoning she would become more and more desperate, while the police at the same time were becoming more dubious, having found not a single piece of concrete evidence. Whenever Shaun thought of his training by the whores that he had employed in the seduction of Lindsay he was filled with delicious pleasure. That was his ace in the hole. There was justice after all. She had often asked how he had become so adept as a lover. "It is simply a rare innate instinct," he had answered evasively. She would certainly not show the police some of the notes with their intimate inferences.

The whole exercise eventually became a game. He watched her growing consternation from a distance in the woods; he sensed the futility of the police in their frantic efforts; and he marvelled smugly at his ingenuity. The plot was unfolding exactly as he'd envisioned. She knew who it was that was stalking her and why but the police did not have anything that was traceable, not even circumstantial evidence. She couldn't or wouldn't tell them the total story. At night alone in the old shack Shaun would fall asleep smiling, contentedly.

Shaun's girlish looks had plagued him for his entire life. The first vivid

memory from his early childhood, at the age of two or three, had festered and grown in his brain. He'd overheard his father say derisively to his mother, "Why in God's name wasn't it at least a girl or a stillborn, even a full-blown homosexual, instead of this so-called boy in what appears to be the body of a girl?" That angry remark had seared into the small boy's psyche. Like most boys Shaun had wanted the approval of his father. Often he cried long into the night. He never had forgotten or totally forgiven.

Shaun was a tragic dichotomy, one of those apparitions that occur occasionally in reproduction. He was a completely normal boy, hormonally. As he matured all the strong natural male sexual urges arose and raged. Only his physical development didn't follow. He retained completely incongruous effeminate characteristics. He was all male physiologically, but in looks and nature he appeared to the world to be a delicate female, or a blatant homosexual. Somehow the genes had got scrambled.

Growing up was not easy for Shaun. He suffered through all the inner conflicts of a maturing boy sheathed in what essentially appeared to be a girl's body (sans breasts and a vagina).

The dichotomy was exacerbated by a macho father who was steeped in conventional male tradition, a mother warped by religious fanaticism, and intolerant hypocritical neighbours in a closed social environment of conservative convention.

His father, a big rugged man, didn't possess a thread of understanding or compassion for someone outside of his idea of the traditional accepted mould. He never could surmount the disappointment of not having borne a boy in his perceived image of maleness. He bullied and ridiculed the tender boy endlessly, incognizant of the psychological damage he was inflicting on his son.

They lived in a middle-class world of conformity and routine, the father rationalizing their mediocrity and failures by, "if only." Their house was in a suburb on the outskirts of Claremont, among rows of identical houses. A bay window on the front of the house looked out onto a small neat expanse of lawn. Small side-view windows peered into neighbour's bathrooms, with the blinds often left open, either carelessly or intention-

ally. In the cherished sense of an American's expression of individuality and personal freedom, his father, an accountant for a large conglomerate, drove to and from work in the city centre, alone, in a large SUV among a proud stream of other independent, frustrated commuters. On Saturday mornings he played golf faithfully with the same men, at the same time, at the same place. After the game they drank beer in the clubhouse and rehashed every shot, missed or made. Then in the afternoon, in a dirty undershirt, he mowed the patch of grass in front of the house, riding a small green and yellow tractor. The neighbours did the same. Sunday morning, as a suburban routine, in the same soiled undershirt, the father washed the car, while his wife attended church for spiritual renewal, administered by a fundamentalist preacher. His father was a complainer. He couldn't cope with, or tolerate, anything that he perceived as being non-customary. When it was, he responded with mean sullenness, ridicule and abusiveness. Later in his life Shaun often wondered if his father had hidden homosexual tendencies.

Shaun's mother was a sad, subdued and pathetic person, wrapped up in a narrow protective world of religion and salvation. She was aware of the trauma that Shaun, the tender and sensitive boy, was experiencing in trying to please his father and fit into an intolerant environment of rowdy and mischievous boys and spiteful girls. But she lacked the courage to protest and resist openly, and as time passed she sank further and further into prayer.

Instead of shedding the soft features of a child as he matured, Shaun retained his deceptively feminine appearance. The bones of his face and body remained finely drawn and no matter how hard he tried to appear manly the girlish tendencies stood out. In school he was rejected by both boys and girls and mercilessly bullied. As soon as other boys in school became aware that he looked different he was the object of ridicule and hazing. They banded together and taunted him with girlish imitations and rude remarks. When he had tried, contrary to his delicate inclinations, to participate in boys' games and group activities in order to appear normal, they mocked him.

“You should be playing field hockey or touch football,” someone would always sneer. “Why don’t you take up crocheting and not try to engage in manly activities,” someone else would shout, to everyone’s great amusement. Mostly he was left out, or at best relegated to some non-participatory activity at a teacher’s insistence, both to his relief and chagrin. And it was not only the boys. Even worse than the exclusion from boys’ pastimes, was the scary, venomous and vicious meanness of the girls. If he tried to mingle in mixed social gatherings he was shunned like a leper. Boys with acne-disfigured faces were more acceptable to the popular girls in school. Once in a moment of desperate indiscretion he asked one of the more desirable girls in the school, who seemed somewhat kinder, to a dance. She had declined, barely able to hide her embarrassment, and walked away with her friends, laughing cruelly. He never forgot or repeated that imprudence. Even the homely girls, the ones the macho sports-heroes ignored, were aloof and cool. They wouldn’t accept the effeminate-appearing substitute. Of course there were the boys with homosexual inclinations. Initially they would pursue Shaun with great ardour. And Shaun, desirous of acceptance by anyone, didn’t immediately turn away. They didn’t repel him, although he felt no sexual affinity. As soon as the gay group realized, however, that he was not one of them literally they laughed and ridiculed him as well; some of them even became angry, believing that he was being deceptive and misleading. Because he was excluded from normal boys’ activities his tastes and interests were channelled towards artistic things, which of course accentuated the perception that he was gay.

His gonads descended as in any boy; his sexual drive was possibly more intense because of the inherent desire to be accepted as manly and normal. His voice never deepened entirely, however, and during the transition from a boy to man his vocal intonation was a mixture of undulating highs and lows. Sometimes he stuttered slightly as he desperately tried to make more guttural male sounds. His facial hair was light and sparse, more like fuzz than whiskers.

Overall he grew rapidly in stature like any other teenager, but his physical characteristics remained essentially unchanged. Reaching man-

hood he was a male without a man's bone and muscle mass. And emotionally, although he consciously tried to affect a gruff exterior, he had a mild and tender disposition.

Not by choice he became a loner, as an innocent victim caught in an impossible dilemma, being pulled in a tug-of-war between mind and body, desire and inclination. He was by nature gregarious, wanting to be a part of social gatherings. But he was excluded because he didn't fit any given category. In essence he was an unfortunate abnormality in an environment of conformity.

As a young grown man, stronger and stronger male sexual drives mounted within his effeminate-appearing body. Desire ran like molten fire through his veins, finally driving him to a brothel for relief. There his sexual needs were not only fulfilled but he was given a rare amorous education. Many of the girls had been exposed to abuse and cruelty by their families and later by perverted clients and they were empathetic; they understood Shaun's unfortunate dilemma. They took him in and gave him a thorough grounding in much more than a sexual release. They instructed him in the approach and techniques in the art of refined seduction which they had missed and longed for in their own lives.

Shaun had every reason to become bitter, but instead he developed into a cordial and amiable young person. In college he majored in and became an authority in various esoteric artistic fields. In particular the mysticism of Oriental religion and their art and sculpture intrigued him. The non-confrontational, passive ways of the Tibetans appealed to his mild nature. Upon graduation these interests gave him access to groups not as concerned with convention or appearance.

Notwithstanding, innately an outgoing human being, he longed to be included. Periodically, he would try to do whatever he felt necessary to be a normal part of the activities of the so-called in-crowd. He even got involved in supplying drugs, although he was not an excessive user. The drugs were merely a means of entry and inclusion into various social activities. It was ironic, he often thought laughing bitterly. His father's scare tactics of using the horrors that awaited an effeminate-appearing person

in prison as a disciplinary deterrent had been counter productive. His desire for inclusion at any risk had driven him to the brink of crime.

As young man he was still largely left alone, but he no longer was meanly ostracized as he'd been as a maturing boy. Most meeting him immediately assumed that he was gay. The so-called enlightened crowd was tolerant, or indifferent, neither concerned nor caring about his sexual proclivities. He was treated as a neuter by both the gays and the straights, and he perfected a non-imposing attitude that he referred to jokingly as 'inconspicuous anonymity.' He also began to realize that his physical affliction gave him some unique advantages. There were decided benefits in being considered abnormal in highly conventional surroundings. Hence, occasionally he parlayed his physical dichotomy into his own advantage.

His father, probably partly because of subconscious guilt, thinking Shaun would be incapable of a satisfactory career and would be unable to make a decent living with his unmanly looks, had established a small annuity for the unfortunate creature that he had reared. It was not excessive, but enough so that Shaun didn't have to work full-time. With this outside means he dabbled in his artistic interests. The artsy social set got to know him and included him at least peripherally in some of their functions. Periodically, he was asked to escort older widows and wives of rich patrons whose husbands didn't care to attend various events at the museums or theatres. The old girls confided in Shaun, believing that he was a safe confidant. He was in a sense a modern eunuch and as such often privy to the rich matrons' 'harem gossip'. Some of their uninhibited disclosures about escapades in their otherwise respectful lives were quite revealing and amusing. The mayor's wife had had a liaison for years with a plumber. She was a practical woman getting her jollies and free plumbing for their big old mansion on the hill, which had ten bathrooms without copper piping. The Episcopalian minister's wife methodically seduced the choir boys when their voices fell. She listened for the telltale drop in pitch and plucked them one by one like ripe cherries. Shaun had many laughs over that image. She was a big woman with an enormous bosom and thighs as

thick as oak tree trunks. The maturing boys, Shaun imagined, must have got a rare indoctrination into big sex.

Occasionally, young people invited him to their functions as a safe source of pot. There, some of the younger women also disclosed their secrets, considering him more attentive and discreet than even their hairdressers. He was deemed to be neither a threat to them nor their husbands. The straight men shied away from him not wanting in any way to be suspected of having homosexual tendencies and he was spared tedious discussions on golf and football. As a fly on the wall of upper-middle-class society he was party to many rare and amusing confidences. He knew who was having an affair with whom; who was unhappy and considering infidelities. It was often better than a soap opera, or a pulp novel; but also it was a delicate balancing act. Sometimes, he was tempted and aroused, but knew all too well that if he showed the slightest signs of sexual interest he would flush the proper girls like a bevy of frightened quail and lose their trust. When he became excessively frustrated, after attending a party, he visited the call girls at the brothel.

At the age of twenty-five when he met Lindsay he was obviously far from being a virgin in the traditional context of American virginity, but he had never had a truly intimate relationship of an emotional nature. He had never been kissed squarely on the mouth before.

