

LOUISA

by

Jeannette Dean

“You really must come, Cheyenne, it’s your kind of place. Myth or reality, that is the question. High adventure enfolds me!”

I could resist, perhaps? Louisa knew my weaknesses all too well. Her short note had the desired effect.

So many years since we had shared espresso and cognac at Andre’s cafe’ in the Rockies. We would watch the intrepid figures careen down the white blanketed mounds, carving turns or disturbing the rhythm with a body slam. Their parade through the village followed in layers of clothes and clumsy boots. Carrying their skies and paraphernalia, they haphazardly descended toward favorite bars or warm condominiums. Expressions ranged from exhausted dejection to elation. Tired they were but with the rising energy of camaraderie as the exchange of tales approached. I shared so many of their days, I was one with them.

The restaurant which I managed consumed most of my time but the mountains had my heart. In the summer Louisa and I would share a bottle of cool dry wine as my basset hound and her two Himalayan cats reveled in the green warmth beside the stream. The bustling resort of Vail became a tranquil refined village as the sun made its northern swing. All facets of life in those mountains fit me comfortably. I thrived on the changes, challenges, demands, decadence, varied pace.

Louisa was the observer, the visitor, the sampler. ‘Ski bum’ could apply somehow, though the term just didn’t seem to fit her. She watched my multitude of flings with casual interest. For her, one impressive Frenchman inspired reserved enthusiasm. She even duct-taped together the separating skins of her antique red fox coat to keep her warm and fashionable when they shared days on the mountain. Then there was the intelligent displaced aristocrat who used liquid spirits as his familiar. Life confused William. As did Louisa. They moved on to San Francisco together. Then he followed her to New York, her home. That had been around the beginning of 1995 and I’d not heard

from her since then.

From her short note I surmised she was alone. I pictured Louisa in a sunny, marble-floored villa with her Baby Grand, a silk-covered futon, and a few large plants. A few pewter pieces would be scattered amongst the debris of her disordered daily life. A round table with one chair would be on the flagstone patio overlooking a valley. Her cats, Saskia and Kahnuri, would have their engraved dishes on the one Persian carpet. Ah Louisa, this is your setting, I thought, and turned to the reality of aligning transport. It would be a major crossing of minor distance to visit my old friend and learn the truth of her situation after all those years.

As an underwater photographer my career had its ups and downs, if you'll pardon me. I had just completed an assignment that was hazardously successful. Sharks are fascinating in their viscous beauty. The magazine had loved the snaps of brute creations ripping into their wounded comrades. I was trembling, not detached, during those shoots, and the camera had been my defense. Papua New Guinea, with its collection of World War II artifacts underwater, had been my base for a while. All the bodies that had gone down in planes and ships, the war toys, had made the area the base for an impressive host of sea life, especially the big guys with sharp teeth. I needed a break, so Louisa's missive was well-timed.

I'd wandered the Indonesian waters a bit and admit surprise at the location Louisa had chosen. A large untamed island on the equator that was governed by fundamentalist Muslims just didn't seem the appropriate setting for the tall, sophisticated blonde. Just getting there from the islands off the NE end of PNG was going to be quite an undertaking.

The idiosyncratic practices of peoples of the world fascinate me. Seems our species needs to complicate this simple thing called survival. Speaking of complications. The solemn locals of Lihini and I struggled through enough pidgin to establish that I needed to get to the village of Namatanai. The solitary tribe had no use for money, but the brightly batiked sarong I wore as skirt caught the eye of the headman. We struck a deal. He let two 'fellas' of indistinguishable age row me over in their 6-meter outrigger dugout. Having left most of my gear on the dive boat (with which I planned to rendezvous in one month in the Philippines) my one bag of necessities made for easy traveling. It was SW monsoon season so the seas were calm for the 20km trip. Watching the muscular backs and buttocks of my chauffeurs under their taut ebony

skin gave rise to my basic instincts. Those were cooled by the distended earlobes, which would encircle shells of hand width during festivals, and by their red-stained beetlenut-chewing smiles. I did not understand their pidgin, nor they mine, so our quiet sojourn ended with a nod as they began paddling home to their 'wantok' (people of the same language with kinship ties, one talk).