His whole world changed. The carefully nurtured role as a harmless abnormality in a world of conformity was overturned. For the first time he felt like a real man. He was liked and accepted for what he was, 'a horny male'. He was approved by someone not for pity, or for his usefulness as a safe source of drugs, or as a harmless escort and attentive safe listener, but for himself. The fragile shell he'd built around himself was broken. His comfortable unobtrusive existence was cracked. He was also highly vulnerable, normal in Lindsay's eyes, or so he'd thought, and worse yet, now acceptable socially in his own mind.



“And just where do you think you are going, Sonny?”

The beam of a strong flashlight blinded Shaun as he tried to escape out the back door of the house and flee into the woods.

The big burly policeman grabbed his arm roughly. "You've been harassing a lady; I guess you know that's a criminal offence. Will you people never learn? Criminals are always the same. They think they are cleverer than we are. But they always go too far and slip up. You are charged with personal threats and molestation. You have the right to remain silent...."

Shaun, although quivering with fear, bristled with resentment. 'Sonny,' his father had used that belittling designation in a demeaning way, even after he was grown and mature. He tried to struggle free. The other policeman came racing around the corner of the house with a dog on a restraining leash barking menacingly, eager to get involved actively in the arrest of a dangerous criminal. They twisted his arms behind his back, handcuffed him and dragged and shoved him, screaming profanities, into the back of the police van. He had never been so humiliated and terrified.

The enclosed space in the rear of the police van accentuated the pungent smell of his fear; sweat trickled down his sides making him shiver violently as it cooled. His bladder released a gush of warm liquid. The dog in its cage next to him in the rear of the van bared its teeth and growled whenever he moved.

"You can't do this to me. I have my rights. You have nothing on me," Shaun shouted in an outraged voice, more high-pitched than ever in his fear. "Let me call my lawyer. I suppose you believe that stupid woman. She's jealous that I went out with another girl. Christ, she's more than twice my age. You're crazy if you think I'd bother her."

The two cops laughed at his protestations. The big one stating mockingly, "Tell it to the judge, Sonny. Yes, you'll have the right to call a lawyer, but it won't be until morning. It's late and every official is warm and comfortable in their beds. Perhaps they are even experiencing normal amour with willing partners of the opposite sex. Maybe someone will post bail for you, although if I had my say I'd let the creeps who prey on women cool off for a time in the brig, regardless. And I wouldn't resist any more, or we will be forced to commit you as a serious social threat and take

you straight to the state penitentiary for dangerous violators. You'll have some real nasties as roommates there. With your good looks and delicate body, you'll be a sensation!" The policeman's voice was filled with hostile humour.

They drove off, the two police officers talking nonchalantly about their private lives, ignoring him. He was just another routine offender, like a common drunk, or a prowler caught disturbing the peace in the small town.

They pushed him rudely into the holding tank in the town jail. The brick cell had not been altered materially since Beaver's bawdy frontier days when the drunks and vagrants were held overnight to sober up. The cell smelled of urine, vomit, unwashed bodies and stale booze. Shaun thought he was going to be violently ill.

In the dim glow from a streetlight filtering through a dirty barred window, Shaun could just make out a row of double bunks.

"The top bunk is empty here. Or you can share my pad," someone called out of the darkness in a drunken slur; rude laughter came from other bunks.

Shaun trembled, another spurt of urine trickled down his pant leg. Although he assumed it was not dangerous in the jail of the little town, the thought of being sent to the state pen in the morning reignited the horrors of the phobia induced by his father when he was a child. There was no one to post bail.

The mortification of being thrown into a cold, stinking cell with the lowest dregs of a backwater town was too much. For a few moments Shaun lost control completely. Tears, which had been held back for years, streamed down his smooth, soft-whiskered cheeks. He shook like a leaf being buffeted by wind.

He had always been meticulous about his appearance and fastidious about cleanliness. Lindsay had teased him about his habit of wiping the cutlery even in good restaurants. The mere thought of sitting on a public toilet seat constipated him. Here, suddenly, he found himself subjected to everything he held malodorous. An array of wild thoughts coursed

through his mind. In desperation he clanged the cell door. No one paid any heed.

Finally calming himself, not wanting to provoke any more attention, he crawled up on a top bunk and lay stiff and trembling, barely able to breathe. The cold reality of his hopeless situation struck home; he was paralyzed with hopelessness and fear.

A slightly drunken voice asked out of the darkness, "What are you in for?"

"I've been falsely accused of stealing," Shaun mumbled, sensing that it was better not to mention that he'd been arrested for harassing a woman. Criminals, he'd heard, often had a perverted sense of chivalry.

There was a loud burst of coarse laughter. Another voice stated profoundly, "They all say that. We've all been wrongly accused."

Hearing voices emanating out of the semi-darkness without being able to see or identify the source or number of persons in the cage added to Shaun's dismay. He could only imagine.

For a time the unseen cellmates, in a vulgar mixture of swear words, conversed about their unjust treatment, ignoring him.

Finally, someone yelled, "For Christ sake, go to sleep. Wait till morning."

"Maybe we have a real looker," another said, laughing crudely.

The rustling and talking slowly died away. In its place a cacophony of coughing and unrestrained farts rumbled through the closed space. Finally the cell descended into quiet snoring.

The cement enclosure with its rusted steel doors and barred windows was cold and damp. There was a blanket, but it stank even worse than the overall stench of the space. Shaun forced himself to lie still so as not to attract attention, but he began to shake again almost uncontrollably from the mix of chill, fear and disgust. The stillness was eerie.

The night was long and cold and miserable. Shaun tried to dispel all the disgusting images of his surroundings, but he couldn't. His mind kept dredging up all the dreadful things that might await him if he were sent to the state prison. Time and again he was on the very edge of losing self-

control. Remorse, anger and then new thoughts of revenge welled up in a violent turmoil in his mind. Who could he call to get bail? The capital in the small trust fund that his father had set up for him couldn't be used. He never would ask his father for help, no matter what happened; he would only laugh and say mockingly, "I told you so." His mother, under strict financial control, had no access to funds. He knew no one in the little town of Beaver except Lindsay and her mother. Lindsay would hardly post bail for him after filing the harassment complaint that put him in the brig. The mother, perhaps. The irony of that idea almost made him break out into hysterical laughter. Fortunately no sound came out.

Eventually, composing himself, as he'd trained himself to do as a boy in combating baiting, bullying and exclusion, lying miserably on his back, he tried to think calmly.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dark, but he could only make out the ominous bulk forms of other bunks. The only sounds were raspy breathing, but Shaun imagined that some of the unseen occupants were still awake; he was afraid even to close his eyes in case one of them crept up unseen and shoved a dirty sock, or worse, into his mouth. That revolting thought reawakened all awful childhood fears that had been instilled by his father's warnings.

He cursed her over and over, repeating silently, "How could she have done this to me? How could I have let myself believe that she had accepted me for what I am and was not turned away by my effeminate looks?"

Finally, exhausted, he fell into a troubled sleep.

Dim light creeping through the dirty windows awakened Shaun fully. Momentarily he didn't know where he was. Then, the horrors of what lay in wait for him roared back into his mind.

CHAPTER 3



NGARI INDARA

Ngari Indara was the youngest offspring of a beautiful, tragic and highly dangerous love affair of the kind that periodically unfolds out of the cruel and intractable social castes and strict religious sects of India. His mother was the beautiful daughter of a high Brahman landholder, his father a peasant from the lowest social rung. They'd met by chance, or fate his mother said, defied tradition and fell in love, consummating their love secretly. It was not only an unlikely union, but a highly precarious one.

They were leagues apart in every aspect of their backgrounds and appearance. Yet, despite all the contradictions and dissimilarities and consequential repercussions if they were detected even conversing, there was an irrepressible attraction; two diverse souls were drawn together, first by rebellion, defiance and adventure and then bound as one by the intangible and intractable forces of love. She had the fine aristocratic features of generations of arranged marriages, possessing all the refinements of careful conditioning in preparation for a suitable marriage and a submissive life among Indian aristocracy. He was a stocky lad, with a coarse build and the rugged looks of a manual labourer. She was bright, articulate and well-educated and lovely, a rare combination for an upper-class Indian girl destined solely for a marriage within her caste. He, while intelligent, was virtually illiterate with no formal education, having had to labour from an early age to help a poor large family survive. He was steeped in Buddhist pacifist tradition while she was of a pious and vindictive Brahmin order.

They were two opposite poles, but also magnets with an irrepressible power of attraction. The extreme contrast and the forbidden nature of the fruit dangling so near had been irresistible. A raging fire ignited by the tinder of their youth burst out and destroyed all reason. She was only fifteen and he seventeen. The vigour of their bodies and the free spirit in their souls overrode all other considerations.

The highly unlikely union began, as unions of this nature usually do, innocently. While riding she would see him toiling in the fields, shirtless. His rippling muscles, glistening with the pungent sweat of hard labour in the hot sun, stirred sensations she had never felt before. His proud bearing set him apart from the other workers in the fields.

He would watch her ride across the fields on her spirited stallion. When she came close instead of lowering his eyes respectfully he would look at her boldly and openly, well aware that even a casual intimate glance observed by the foreman could result in immediate dismissal.

As time went by, a defiant challenge developed between the two rebellious youths. They both knew full well that any personal exchange between them was strictly forbidden. If caught, or observed in any semblance of familiarity she would be restricted in her freedom to ride in the fields, and, if she were perceived to be engaged in any kind of promiscuous behaviour, she could be cast out of the family and thrown into the harsh world without means. As a fallen girl of even a high caste she would most likely have to resort to a life of prostitution to survive. She could even be killed by the father and brothers to save the family's honour. He would have to flee and live as a fugitive hunted by the authorities as well as by a family seeking vengeance for the loss of the family's respectability. There would be no understanding, compromise or compassion.

Notwithstanding, the defiance and allure were overwhelming, superseding all the possible repercussions. The forbidden contact became a compulsion rather than a deterrent.

She rode more and more frequently in the fields where she knew she would find him working on warm days. Furtive glances changed to casual

greetings. Feeling particularly bold or perhaps more aroused than usual, one day she stopped and spoke brazenly.

“Did you ever ride?”

Laughing, he replied, not the least chagrined by her query that could well have been construed as a slight, “Only on a plodding ass. I don’t think that qualifies as riding in your sense.”

“Would you like to ride with me sometime?” she responded, smiling temptingly. “You can sit on the back and hold on to me. Riding is quite exhilarating on a spirited horse.”

They arranged to meet near sunset when he had finished work and after the field supervisor had left for the day.

“I won’t be missed, as long as I’m back in time to dress for the evening meal,” she whispered in a low voice, conspiratorially.

That was the beginning. They had galloped across the fields, laughing like innocent children, he bouncing about in an ungainly manner on the rear of her strong horse. Their vastly different backgrounds were forgotten.

The tandem rides became a regular clandestine affair. At first, they were merely carefree children, beating the system, defying authority and breaking the rules of the social order. Then, other plots for meeting undetected were devised, their free spirits tempting them into ever greater follies, their hot young animal blood drawing them on into ever bolder and bolder adventures. They weren’t conscious that a profound and enduring love was being instilled in their restive hearts. They started to meet at night. She would slip quietly out of the house after everyone was asleep, she thought, and meet him in some obscure, prearranged place. At first they simply talked about their dreams and aspirations. As was inevitable, they began to touch and then hold each other in increasingly passionate embraces. Each restrained the other with the rules of their contrasting backgrounds. She resisted because of her virtuous upbringing, but knowing if he pressed that she would eventually succumb. He held back respectively. When he sensed her moral resistance was weakening he would forcefully pull away. But they both knew that sometime all re-

sistance would dissolve. Their passions would overwhelm moral restraint. She begged him to take her and he would run his hands and lips over her quivering body, but that was all. At night alone after they parted, lying in their vastly different worlds, they tossed and turned and cried out in frustration.

Impulsively, as a solution to their moral dilemma, like unthinking children that they were in both body and heart, they were married secretly by an unscrupulous monk, in order to sanctify the consummation of their love. That act of mad impetuosity probably saved her life.

They had been observed. She guessed that her brothers had seen her slip out at night. They were envious and steeped in tradition. She was her father's favourite and he made no attempt to hide his bias. The mother had suspected by the radiant glow on her daughter's face that she was involved in some forbidden love, but had said nothing, knowing the terrible consequences if it were true.

Under fierce subjugation and interrogation their affair and secret marriage were revealed. The young girl would neither repent nor renounce her husband and lover. She was cast out of the family in shame and anger. The father was heartbroken, but felt he had no alternative. The young husband and wife fled the farm, fortunate to escape at all.

They were alone in the cruel world of India's teeming destitute. Somehow they survived, she doing menial housekeeping jobs, he taking work as a labourer whenever possible. Her once soft, pampered hands became rough and callused like a peasant's. He, although young and strong, working at the lowest manual level was taxed to the very limits of endurance. But, unlike many wild young romantic indiscretions that dissolve in bitterness and remorse, their love grew and flowered in their deprivation.

At night, although often tired beyond the realm of anything she'd ever known, she taught him to read and write. And he indoctrinated her into the passive spiritual world of Buddhism. She was soon pregnant and they were elated, despite the further hardships a child would impose upon their marginal existence.

With the added burden of an infant he was forced to take a job in

a quarry where the pay was higher and regular. The long days of work were hard, but the real danger was the grey dust that drifted and settled everywhere. He didn't tell her that the powder congested in the lungs and killed eventually; if you continued long in the pits you died a horrible death, gasping for air until finally strangling in choking spasms.

Three more children were conceived and born and loved before he died. Alone, with four small children, desperate, the mother went to her family for help. They wouldn't take her back, but her father did use his influence to get her a position as an ayah in an English colonel's household.

Ngari, the youngest child of the forbidden marriage was different from the other children. The two older girls and the boy had inherited the rougher and coarser physical peasant features of the father, but unfortunately were without his inherent intelligence. Ngari had inherited the fine aristocratic bearing and delicate features of his mother, which soon were unattractively coupled with an unpleasant haughtiness of perceived superiority.

He felt he was different and special. And while the mother tried to be fair, subconsciously she favoured the sensitive younger boy. Naturally, there was resentment on the part of the other children.

At an early age Ngari displayed a rare precociousness in drawing and art. He'd sit for hours sketching on scraps of paper or pieces of wood, even tracing images in the sand. Some of his creations were quite beautiful and clear, others were vague and obscure, some disturbingly grotesque. No one, not even his idolizing mother, knew quite what went on in the taciturn boy's mind. He resisted authority and was openly disdainful to the English household. He was aloof and haughty to everyone with the exception of his mother and the little English girl the ayah looked after.

Even in her exalted position serving the English family, life in Darjeeling, where the colonel's wife and small daughter spent much of the year, was difficult for the ayah with four small children to rear. As the sole provider she struggled to merely feed and clothe them. Later, when the children were old enough to help it was an easier time and that was a happy interlude in the ayah's life after many burdensome years.

The two older girls got work picking the tender tips, the *diva paat suiro*, for the famous Darjeeling tea, carrying the huge baskets on their backs up and down the steep slopes of the Himalayan foothills. The work was strenuous, but having inherited some of their father's brawn they didn't mind. The older son was apprenticed as a porter in one of the tourist hotels.

Ngari showed no inclination in help in any way, taking full advantage of his mother's obvious preference. While the others worked and helped, he drew and sketched, often accompanied by the ayah's small English ward. The quiet grace of the fair little English girl seemed to have a calming and controlling influence on the restless, troublesome boy. Sometimes the girl would sit quietly while Ngari drew. Other times they would just squat beside each other in the shade and talk, each listening attentively to the other, like two respectful adults discussing world events rather than small children chattering about frivolous things. Although they were complete opposites in culture and race and colour and their social positions were far apart, there was an obvious mutual sense of understanding between them. The ayah watched the growing closeness with a mother's pride and joy; at times it seemed as if the two young children, one brown and taciturn, the other fair and sprightly, were brother and sister, her natural children. At the same time she couldn't dispel a feeling of impending doom if they were left together much longer. She remembered her own rebellious youth.

The ayah found the two children together in the woods, naked, examining each other's bodies. Her son, at the young age of ten, was already partially aroused. The ayah was dismayed, not because of what they were discovering, or doing; that was simply the natural inquisitiveness of children. But she knew if her employers, as stiff and proper English in their superior colonial role in India, found out about the physical familiarity between the children, she could lose her cherished position as an ayah in the household. They would not excuse the children's normal curiosity, especially when the skin of one was brown and the other white. As the

ayah she would be blamed and dismissed. She couldn't take the risk. The two innocent children would soon have to be separated.

She left them undisturbed in their harmless exploration. But now she fretted more urgently over what she should do. She couldn't forcibly separate them without causing terrible consternation. She had already thought about sending the boy away to an art school in Delhi, but that was far beyond her means. She asked the English colonel and his frivolous wife for help. They were amused, thinking the drawings and doodling of Ngari were simple childhood fantasies, a way of avoiding work. They wouldn't help. In desperation the ayah even asked her father, but he too was sceptical about great talent being present in a peasant's son.

The answer to the ayah's quandary came by chance. A monk from Tibet stopped in Darjeeling on his way back over the high passes to Lhasa. The ayah, with terrible misgivings, determined this was a possible solution to a potential problem.

She sought out the monk. At first he laughed at her and was totally unresponsive. She showed him a portfolio of Ngari's sketches. The high monk was impressed, but it was only after much cajolery and pleading that he agreed to take the boy back with him to Lhasa, with the understanding that Ngari would be subjected to a life of religious submersion as a monk.

It was the hardest decision the ayah had ever had to make. She was a true mother, filled with every possible concern, real or imagined, about anything that might affect her son. She was nervous about the future of Tibet. As an educated woman, she knew about the Chinese claim that Tibet was historically a sovereign part of China. She reasoned that the communist regime would exercise that claim eventually, forcefully if necessary. Having grown up under colonialism she had an inherent fear of oppression. When the oppressed became the rulers they were invariably fanatically vengeful and crueller and less tolerant than the rulers they'd overthrown. The peasant class with power was a frightful spectre for the once privileged woman. In her mind, Tibet as a passive, spiritual land would no doubt suffer horribly if there were Chinese occupation. Artists

in particular under a classless communist regime would be prime targets of cruelty.

At the same time the ayah was concerned about Ngari's future in art in the spiritual environment. She had become a Buddhist in principle, but having been raised in a strict Brahman tradition the idea of total immersion for her son in Buddhist doctrine was troublesome. She feared he would be subjected to endless meditation and his free spirit and artistic potential would be lost. There would not be sufficient appreciation for what she considered was her son's great artistic promise and he would not be given the time and help he needed to develop and hone his inherent skills.

So while Tibet was an ideal solution to a potentially disastrous situation she was apprehensive. Finally, since there was no alternative she agreed, but with severe reservations. She warned her son of the dangers he would be confronted with and made him promise he would escape back to India if the Chinese invaded.

The parting was heartrending for everyone except her other children. They were glad to see the pampered and favoured boy leave. Ngari, though he despised the English household, didn't want to go. He was suddenly a little vulnerable boy again, all his philosophical maturity gone in a stream of tears. The idea of leaving his mother and his little English companion was more than his childish bravado could stand. He ran away. They found him hiding in a loft on the edge of town. His little English admirer was equally distraught. The ayah left the two of them together for a time to say goodbye in their own grown-up/childish way. She heard the girl sobbing and Ngari, now resigned to his fate, trying to console her with adult reasoning.

"Don't worry, my little one. It's only temporary. I'll come back and see you as soon as I'm famous. Meanwhile you listen and gain great wisdom from my mother. She is of a high Brahman sect and has great spiritual insights. Look after her. Wait for me."

"You'll never come back. I know," Lindsay wailed, sobbing uncontrollably. "You will forget all about me and I'll never see you again. Why do

you have to go?" They were both young children torn out of their security; only Ngari had already mastered his emotions with grown up logic, while Lindsay was lost and devastated completely in a small child's fears.

It was a wrenching juncture in all their lives. Ngari would go over passes far away into a remote world of mysticism. Lindsay would soon be sent away to a boarding school in England to prepare for a life in an entirely different culture and new environment. The ayah was left despondently alone. She kept telling herself that it was essential, the best of everyone, but that only eased the pain temporarily and superficially.

Actually there had been no alternative. Ngari had become increasingly rude and contemptuous, particularly with the colonel's wife whom he considered totally frivolous and of a markedly lower social class – someone to be disdainfully avoided. Ngari had never accepted his father's peasant part in his genes.

The faces would blur in each of their memories. Subconsciously, Ngari and Lindsay would never entirely forget the joyous times spent together as two children under the protection and tutelage of the wise ayah. The ayah was never quite the same. She would sit forlornly alone, wondering what her son and surrogate daughter were doing. Over time, slowly she shrivelled and wasted away in her grief and longing for their return.

Ngari walked stoically away with the monk, without once deigning to look back. Lindsay Devon cried non-stop for days.

Ngari never entirely forgave his mother. She followed his spiritual development and artistic progress with pride, as much as she could through reports by occasional travellers. The Chinese invaded as she'd feared. She heard nothing, could find out nothing about the fate of her son. She never saw him again, dying before he returned to India. The sad memory of his stiff and haughty back disappearing down the trail haunted her at night.

Matters were strained for a time between the ayah and Lindsay. She blamed the ayah for sending Ngari away. Soon, however, in the need for consolation, each in their loneliness and sadness turned to the other and they became closer than ever. Sometimes Lindsay, the child, was the comforter for the distraught mother. Then, the tables would turn and the ayah

would hold Lindsay in her arms as if she were the real mother of the small lonely child.

Once in Lhasa, under the kind and patient guidance of the monks, Ngari's metaphysical ramblings as a child matured and flourished. He felt immediately at home, in his rightful media. He immersed himself totally in the Buddhist's spiritual world, meditating for long spells. There was little free time for his art. But he didn't mind. Lhasa was a natural and highly satisfying environment for his artistic temperament. The memories of his family faded from the forefront of his mind, although occasionally he felt a compelling need for the sage council of his mother and the companionship of beautiful little English girl. Eventually, however, in his new life of spiritual devotion, he was totally at peace with his childhood, his meditation became his solace. All that remained from the past life in Darjeeling were occasional images of his silent little English confidant listening attentively. He sometimes imagined, not at all spiritually, how she would look as she matured into a woman.