The cargo boat I would take was tied up at the rickety wooden pier. There was much activity as burlap bags of copra (dried coconut) were being loaded. That meant I could find some juice or beer or whatever to drink while the animals and produce were piled on then humans squeezed in. The 20 meter, smoking, thumping old clunker came in every two weeks. The only link with the outside world, it was always overloaded. My obvious foreignness broke the rhythm of loading temporarily. Most assumed I was of the Australian tribe with my pale skin, straight brown hair and green eyes. My use of pidgin got everyone laughing and a mob of bare-bottomed kids with runny noses and conjunctivitis-infected eyes as audience. A young green coconut was opened and presented to me for drinking. Sweet and refreshing.

Departure was later that night. Through a wall of black smoke I waved to my new-found friends from the stern. The following day and a half was spent inhaling fumes as I sat on my bag watching the ongoing process of beetlenut preparation, chewing and spitting. The woman to my left, with the calm complacency of a long-term chewer, had a permanent stain where the red juice spilled from the corner of her lower lip. The trail led down chin, along neck, over collarbone, and along inside curve of long sloping right breast. Said breast was clutched in the arms of her toddler like an old teddy bear as he sat in her lap and studied me, the pale alien. Later he'd be told that I'd come carry him away if he was bad. Everyone must have a bogeyman.

Rabaul is renowned for top quality beetlenuts. It's also a party town for expats, yachties, war heroes, and assorted adventurers. Tired, dirty and itching, I dragged into Travel Lodge. Had dinner sent up and didn't even look in the bar. No partying tonight with an early morning flight to Port Moresby then an evening flight to Jakarta (each leg cost more than Los Angeles to New York!). There's a toss-up as to which city is more unsafe and crime-ridden, but each has many high points, if one has time. Never rent a car in either place. Take my word for it. Endure the necessary price haggling with hard-pedaling bechaks or dilapidated taxis.

I descended from the cool, quiet Air Niugini jet into the heavy blanket of equatorial

night in Jakarta. Airport hustle. The over-crowded world of streets and traffic and stalls had me yearning for a lazy and peaceful subsistence village in the mangrove swamps. Somehow the survival instinct as displayed by naked jungle tribes is more palatable than that of the city dweller. But, I was in Jakarta, so spent the day investigating and whet my appetite for the coming adventure. The northern province of Aceh is fundamentalist Muslim and the Jakarta government doesn't really have much say in their affairs. Rich in natural resources and covered in jungle, the sparse human populace shares their island with an impressive collection of endangered animals. Black baboons, flying fox, Sumatran tigers, goat antelopes, elephants, fox-nosed monkeys, Slow Loris, the one-horned hairy rhinos. Now, how does one get to the jungles of Sumatra? Louisa hadn't bothered to fill in that minor detail. She knew me to be resourceful.

After padding a few palms I was on the packed Air Garuda flight the following morning. Next stop Medan, on the east coast just south of Banda Aceh.

I took a rough taxi into the center of Medan for a quick wander around to check the place out and inevitably found myself indulging in the local cuisine. A street stall offered front row seating for the midday matinee of folks in the process of living. There is no better entertainment. The coffee was strong, served by the glass with sweetened condensed milk generously added. The wok-fried rice noodles included greens, onion, garlic and hot chilies, and were served up on green banana leaves. I ate expertly with the fingers of my right hand, not dropping a noodle. Delicious! I was ready and my excitement was growing.

The oil company based in Lhokseum had a spare seat on their six-seat company plane so I bummed a ride. I love small planes. We were so close to the ground in flight I could see the lush green jungle and forbidding north coast. Small villages were scattered about. Most had access to winding dirt roads or streams that joined rivers or the ocean. Many seemed to have no beginning, no end. It was a bumpy ride.

I was well prepared for negotiating price with the leather-skinned old man with toothless smile in his brightly painted cab. It was wired up to a rusty vintage two-stroke of unknown origin. I climbed into the covered passenger seat and donned dark glasses, ready to eat dust. By the time the bechak deposited me at the Hotel Sultan we had caused several traffic jams. Few foreigners were seen here, especially lone females. In this part of the world you're never alone, certainly not if you're a woman.