Ngari was soon engulfed totally in the Tibetan life style. He studied diligently, memorizing the main dates and major turning points in Tibet's history. The cultural advancement of the remote land in its isolation intrigued him. His perspective, having lived in India with its English influence, was of course unique to most Tibetans. As a result Ngari was the centre of attention. The fellow monks were anxious to know and learn more about the outside world from someone who had actually lived there. When he described India under the rule of British colonialism they were as appalled, unable to conceive how anyone could live under foreign influence. They knew a surprising amount about the outside world, but few had any desire to go or live beyond their mountain barriers. His mother need not have been concerned about his artistic training. One of older monks who had travelled some in the West saw his sketches and Ngari was quickly redirected in his studies and assigned to work with other Tibetan artists.

He brought a new perspective to Tibetan art having seen more of the impressionistic and abstract works of the West. As such he became a ce-

lebrity, and not only among the artists. His unique skills and impressions were broadly recognized by the rich landowners as well and he became a favourite of the Tibetan land-holding class, which was nearly his moral downfall. He began to relish in the privileges of the landholder's higher status. They dressed him in fine clothes, like a little prince, and included him in their exclusive social activities, all of which inflated his inherent ego and his belief that he was special. For a time material things became important and his spiritual training was neglected. The Potala Palace, where he enjoyed the free run of its labyrinth of halls and chambers, was virtually his home. He began to wallow in the adulation showered on him and became addicted to a life of materialistic luxuries, taking full advantage of his exalted position.

Maturing into a beautiful young man there were other perks as well, which he indulged in wantonly. He ripened into an insatiable lover. Using his position as a gifted artist to the fullest extent he ravaged a willing coterie of raven-haired Tibetan beauties.

On the streets and roads admirers followed him like a pied piper. Basking in a life of adulation he nearly lost his way in debauchery. His artistic career was neglected. As a confirmed devotee of the Tibetan class structure, which the Chinese invaders later called a primitive feudalistic system, he sometimes felt that he had already reached his Nirvana. His Indian roots were forgotten entirely.

Because of his artistic reputation he was in great demand throughout the land. He was asked, and required to go to many remote monasteries to paint new *thangkas*, or to restore old art treasures and teach. At first he was reluctant to go and be deprived of his material comforts and body pleasures in Lhasa. But he had no choice and he got to visit some of the remotest and most spectacular areas of Tibet. Often the monasteries were reached under extreme conditions and at very high altitudes. The mountains became his saviour. The more he travelled the more the mighty Himalayas drew him in and back; he was transformed almost unknowingly into a hard and wiry little mountain man and his creative artistic genius was rejuvenated. The rugged landscape and nature's spectacular vistas gave

him a new perspective for his paintings. His art became an exotic and erotic mixture of the real and the perceived. Sometimes his renderings were entirely mythical, other times they were abstract, the image or the intent, if there were one, left entirely up to the observer. He focused on portraying the forces behind nature and in the senses, rather than on the objects themselves. At times his art and drawings were brutally frank and factual. In other sketches he expounded on the grotesque, elaborating on the images he'd doodled with as a child while Lindsay watched. His presentation of the eternal path of life was not always conventional. He became controversial, worshiped by those who appreciated the skill of the artist and despised by those who felt they and their faith were being maligned. In the remote monasteries, however, he was always met and accepted with great fanfare and excitement. To many of the isolated monks he was considered to be a Messiah, who depicted precepts of the spiritual world beautifully. He had reached, he felt, the best of all worlds.

In his time alone in the mountains he was able to contemplate life and the hereafter in the overpowering stillness. He felt at ease with nature. Yet, whenever he returned to Lhasa and sighted the Potala, towering over the plains, his spirits soared anew. The Potala was, in Ngari's eyes, the very embodiment of strength and endurance, the ultimate centre of the universe. That dichotomy of emotions surely saved his life.

In 1950 the simple Tibetan world of isolated peace and spiritual enlightenment ended abruptly. Violently and tragically the peaceful passive land was torn asunder. The Chinese invaded. Like swarms of brown clad locusts they swooped down on the utopian land. The resistance of the small Tibetan military force was quickly and ruthlessly subdued. The justification for the invasion was an ancient territorial claim, as Ngari's mother had said; the intent was much more sinister – to destroy all vestiges of Buddhism in the peaceful and spiritual land and dismantle what the Chinese communists called a feudal hierarchy. The purge was even worse than his mother's warning. Thousands were killed and imprisoned for no other reason than adherence to their simple life and faith. A massive program of psychological brainwashing swept across the land. The

communists in their fanaticism attempted not only to destroy the culture, they wanted to eradicate all the physical vestiges of Tibet's history. Ngari watched in horror as the peaceful social structure of Tibet was ruthlessly dismantled.

The mad Gang of Four, directed by Madam Mao, was the leader and perpetrator of the vile vindictive crimes; the fanatical Red Guards were the enforcers. Monasteries were burned and decimated. Even the prized lush barley fields on the plains outside of Lhasa that produced the beloved national staple, *tsampa*, were ploughed under and the land transferred into crops dictated by the invaders. Featureless Chinese tin structures were erected, sullyng the once beautiful, bold and distinctive architectural landscape of Lhasa. Much of Tibet's ancient art and artefacts was destroyed and lost forever. Beautiful symbolic carvings and many of the colourful *thanghas* in the temples, depicting the path of life, were decimated. Ngari wept silently as he watched the decimation, knowing that Tibet's passive existence as an isolated land largely free from foreign influence would be lost forever.

Some Tibetans fled across the plains and over the high mountain passes to India, Sikkim and Nepal, including eventually the Dalai Lama. Most others had no alternative and were forced to succumb to the Chinese repression. Ngari knew he was in grave danger. As his mother had warned, as a privileged religious Buddhist artist, he would be a primary target of their ruthless plunder and cleansing. For a time masquerading as beggar, he evaded the invaders. Then he too was apprehended and incarcerated in the infamous Trahshi prison. He guessed one of his detractors had turned him in, trying to curry favour. The conditions in the prison were so appalling that even with his strenuous conditioning from his travels and prolonged periods spent in cold, austere monasteries, he barely survived. It was a Hell-hole of filth and disease; the intent was slow starvation of the most recalcitrant. The slop they received was uneatable even for starving men; night and day they were bombarded by a relentless stream of brain-washing. Beyond even the most devout disciples of spiritual endurance, thousands simply gave up and died. But Ngari was a survivor. He believed

in his artistic destiny. He began to plot escape and retaliation. Repulsive as the idea was he decided to pretend that he saw the error of his ways and he wanted to convert. As a highly regarded Tibetan artist he would be, he reasoned, an ideal communist convert in the warped minds of the Chinese, if he were contrite. He began the process with Red Guards in prison. As he'd hoped, he was soon despised by other prisoners.

Confessing to having been a victim of misguided Buddhist sins, he asked for repentance. They released him from the horrors of the prison under close observation. Then, seemingly shamelessly and openly he began collaborating with the Chinese. As a total blasphemy he even produced modern communist art for the invaders, paintings and sculptures of happy peasants toiling in the fields or on assembly lines. He went so far in trying to convince the Chinese of his reformation that he personally directed the gruesome physical and mental tortures used by the invaders on the Tibetans.

Gradually Ngari became a trusted converted model to the occupying regime. As he'd planned and hoped, increasingly the invaders began taking him into their confidence. Other Tibetans not knowing his intent looked at him sadly; some spat at him in disgust when he met them on the roads. Girls that had been his intimate playmates shouted obscenities. All the time hate and revenge festered in Ngari's mind.

As inevitably occurs in any occupied country an underground network was formed with the dedicated purpose of harassing and resisting the invaders irrespective of the risk and horrendous punishment that would be wreaked not only on them but on their families if they were caught. Killing was against the Buddhist faith, but otherwise all kinds of disruptive carnage was inflicted on the enemy, whenever an opportunity arose. Roads were purposely blocked with herds of sheep or by man-made rock slides. Chinese patrols were led astray by the Tibetan guides in remote parts of the kingdom. Construction projects were sabotaged mysteriously. The members knew, as all members of undergrounds have known, that their individual activities were largely futile and the resistance was mainly

symbolic. But there were eager participants from all classes of the Tibetan society.

Ngari, on one side posing as a trusted Chinese collaborator, became a leader within the underground. As a Chinese confidant he had gained access to invaluable information. Secretly at night at extreme risk he supplied operatives in the underground network with details of Chinese troop movements and dates and times on other potential targets for sabotage. To enhance the Chinese trust in him, sometimes he even committed terrible crimes against Tibetans.

He moved up through the Communist ranks. They sent him to China for indoctrination and when he returned, believing that he had been thoroughly inculcated and was a confirmed disciple of their classless society, they installed him in ever higher positions of trust. He learned the Chinese dialect of the invaders and, as he had plotted, he was eventually given the highest possible position as a Tibetan in the invading regime – the principal Buddhist aide to the Chinese commandant in Lhasa. There he was entrusted with and gained access to many secret files and documents.

The Chinese, like most rulers and conquerors throughout history, had a strange compulsion to record their infamy. They documented their crimes meticulously, as if it were a badge of honour rather than a record of their perfidy. Ngari copied scurrilous facts and names from the gruesome files. At great risk, whenever possible he took pictures with an ancient camera. Then secretly, in the dark corners of the narrow streets of Lhasa, he passed on the condemning materials for others in the clandestine network to transcribe. The danger was extreme. Red soldiers moved throughout the city night and day. Ngari was well aware of the terrible danger. If he, a trusted convert, were caught there would be widespread reprisals with many tortured and killed in an added brutal and grizzly purge. The Chinese were not the only danger. Even in righteous Tibet there were collaborators and traitors without principles who tried to gain benefits and favours as informers. One never knew for sure who was a turncoat.

The main task was completed. In dark cellars under the dim flickering

lights of butter lamps the names of the perpetrators and the details of atrocities and crimes committed and a record of the terrible desecration of monasteries and art and artefacts had been tirelessly transcribed onto thin scrolls in neat Tibetan characters. The most damning documentation was a long list of innocent Tibetans murdered and those who had died because of maltreatment, along with the names of the murderers.

Ngari decided the danger of discovery had become too great. A small contingent must leave immediately and try to escape over the mountains to the west with the damning material they had collected and transcribed. From among many volunteers a small group of the most dedicated men was selected. They would flee over the passes to Sikkim, a Tibetan enclave in India. Ngari would lead the way.

From his extensive travels as an artist to the different monasteries, Ngari knew well the old trade route through Gyantse. But they would have to take another route, a more remote and dangerous way, which had once been used by smugglers in high summer, to have any chance of escaping what would be mad pursuit by the Chinese. The seldom-used trail was, they learned from an old surviving smuggler, difficult enough in summer. With winter approaching the old man said, shaking his head sadly, "There is no chance of getting over the passes; it is sheer madness to try." Ngari poled the men. They all agreed that there was no alternative.

They knew they must leave quickly, regardless of the added risk of the weather. All the selected group were at least partially mountain men, but none was as well conditioned and acclimatized as Ngari. The passes were high and perilous. A roughly drawn map, that the old drug smuggler had recreated from his fading memory, was their only guide.

In a cellar, lit dimly by a smoking butter lamp, the seven chosen men met one final time. Ngari outlined in sober cold reality the dangers of the venture.

"The risk involved on the route we must take is extreme. Your families will be exposed to the likelihood of imprisonment and torture. If we are caught you will be subjected to unimaginable torture before you die. Some of you will not survive the elements we inevitably will encounter on the

route even if we manage to evade the pursuers. I'll understand if anyone decides not to go. You will not be condemned in any way if you think the risk and the sacrifice is too great."

None hesitated. One man spoke for the others. "It is a great honour to have been chosen for such an exalted mission. This journey is a natural and logical extension of the danger we all took in transcribing the documents. Letting the world know in first-hand documentation what terrible things are taking place in Tibet is a noble goal. This is our destiny in our life. We will surely be reincarnated in a higher order."

They all nodded in eager agreement, everyone secretly afraid that for some reason he would be excluded from the mission.

Ngari smiled sadly at the group of eager men, trying to instil more assurance than he felt.

"Alright," he said, "go to your families. Try to act naturally. Don't tell anyone the intent or plans, for if they know they are more susceptible and surely will break under torture. No one can long withstand their sadistic techniques of pain and drugs."

One by one, like eerie shadows the seven men dissolved into the night.

Alone in his room, Ngari was plagued with guilt. He had witnessed, first hand, the ruthless terror and intimidation of the Chinese occupying force. He was high enough up in the order so his escape would be discovered quickly. He was a trustee, but they trusted no one. You were watched, regardless of your position or rank. He in particular was still under constant observation, even though he had become a high placed and supposedly a confirmed communist lackey. The purpose and full implications of the group's flight would soon be realized and reported at the highest level. He was a prize conversion. He had had access to secret documents. He knew too much detail about the heinous nature of the atrocities the Chinese had inflicted on the gentle people of Tibet. He knew the names of the perpetrators in high places who had ordered or inflicted the terror. In the communist's brainwashed minds he would be labelled as an unconscionable ingrate, a traitor to the liberators of the primitive land.

The Chinese commandant would be wild with anger and fear. He would want personal revenge. There was no tolerance in the communist system for failure. As the commandant he would be held personally responsible for Ngari's escape. There would be crazed pursuit.

At the start they would have to travel at night so they wouldn't be detected. Speed would be essential, not only to escape the inevitable pursuit of fanatical Red Guards with their blood thirsty hounds, but for them to have a chance of getting over the passes before the full force of winter descended. The food they could carry in their packs would be the only sustenance for days or even weeks. There would be no time to acclimatize to the higher altitudes. Some of the high passes would already be encased in deep snow. Ngari had experienced the wrath of the sudden storms in the high mountains and he sometimes still shivered from the memory of the blasts of cold glacier air and the penetrating wind. Prolonged exposure to the high winter storms would test any man's endurance, no matter how strong the will.

The chance of getting through were slim to none. But likewise, if they stayed it would only be a matter of time until they were discovered. And if they passively succumbed to the subjugation their spirits would eventually be broken.

They couldn't afford to take the chance of waiting for spring, or of following the usual less-rigorous escape route over the passes to India. Each day, like a ominous creeping shadow, Ngari felt the mounting risk and the oppressors closing in. Too many people had been involved in the transcribing process. In the Chinese communist system, as in all totalitarian regimes, there is an inherent atmosphere of suspicion. No one is completely trusted for long. The higher up one was in the hierarchy the greater the danger. Sudden searches were conducted without warning. One broken link in the dependant chain of their underground network would destroy all their work, unravel the entire organization and release even more dreadful decimation. The odds against them getting through were overwhelming. But they had to leave and now.

The transcribed documents were sown into their coats and leggings.

Unknown to the others, Ngari had taken pieces of ancient Tibetan art that the Chinese commandant had stolen for himself, and stashed them in his pack. The rare art treasures would be invaluable in the West. He kept telling himself it would help authenticate the validity of their other information. But he didn't tell the others. The maximum amount of food that each man could carry reasonably on his back had been carefully weighed out. A travel agenda was drawn up but it would have little relevance under the conditions they would encounter on an unknown trail.

The night was ideal for their flight. Dark clouds rolled down off the mountains. A thick damp mist shrouded the town. The Chinese guards huddled in the doorways and shelters against the chill, smoking despondently, unsuspecting that anyone was about on such a night.

The seven chosen men crept silently through the gloom, their heavily padded feet making no more than muffled shuffling sounds in the darkness and the wind. After rendezvousing on the outskirts of Lhasa they moved quickly. An old man, with only a few years left in his present form, he said, was willing to take the risk of being caught and tortured, rowed them across the Brahmaputra River in an ancient, leaking, flat-bottomed, wooden boat.

Barely a word was spoken. The spirits of the group were high, almost euphoric in their perceived honour of being part of such a noble undertaking. Needing to reach the higher mountains before dawn and get well ahead of the Chinese pursuit they sped across the valley through the dark night at a torturous pace, alternating between jogging and long purposeful strides. Even though acclimatized to the high altitude of Lhasa their lungs and legs were burning. No one complained.

Ngari alone was in a high state of agitation. Now that they were underway the awesome magnitude of what they were trying to do struck home. Their flight was totally insane. A tragic outcome was a near certainty. Rather than being euphoric as the others were he was despondent. As the principal organizer he felt an acute personal sense of responsibility for implicating the naive, brave men and exposing them and their families to horrible torture and death. Many not involved directly, or even aware of

the plot, would suffer. The families of the fleeing men would be interrogated with sadistic fervour. “Does the end,” he kept asking himself as they hurried on, “justify all the risks? Will the West do anything? Even if they are handed the documented proof of the crimes, would they, or could they, act?”

He tried to ease his conscience by whispering over and over in a silent chant, “The West will surely come to Tibet’s aid. At least collectively they will have to exert such economic and moral pressures that the Chinese will be forced to relent and abandon the harshness in the occupation. No matter what they do internally, they care about their worldly image.” It gave him little comfort. He, unlike the others, knew the West. He still remembered the self-centred indifference of the English in India to anything beyond individual commercial interests.

Several times, feeling an overpowering sense of guilt for leading these trusting men to sure death, he was nearly overcome with emotion. He had to forcefully resist stopping and telling his companions it was senseless and that they must abort the madness and return before their flight was discovered. But always he continued, leading at a torrid pace.

He thought about his own deception. Was the stolen art he’d secretly hidden in his pack really a necessary accoutrement for assuring the success of the undertaking, or was the real motive his personal welfare if they got through? He knew he should have told the others about the treasure in his pack, but it was too late. His companions would only be distracted and disillusioned. If he told them now it could sow distrust. He would tell them, when and if they got through.

Like grey, hunch-backed phantoms they raced along the valley in the dark night.

Some time had been bought by advising the Chinese Commandant that he had to go to the dentist the next morning, purposely bruising his jaw and causing his face to swell as a convincing deception. The fanatical Red Guards would not be deceived for long. They and a pack of bloodhounds would soon be on the trail, the dogs howling for blood, the Red Guards screaming for vengeance. He believed he was a brave man, but

the thought of the crazed hounds sent cold shivers of fear running down his perspiring back. His Buddhist training was not strong enough to overcome the dread.

At the foot of mountains they branched off from the main route onto the barely used trail that snaked up the steep slopes into the high ranges, careful not leave any traces of the route they had taken. There were no signs of recent travellers. Only the barest remnants of a trail at all appeared occasionally. Ngari would lose all signs of the track. He would become desperate. But always he kept striding on confidently to assure the others. A scratch on a rock or an old broken branch would be visible in a flash of moonlight. He would sigh with relief, saying with false confidence, "See, I told you. The trail is clear as a modern highway." There was a smattering of subdued laughter. They knew.

Over and over the sequence was repeated. All indications of the track would disappear. Ngari's courage would wane. Some slight sign would appear – the crumbled remains of a cairn, a dislodged stone, a tattered prayer flag, an old broken branch. They would laugh weakly and move quickly on.

They were climbing in the darkness, with only occasional flashes of moonlight as their guide. Ngari would become disorientated, feeling as if the low drifting clouds in the dark night were closing in and following them, or even at times, that they were descending. The map, crudely drawn, was of little value outside of providing them with the general direction they should take.

It became a deadly game. The others had not been fooled, but they said nothing. They knew that Ngari was exuding false confidence. When a crumbling protective stone god or a rock cairn emerged out of the darkness, they would chant and pray and then laugh in low mumbled tones of relief. They were scared and anxious, but also they were confident in their faith and resigned to their destiny. Ngari wished he were more devout.

The wind had risen and was in their faces, adding to the difficulty. At the same time they were thankful for patches of drifting snow. Any tracks

would soon be eradicated on the rough terrain. Only their scent would linger on trail.

They plodded forward, their exhausted bodies responding to the one thought in their minds – escape. They were out-distancing the inevitable pursuers and leaving no traces. That was all that mattered. They barely noticed the diminishing oxygen in the air at the higher altitude or that the cold was already seeping through their heavy clothes. They tried not to think about the smell they were leaving for the hounds.

Cold morning light began to filter through the dark overcast. A sliver of dawn appeared on the horizon. It was like a welcome beacon. They all saw it. Without comment the attitude changed again. The night was nearly over and they could sleep. The full extent of their tiredness suddenly struck home.

The sign of a new day brought a sense of accomplishment. They had escaped Lhasa without detection. The first hurdle had been overcome. They had made good time and were well up the lower slopes of the first high pass they would have to cross. There was renewed sense of hope.

As he watched the jubilant exhausted men Ngari was again racked with a terrible feeling of personal guilt. He couldn't overcome the sense that he had committed six men to almost certain death, either by the Chinese or by freezing and starvation. There was no question now. They could not turn back. Unlike the others, while the first stage of their mission had been accomplished – the successful escape from the heart of enemy – the hopelessness and futility of the venture was even more pronounced. "Oh Buddha," he whispered, "forgive me. I've committed these brave, trusting men to sure deaths, for nothing. We are damned. There will be no future life in Nirvana for me. I am leading these trusting, innocent men to certain death."

Their small tent was pitched in the lee of a high rock bluff, out of the wind. They covered it with brush and snow so that it was not visible from the air. They dared not light a fire. Crowding into the cramped space they made tea on a little Bunsen burner. Ngari spiked it sparingly with the beloved yak butter.

Small measures of dried yak meat and barley *tsampa* were rationed out to each man. It was hardly enough to subdue the hunger of the exhausted men, but no one complained. After the meagre fare they curled up like a pack of huskies to share each other's warmth. Almost instantly the others fell into a deep death-like sleep. Ngari lay awake listening to the heavy breathing of the men in the close quarters of the small tent; he guessed they were too exhausted to snore.

Like a mother, Ngari studied the faces of the tired men in the pale light of day rising on the outside. They were, he thought sadly, like sheep being led to slaughter, fearful of the unknown, but trusting that Ngari would lead them to safety, blindly confident that he would find the trail. He had become their Messiah.

Ngari rose quietly and crept to the edge of the escarpment and peered down into the valley they'd left behind. It was clear now and deathly still. Nothing moved. Just for an instant, standing in the stillness of the early morning light, he lost his fear in delusionary thoughts. *The Chinese wouldn't follow. They'd assume that the escapees couldn't possibly survive on the untravelled route this time of year.* But just as quickly he realized that was a ridiculous hope. He couldn't see anything, but he felt they were already there, scurrying crazily about, like ants around a dishevelled hill, searching for some trace. It would not be enough that the traitors would surely die in agony, hungry and cold; they would want to inflict their own personal vengeance, particularly the commandant who had lost his stolen art treasure, and would be desperate to save his own skin. He'd want to catch them, or at least find their frozen twisted bodies so he could hang them in the town square for all to see.

The tent was pleasantly warm, almost hot, from the radiating heat of the packed bodies. Despite his torment, Ngari fell into a dreamless sleep of physical exhaustion and escaped into metaphysical peace. In the late afternoon, he guessed, it was still partially daylight; he was startled awake by a new and different sound. He lay stock still, barely breathing. He heard it again. This time he knew what it was and his blood ran cold. The hounds' bays, carried by the wind, were distant, but clearly distinguish-

able. He'd seen them on searches for others who tried to escape. There was nothing more bloodcurdling. Starved by the Red Guards to make them more ferocious, they would be running crazed on the trail. He had once seen them catch and mangle a fugitive, while the handlers stood by and laughed. He couldn't go back to sleep.

Finally, darkness and its safety for travel descended on their little camp. Quickly they brewed more tea and Ngari dispensed another meagre ration of *tsampa* to his silent companions. No one said a word. They were now seemingly totally at peace with their souls. They knew they couldn't go back and if they were unable to continue they must be left behind to die alone. Their belief in reincarnation and a better next life was written in each man's face. He didn't tell them about the hounds.

The tent was quickly rolled and packed and they started out again, careful not to leave any signs of their presence for the Chinese scouts to find. Before they left, Ngari once more crept to the rim of the ridge. Far below on the plateau small bobbing lights were visible in the gathering darkness. The hounds' howls could be heard distinctly now. When he joined the others they looked at him anxiously. They had heard the dogs as well and were desperate to be underway. The howls of bloodhounds had scared them all, despite their faith.

Ngari led, again often blindly. The trail wound ever upwards through a drifting film of new snow. Progress was painfully slow, but none faltered. Again they stopped at the first signs of light. The tired men drank the tepid tea and ate their meagre rations, silently. It was colder now. They huddled more closely together for warmth in the cramped shelter. Curling up like dogs they fell into a deep exhausted sleep. Again Ngari remained awake for a time observing them with love and admiration.

During the next night as they travelled the sounds of the crazed hounds grew closer. No one said a word, but terror was evident in the drawn faces that even their faith could not hide. On and on they toiled, mounting ridge after ridge, dipping down into ravines, climbing back up, Ngari encouraging anyone who faltered. He would lose the trail and think that they were completely lost, that it was over; he had failed; they were doomed.

But they plodded on. When all seemed hopeless the tattered remnants of prayer flags, or a crumbling cairn emerged out of drifting snow. They cheered in weak strained voices. Ngari smiled despite their plight, thinking they sounded like the cracking discordant sounds of maturing a boys' choir. They moved on with a new surge of strength. Ngari's confidence would fail. But always, near a point of total discouragement some vague marking of a trail would re-emerge and his spirits would be uplifted. Even he began to believe that an unseen power was guiding them.

They reached the top of the first pass at nearly 18,000 feet. The snow was hip-deep in places. The last steps up were made by sheer mental determination; they had used the last iota of their physical reserve. Several of the men were already suffering greatly from the high altitude and the creeping onslaught of the invasive cold.

They were in a world turned upside down. The first signs of daylight brought a wave of relief. They could stop and rest and drink tepid tea and eat, then huddle together for warmth. The slim rations were not enough to sustain them long, but that soon didn't bother them either; tiredness and the need for sleep overcame the hunger pangs. The thought of being able to curl up together for warmth became the force that dragged them on as the pale light of morning began to show.

Something changed. For a time no one knew quite what it was. They stopped. Simultaneously, they cheered. They could no longer hear the dogs. There was a new sense of hope. They had passed the second great hurdle. The dogs and pursuers were no longer the main concern.

"Just one more night," Ngari told them, "and we should be completely beyond the Chinese pursuit. The first enemy will have been vanquished. Then, it will only be the cold and the slow dissipation of our energies from lack of food and oxygen deprivation with which you will have to contend."

One of the men was in a serious state with frozen toes and fingers and uncontrollable bowels.

"Leave me," he implored Ngari. "I'll just delay the others. I've tried my

best, but now the time has come for me to move on into another more peaceful world.”

The others stood silently looking at their companion sadly, wondering, Ngari guessed, possibly even hoping, that they would be next to depart life on Earth. But the will to live remained the stronger force, overriding Buddhist faith, and they trudged forward.

The stricken man died silently and peacefully some time during the day. No one heard a sound or knew he had stopped breathing until they untangled from the cold body when they awoke. They couldn't as yet wait to light a fire to burn his body as was the traditional Buddhist custom when there is wood available for a funeral pyre. So they constructed a platform out of rocks, cut the body into parts, and left the pieces neatly arranged on the makeshift rack for the ravens and vultures.

Now they were descending. Just in time. Each step down from the high altitudes to a lower reaches breathed life back into their oxygen-starved brains and debilitated bodies.

The respite was short-lived. New obstacles confronted them, at times even more challenging than the deep snow and winds on the high pass. But at least there was oxygen in the air again. Wild rushing rivers had to be crossed and re-crossed numerous times in the valleys. Sometimes they got over the raging torrent on old dilapidated, makeshift rope bridges that swayed precariously on frayed ropes. There were desperate moments as a rope broke, or a rotted slat cracked under the weight. Mostly the crossings were made, however, on slippery logs, the wild water lapping just a few feet away. One slip would plunge them into the churning water and they would be swept away down a gorge in the roaring current. When it was particularly dangerous the packs and coats with the valuable documents were passed over the rushing water separately in case someone slipped and fell. Progress was slow, precarious and nerve-racking. But a new spirit was evident. The goal, while not in sight, somehow seemed achievable now that they had come so far. They had escaped the Chinese pursuers and scaled the highest pass.

Their progress was slow. They had to overcome an endless array of

obstacles. They climbed and descended and climbed again. They crawled along the edge of cliffs. They walked slowly and carefully along precipitous paths. The trail would disappear entirely and they would have to turn back and try another way. Sometimes an avalanche had left great piles of rock and tangled roots and splintered trees which blocked what had once been the trail and they would have to make long detours.

But they kept going, like silent clinging spiders without a web. The weather was less severe at the lower altitudes, but the terrain at times was more difficult.

They camped beside a rushing stream and for the first time lit a fire. Ngari measured out a larger portion of their dwindling food supply as a celebration. The warmth of the fire and the first hot meal of barley porridge since they left reinvigorated them. They laughed and joked, their spirits soared.

Ngari hadn't told them. There was one more pass marked on the little map. The old smuggler had said, "It is not quite as high as the first one you will have overcome, but in your weakened condition it will be even more demanding and will tax some completely."

Ngari told them the dreadful truth as they started up again, "You will have to survive increasingly on will and spiritual fortitude. I'll have to reduce the ration again. It has taken longer than we planned." They nodded in understanding. "However, at least we can revert back to a normal pattern of sleeping at night and travelling by day, no more discombobulated time." They laughed weakly at Ngari's attempt at humour.

Silently they ascended on the vague remnants of the rock-strewn trail. The markings of the old smugglers route were discernible below the snow line, although it was evident that no one had passed there for a long, long time. They had not seen a single person or living creature since leaving Lhasa. The only indication that there was other life on the universe had been the distant baying of the hounds and fortunately that was gone.

The weather was pleasantly bright and cool. It would have been nearly perfect for climbing if their bodies had been well nourished. As they rose up into the clear azure sky, however, clouds began to form on the towering

peaks above them; the wind stirred uneasily and the air chilled, causing them to shiver despite their extreme exertion. In the trees, sheltered from the rising wind, it was tolerable. But when they broke out above the tree line, they were struck by mighty blasts of blowing snow and fierce tearing gusts of frozen air. Winter had come. It would be, Ngari knew, the final test of their remaining stamina.

Up and up they staggered into the snowy waste. Ngari had to urge and implore them continuously to keep moving. For if they stopped now, exposed to the full blast of wind and snow, they would never regain the energy to climb the steep approaches to the new pass that they would have to cross. The inclination was simply to sit down and die in despair, or perhaps relief. If they stopped there would be nothing Ngari could say or do to move them on.

The wind screamed, battering them remorselessly, at times nearly toppling them off the narrow ribbon of trail. Often there were no signs that anyone had ever been there. Often they couldn't see if they were moving in the blinding snow. Occasional breaks in the fury provided a sense of direction. Each slow step higher was a major effort, an accomplishment.

"Don't stop," Ngari kept shouting through the wind. "Each step higher is also a step closer to our goal."

It cleared partially. The sight of wild terrain was even more terrifying and awesome. Two other men were near a state of collapse, falling to their knees, begging to be left behind and allowed to sink peacefully into their spiritual worlds of reincarnation. Their faces were blistered and blackened from the wind and the sun reflecting on the snow. One man's feet were frozen and he hobbled like a tired old man. The other was nearly blind. All Ngari could do was help them up and urge them on.

The two stricken men could go no further. Urging was useless. The group stopped and erected their flimsy shelter in the lee of a bluff of rock. The two stricken men were too far gone to even eat. They curled up in sleep and sank into unconsciousness. They died in the night. As before, their dissected bodies were left in the open for the ravens and the vul-

tures. There was some wood about, but the others were too dissipated themselves to gather it and burn the bodies properly.

They divided up the remaining food from the dead men's packs and redistributed the documents they carried. The death of those two men was probably what saved the four surviving men's lives.

Ngari thought he saw contrasting movement. He tried to shout. Nothing audible came out. They moved slowly on. Then he saw it more clearly. For a moment he was afraid he was hallucinating. The tattered remains of prayer flags anchored to rocks were flapping like wounded birds in the wind. They were at the top of the last pass.

When he was able to speak, or at least make intelligible sounds, he said quietly, as if it were a foregone certainty. "We've made it. It's all downhill from here. Our mission is accomplished."

It was as if they had been given a gulp of pure oxygen. They pulled themselves over the ridge of rock and without pausing started down. As before each step they descended gave them a new gasp of energy.

That night they camped on a high ridge sheltered from the main force of the wind. There was no wood for a fire and the fuel for the Bunsen burner was gone. It didn't matter. They ate the last of the cold barley gruel and drank cold tea laced with a dab of yak butter. Their throats were raw and they could barely speak. Yet, it was like a banquet, or as one man, familiar with Christian beliefs, joked, "The last supper, with no food." They were all aware that they had been on the outer edge of life. Their dissipated bodies had been propelled solely by the determination of their minds.

Ngari was near defeat. He didn't tell the others. He had given up, abandoned all hope of getting through. His once hard body was totally spent.

Somehow, they continued through three more plodding days and cold miserable nights, huddling together in the little tent, sleeping listlessly, surviving on instinct and drawing on the last gasps of some hidden reserve. There was no fear now. They all felt it was destiny. Nothing could deter them.

Ngari glimpsed it flitting through the cloud. For a moment he thought his blurred eyes were deceiving him. His mind wouldn't immediately function.

Slowly, the massive expanse of Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, came into view. There was no mistaking it. Ngari remembered from his childhood, admiring it at dawn in awe from a tourist's viewpoint outside of Darjeeling. They were near the border of Sikkim.

"We're there," he cried out in a hoarse cracked, rasping whisper.

The others looked at him in alarm thinking their leader had gone mad. All they saw was a massive mountain towering in the sky and a vast glacier flecked with gaping fissures.

He pointed at it, babbling incoherently. "We're safe. Sikkim is on the other side."

Four haggard, emaciated men, more dead than alive, dragged themselves over the border. They were the first refugees to have ever made it over the high abandoned trail, possibly the only to have even tried. Even the Buddhist monks at a monastery near the border, used to living in a mystical world, could hardly believe Ngari's story. But they took them in and nourished them back to life without questions.

They had been on route for twenty days and nights, or nights and days. To the four ravaged men, it seemed as if they had spent a lifetime on the trail.

The mission accomplished, three of the surviving Tibetans dispersed throughout India to make new lives. Ngari, imbued with a non-Buddhist hatred, stayed in Sikkim. He wanted personally, somehow, to extract a measure of revenge. He'd make the Chinese pay in some way.

A monk in Sikkim knew of Ngari from his art. The monastery commissioned him to restore and paint frescoes in a little temple high in the foothills above Gangtok, the chief city of Sikkim. The ancient Buddhist shrine had fallen into disrepair.

He didn't tell the monks or his companions on the flight about the valuable treasures he'd carried out of Lhasa, rationalizing that he didn't want to endanger others. He knew the Chinese would find him some day.

Thieves and conquerors are by nature vindictive; they never forgot or forgave. They would torture the truth out of someone left behind in Lhasa and like hounds they would relentlessly follow his trail. Always he would know they were out there closing in; he would have to live a life with fear lurking in the background.

Ngari did not mingle with the locals, being careful not to disclose his real identity to anyone but a few high monks. The only call he tried to make was to his mother. A sister told him she had died years before.

He painted and waited for an opportunity to get the secret material to the West. It would not be easy. The Chinese were not the only danger. India in particular posed a threat. They wouldn't want to antagonize their mighty neighbour.

He was safe for a time. But they would come some day.

CHAPTER 4



SEDUCTION

Humming happily over the sink, her hands immersed in suds, she didn't hear him enter.

Her daughter and new husband were having an open house in their first home. They wanted it to be especially nice. Lindsay had offered to come and prepare canapés and wash the dirty dishes, do anything to help as people came and went. She promised that she would stay out of sight. Actually, it wasn't an imposition. Her marriage had recently dissolved in growing discord and tension and had ended in a nasty divorce; she was happy to have something to do. Even washing dishes was preferable to sitting home alone feeling sorry for herself and brooding over the failure of her marriage and the meaninglessness of her life.

"My, oh my! They have attractive help," he said lightly.

She whirled about issuing a startled gasp; he was the most remarkable looking person she'd ever seen. For an instant she thought it was a girl in men's clothing. But then, upon closer observation, she sensed a masculine energy under the girlish appearance. The lovely smooth surface masked strong male instincts. A musky odour seemed to permeate the room. She knew instinctively as a sensuous woman that this effeminate-looking person was not a homosexual. She was drawn to his eyes. They seemed to reflect a hidden passion.

"If I'd known that you were in here slaving over the sink, your beautiful hands wrinkling in harsh soap, I'd have come earlier to help. They're

too young and giddy out there for me; I need a lift. Mind if I take a few drags?"

"No, no, go right ahead," she stammered, "but don't blow the smoke in my direction. And by the way, I'm not the help. I'm Jesse's mother. I'm just helping out."

"I guessed as much. You look alike. You have the same air and grace. There is a similar sheen of inner beauty. You of course in your maturity possess far greater sophistication and wisdom."

She laughed at his factitiousness. The flattery was a bit too thick, but she liked it. It had been a long time since a man had said pleasant things to her.

"Would you like to try a joint? It will make your work much more enjoyable," he said, extending a packet that she assumed contained reefers.

Her first inclination was to refuse indignantly. Then, on an impulse, she said casually, effecting what she considered to be familiarity, "Why not? I guess I can't get into too much trouble over a kitchen sink."

She took a few puffs, coughing as the strong smoke seeped down into her lungs and the sharp scent curled up her nose. The sweet pot quickly took affect. She felt wonderfully free and giggled like a young girl. Soon, under the relaxing affect of the weed, she lost all self-consciousness. He stood there grinning, making no attempt to help.



"How could I have been so terribly naïve?" she muttered, throwing a shell she had picked up far out into the sea.

She glanced around furtively. Then, remembering that Shaun had been arrested and was locked away in the town jail, she continued her leisurely walk along the empty stretch of beach, weaving her way among cleanly washed boulders and white-bleached logs; for the first time in months she felt free and safe.

Her mind flitted back and forth between the past and the present. She wondered about the older man at lunch, speculating on who he was and what he did. His arrogance had annoyed her on one side, but his self-

assured manner had attracted her as well. There would be no contrivances with him. Hanna was right. He looked rich.

“God,” she invoked aloud, “how I want to go back to India.”

There is, she mused, as she often did, something magnetic about the place where you were born that never left you. It was one of the intangibles of existence. Although not religious, Lindsay supposed the believers would say that it was the inexorable draw of the immortal soul. Whether you were a native of the country, or not, didn’t really matter.

“Perhaps,” she whispered giggling as she strolled along, “I’m part West Coast salmon and I will eventually go back to the stream where the egg was fertilized and where I spent my early childhood and spawn some eggs myself.”

Realizing there was no one else on the beach, she stated aloud with determined conviction, “Someday, I’ll visit my homeland.”

India of course wasn’t her real heredity. She was from pure English stock. Her mother had never let her forget that English heritage, even though her parents had lived among the Indians for most of their adult lives.

Lindsay had been born into the remnants of the passing British era in India. And while her father and mother flaunted their English tradition, they lived fully and wallowed in the lifestyle of upper-class Indians. Her mother, in actuality, was a middle-class English merchant’s daughter. As a pretty and pettishly frivolous girl she had pursued a rising English career officer. They had married and shortly after he was assigned to the Indian army.

Soon after coming to India, in her mind and attitude, her mother became a grand lady of the upper ranks. She acted out all the pretences of maids and an ayah and summer homes in the cooler climate of the hill country, as if it were her natural born right. Lindsay’s father had risen quickly to the rank of a colonel and was a respected figure in the Indian army class structure, leading an officer’s life of authority and games. He played cricket and polo with the Indian officers and even occasionally hunted the endangered tigers from elephants. So, while Lindsay’s parents

weren't Indian in their customs and bearing and never could be, they played the part of upper-class Indians to the hilt, while haughtily maintaining a feeling of English prominence. They personified the British attitude of superiority that the Indians had resented for years and then resisted openly, throwing off the yoke. When they had to leave, the colonel's tour with the Indian army over, and were thrown back into Western society, it had been a difficult adjustment, particularly for Lindsay's mother. The colonel had been posted on a temporary exchange assignment as an instructor at West Point Military College. There Lindsay's mother was simply another army officer's wife in American classless mediocrity. She never conformed and the American army wives mocked her high-handedness. She withdrew into a life of haughty seclusion, reliving the past and telling anyone who would listen about her glory days in India as a grand lady.

Lindsay had spent the first carefree years of her childhood essentially growing up as an Indian child. Then, as was traditional, she was sent off to England to a girls' boarding school. It was, however, those early formative years as a small innocent and impressionable white child romping with dark skinned Indian children that had moulded her passive nature and imbued her with an introspective outlook on life. Often she recalled, sometimes vividly in colourful reveries, many of her early experiences in India. Her ayah, her maternal guardian, was more of a mother to her than her own parent. Lindsay went to her for advice and consoling. The ayah's young son, Ngari, was her closest companion and constant playmate. Several years older than she, he was also her idol and mystical mentor. They played together, shared childhood fears and secrets, and once, as she sometimes remembered, still embarrassed, they explored each other's sexual differences as Indian children are allowed, even expected to do as part of normal childhood development. She had been devastated when he was sent away to study art in Tibet. When she in turn was dispatched to school in England she felt as if she had been wrenched out of the womb of her rightful home. For months in England, she could think about nothing but India, the ayah, and the ayah's son. At night in the cold rooms of the

English boarding school, she would curl up in a foetal position and sob herself to sleep.

Now sauntering along the silent beach in Oregon she wondered where Ngari, her childhood companion, was and what he did for a livelihood, or even if he were still alive in the harsh life of poor Indians; or, she thought, for a moment in near panic, had he been murdered by the Chinese in Tibet. No one had heard from the ayah and her family after Lindsay's mother and father left for the States.

Under the strict rules and regulations of the girls' school, Lindsay was forced to conform. Her strong will was held in check by the strict discipline of the school, but her free spirit remained intact, waiting, like a trapped bird in a cage, to be released. She remained aloof and the other girls, sensing the remoteness, mostly left her alone. She made no close friends among either the students or the teachers. At night as a maturing teenager she writhed in sexual frustration, but unlike many other girls in the dormitories she had no inclination to have a physical relationship. The sexual orientation of many of the girls repulsed her, but beneath her outward appearance of indifference and calm, strong fires of desire ignited by her carefree childhood soul-mate in India smouldered, waiting to burst into a flame of discovery and unfettered passion. She counted the days until she would escape from the restraints and regulations of the school, when she would be able to satisfy the normal instincts that boiled like molten lava under the school's suppression. She longed for freedom and adventure.

Contacts with boys or men in the English public girls' school were rare and when they did occur were closely chaperoned. As a result she graduated appallingly ill-prepared to face the outside world. Like many girls who came through the English public school system at that time she was seething with strong young girl urges without adequate experience.

Not surprisingly, in her eagerness to experience life, she did the one thing that thwarted her long-closeted desires. She married the first man who pursued her and promised her a new exciting time. When he proposed, disregarding all reservations, without giving more than cursory

thoughts to the restraints and responsibilities of marriage, she accepted and rushed into a situation for which she was not ready either physically or emotionally. She soon found out her husband was not on either an equal intellectual plane or the same temperamental scale. He was kind to her or at least considerate for a time. But when he realized, or grudgingly accepted that she was far superior in intellect with diametrically different interests – “lofty” he called them – he became moody and resentful. He would escape to the pub after sombre dinners.

“To be with my own kind,” he would shout, “not tied to someone who believes she is superior.” Half-drunk, he would come home and demand what he considered a husband’s rights. The next morning he was apologetic and remorseful, but by evening when he returned from work his resentment had arisen again. The ritual became a daily norm in their unhappy marriage.

Becoming pregnant almost immediately, partially because of her lack of knowledge of birth control precautions, she was elated. Raising a family, she reasoned, would help alleviate the growing marital discord. It didn’t help for long. The demanding baby soon irritated her husband and the strain between them became more acute than ever. Before long he was back in his old ways, spending the evenings with his working mates, drinking heavily. Lindsay fully occupied raising her daughter had an escape and the strained relationship with her husband was at least bearable for a time.

When another child, a boy, was born she became even more engrossed in her children. Again, after the novelty of the son wore off, her husband returned to his familiar nightly haunts. She guessed he was seeing other women. Eventually, she was not even concerned over these suspected infidelities, actually relieved. At least she was not often subjected to his crude sexual demands.

Their marriage became a sham of avoidance, if one could even call such a discordant relationship a marriage. They were two estranged people living in the same house with virtually no mutual connection outside of

money and meeting the basic requisites of rearing growing children. When they spoke at all they argued over even the most trivial matters.

Her husband spent more and more time with his friends from work or his single days, or with new girls. She no longer cared; the only worry was that she might get some communicable disease from his philandering. Returning home inebriated, sometimes vulgarly he demanded sex and she complied to avoid another unpleasant confrontation. As time went on even his drunken advances were less frequent and abstinence gradually dulled her once strong sexual needs.

The children grew up and had their own friends and formed attachments and associations. The inevitable empty loneliness occurred, as it nearly always does when one becomes too singularly dependent upon their children for self-fulfilment to the exclusion of one's own activities and interests. Elsie, the daughter, married young, as Lindsay had done herself, and moved out and on into a separate life with her new husband and other friends. Then Simon, the son, whom she idolized, went off to college. Lindsay was left in an empty shell. Often she sat alone in a listless melancholy. In that lonely state of mind she was highly vulnerable, longing for the slightest indication of a need from her children, wanting to participate in their activities in any way, regardless of how menial the role or task.

Divorce after the long indifferent, loveless marriage was a mere formality. There was no longer either a need or purpose for her in the household. She wanted out of his life so she could at least move on and pursue another career independently. There was no problem in reaching an agreement. Her husband wanted to escape from the aggravation as badly as she did, and perhaps, she thought kindly, he wanted to try to assuage his own guilt for his unfaithfulness and philandering by giving her freedom. He agreed to a small alimony which she suspected would become unreliable and sporadic. She didn't care. She wanted out.

The release wasn't as uplifting as she had envisaged. She was more lonely and distraught than ever. When her daughter had asked if she would help in the house-warming party Lindsay had jumped at the chance.



She hadn't expected to hear from him, or ever see him again. They'd had a long and pleasant conversation in the kitchen, he leaning nonchalantly against the sink while she worked. The puffs of pot had made her feel light and slightly giddy as she washed and dried a stream of dirty plates and glasses brought to the kitchen by a busy serving girl. His presence had made the time pass quickly.

Covertly, she observed him while she worked. He was different from any man she had ever seen, or certainly been involved with before. He listened attentively when she expressed an opinion and responded, not assertively as her husband and his friends had done, but calmly and seemingly reflectively, as if he really cared about what she thought. For the first time in years she laughed without restraint and retorted openly and wittingly without hesitation.

Christ, she thought, as he looked at her directly from time to time, he's really quite lovely. His girlish looks and manners didn't bother her in the least. Possibly, she thought for just a moment, I've got some lesbian strains. She was aroused. A warm flow of desire made her blush. She hoped he hadn't noticed, but guessed he had by the self-confident smile that crossed his smooth face.

Later walking back to her house she laughed at her arousal, thinking, how ridiculous; I'm old enough to be his mother.

The party had gone on late into the night. He had remained in the kitchen for a long time; periodically she said, "You should get back to the party with the young people," hoping he wouldn't go.

Suddenly, as if remembering something vital, he said urgently, looking at his watch, "I must leave. I have an early morning appointment."

She didn't realize until much later that conveying a sense of importance and urgency was a carefully planned enticement, all part of seductive intrigue.

"I enjoyed our conversation immensely. Perhaps," he said offhandedly as he left, "we might continue our discourse over coffee sometime."

That was all. He departed brusquely. She didn't even know his last name.

She had been disappointed, but at the same time relieved, not sure what she might have said if he had asked if he could see her home, or had asked her directly for a date, or even suggested a specific future meeting time. As she finished cleaning up and walked home her heart was lighter. She didn't know why, or what precisely had attracted her, or how she knew, but she felt confident that before long she would hear from him again. Ridiculous as any kind of involvement with this inappropriately young man, might be, she wanted something to happen.

For several days, every time the phone rang she hesitated before answering, thinking it might be him, then exhaling with relief, but at the same time disappointed when it was someone else.

Elsie had asked, "What in God's name did you talk to him about for so long?"

"He was nice, polite and courteous. It helped pass the time," Lindsay answered with what she hoped was a non-committal shrug.

Her daughter looked at her intently for a moment, saying in the protective tone that daughters use with mothers, "Be aware, he's a real creep. The only reason we asked him to the party was because he is a safe source of pot. He's neither a straight nor a homosexual, just a strangely effeminate-appearing male, I guess. We never see him or have anything to do with him outside of occasions like this. He's harmless in a crowd, but he's eerie and I wouldn't want to be with him alone."

She didn't volunteer his surname and Lindsay didn't ask.



Now as she walked along the beach she thought of her daughter's warning.

"God," she cried aloud in a strangled voice, "why didn't I take heed?"

She knew why. She had been sexually deprived and lonely and this delicate appearing man had for some reason aroused her suppressed passions.



Several weeks passed and she didn't hear from him. She recognized the absurdity of his appeal, but she couldn't forget the disturbing encounter in the kitchen and erase the embarrassing arousal from her head. Every time she thought about him she felt a warm flow of desire.

The phone rang late one afternoon. She hesitated before she answered. This time she knew it was him. When she heard his high, melodious voice, a thrill of excitement raced through her body.

"This is Shaun. You probably don't remember me? I was the one who bored you in the kitchen at your daughter's house. I just wanted to thank you again for talking to me. I truly enjoyed our little chat. Rarely do I get a chance to converse with anyone so erudite, with interests other than parties and clothes and material things."

Like a silly schoolgirl she stammered, trying to keep any signs of emotion out of her voice, "Oh yes, I remember. I also enjoyed our conversation. The pot made the tedious business of washing dishes almost enjoyable." She could hear her heart beating disturbingly faster.

There was a short pause. She could hear his breathing. She didn't know what to say. Then, in a carefully modulated voice of casual nonchalance, he suggested casually, "Since we had such a nice visit, or at least I certainly did, perhaps we could meet again. Would you have coffee with me some morning? It's not often that I encounter someone who is so attractive with whom I can share substantial ideas." It was more like suggestion than an invitation.

She sensed that it was a carefully rehearsed approach, not a spur of the moment impulse to call and extend an invitation. Alarm bells rang in her head. It was too pat, too well-orchestrated, too well timed, but she responded without reservation, putting caution aside.

"That would be nice, it's a flattering invitation, but you should find someone your own age with whom to spend your time. I'm an old enough to be your mother."

His response was again controlled, smooth and measured, embodying a combination of flattery and suaveness. "You are the youngest mother I've

ever seen. It will be a real pleasure to spend some quality time with someone so sophisticated who has had such an interesting life and has such a unique background.”

The hackneyed terms currently in vogue in America, ‘real’ and ‘quality time’ normally would have made Lindsay cringe. But instead she laughed at the banality of his invitation. She suspected the response also had been carefully rehearsed and was intended to convey cultural awareness; she abhorred such folksiness, but she sensed that he knew better and was testing her. At that critical moment she knew, by the underlying intonation of his voice, that her instincts had been right. This wasn’t simply an invitation to coffee and the desire to have a friendly discussion over coffee. It was a prelude.

She threw caution to the wind, thinking, what the Hell, I’ve nothing to lose, I’m bored. He looks anything but lecherous and he is certainly not physically threatening.

“Well alright, why not?” she said, trying to effect a light frivolous tone, which was not at all how she felt. “If you are sure you can’t find anything better to do than spend time drinking coffee with an old divorcée. When do you want to undertake this mission of motherly salvation?”

He laughed, scoffing at her reference to age. “The age differential merely adds to the attraction. How about tomorrow morning? That is if you’re not doing anything. I know a quiet chic little coffee house where they concoct wonderful café au lait and don’t mind if you sit and talk for hours. It’s like the old Viennese establishments I’ve read about where they have rolled newspapers and intellectual magazines for the clients to read; everyone talks in low unobtrusive voices and no one is interested in what others are saying. We can solve the world’s problems and converse about aesthetic matters undisturbed while enjoying some real old-world pastries at a reasonable price. I want to know more about India. I fancy myself as a bit of a connoisseur on Eastern religious mysticism and Hindu and Buddhist art. But of course, my knowledge has been acquired from books. It’s not like being born there.”

He spoke in a self-effacing way. It somehow didn’t seem to ring quite

true to his nature. But again she ignored a warning sign. He told her where the coffee shop was located and hung up abruptly, saying, "I'll meet you there at ten. I've got to run."

Lindsay had read about male predators that wanted a quick fling with an aging woman as a novelty, or perhaps even worse had made a wager with a mate. All the indications were there for it to be just that kind of male exploitation. As she hung up and reflected on the absurd business, qualms of apprehension again raced through her head. But at the same time she felt a rare excitement like she had never experienced before. It was like a first date. The inappropriateness of such a possible liaison had become more of a turn-on than a deterrent.

That night she didn't sleep well. Interest, desire and caution churned about in a great melee in her mind. She examined all the various reasons for his interest.

It wasn't just a one-night stand or a quick tryst, of that she was certain. What did he want, she asked herself over and over as she tossed and turned in bed, re-examining all the conceivable reasons for his interest? She was still attractive, but there were wrinkles and sags. It was certainly not money. She guessed if that were the motive he would have done his research. It was not intellectual. Their conversation in the kitchen had been light and easy, nothing world shaking. She realized that he was a master at persuasion and had perfected the art of laudation. Maybe it's just a challenge. Do I look like an easy lay? Why me? With his good looks he would have no trouble attracting eager women his own age. Since his girlish-looks didn't bother her, it didn't dawn on her that his appearance to most women would be a turn-off.

She tried to evaluate the dangers of any involvement. Having a coffee was by no means the start of an affair, but she had a weird sense that something deeper, perhaps even sinister was involved. The near animal physical attraction she felt frightened her. She knew that she was highly susceptible after the loveless marriage.

The last mumbled thoughts of rationalization were: "I'm fifty. He isn't interested in a platonic relationship, but so what; deep down neither am I.