Always there are friends, family or children. Of course, my driver had to display his foreign client as that gave face, showed he was making money. The full tour of main and back streets of the sleepy town was the perfect topper for my five-day expedition to a place of which only Marco Polo had heard.

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In haze of total exhaustion, I registered. Tuti, the soft-spoken Indonesian girl who was at the desk, led me to my second-floor room. With relief I realized there was a full bathroom, a rare bonus in this part of the world, and even a sit-down toilet that flushed. Tuti's English was delivered hesitantly but those intense black eyes never left mine. Our brief exchange was pleasant, felt rehearsed. She would happily arrange for breakfast in the room and anything else I might need. I had no doubt she was a nice girl of good family with as much education as local custom would allow, and that this was a respectable temporary posting until her family could find the proper husband.

Scratching at the door disturbed my fourteenth hour of sleep. The calling of my name (I'd never heard it pronounced that way so recognition came slowly) assured me it was a human so I began to search for clothes. My bag was beside the bed, covered with discarded travel rags. I was reassured to find I had securely locked up before becoming unconscious. For lack of an Indonesian answer, I kept yelling, "Okay!" until I could open the door discreetly wrapped in sarong.

Tuti's nervous smile quivered slightly. The heavily laden silver tray she carried was beautiful, the coffee strong and fragrant. I managed a 'thank you' as she left. The coffee was good, the shower hot for a while. Human again, I sat for a second cup and gazed upon the neighboring businesses below. A note fell out when I opened the red cloth napkin. "Sultan Bar at 12."

The closing words of L's letter had been, "Send me a note with the bartender in the Hotel Sultan in Banda Aceh." Okay. But, this note wasn't her style. The words were scrawled in black with a cheap ballpoint. Her artistic calligraphy was her pride and I had once seen her refuse to sign a guest book because the pen was not up to standard. She hadn't known when I would arrive, or even if I would. Probably a mistake, but I would be there. At any rate, the bartender should be on by then. I turned attention to the western-style breakfast and longed for spicy noodles, but consumed ravenously just the same.

After looking over the limited tourist information on the nightstand, I jotted snide

notes to a few friends on the provided post cards and stretched out for a much-needed yoga session. My tranquil reflecting was undisturbed so I arrived in the bar refreshed and excited. I'm resourceful, yes, but the complicated trip had almost exhausted my capabilities. There had been no faster way possible from that remote spot to this one and I had a feeling that I wasn't 'there' yet.

While not luxurious, the Sultan was definitely Sumatra's five star hotel. There was black marble everywhere. Tuti and Elli, who was also petite and delicate but with more rounded features, sat giggling behind the register in the empty bar. The bare shelves reminded me that I was in an Islamic country. There was beer in the cooler and one bottle of Johnny Walker Red in an inaccessible shelf corner. The next three hours were spent sipping cold beer and getting Indonesian lessons from the girls, who were both from Medan. They relaxed and giggled less while I got tipsy and giggled more.

"Dimana bartender?" I asked.

Silence, averted eyes.

I repeated, "Where is the bartender?"

"Not work today," Tuti smiled.

"When will he work?"

Silence, averted eyes.

Repeat.

"Tomorrow can."

Further conversation was futile. Oh well, what's another day? Wandering the streets on foot filled the rest of the afternoon. It is the best way to get to know a place. As a rare specimen on display I entertained the locals by just existing. To show respect (and minimize harassment) I wore my sarong as a long skirt with long-sleeved t-shirt and floppy canvas hat. I received only three 'psssts' and one offer to fuck. The western female has a 'loose' reputation in so many countries. Pot-holed paved streets, traffic lights, cars and trucks lent a city atmosphere to the cacophony of bicycles, small CC motorbikes, pedestrians, baceks, dirt paths, market displays, children, donkeys, squawking poultry and food stalls.

It was time to feast! I made my way to a round woman with one gold front tooth and only a few flies. She had ten selections of spicy dishes on her two-wheeled glass-fronted wooden cart.

"Makan nasi," I smiled.

With obvious pride she spooned a mound of rice onto a banana leaf. As I pointed and nodded she wreathed it with a spoon of each then presented me with the creation. We were both beaming. My audience faded into the background as I consumed some of the best food I'd ever had. Seriously. The Europeans' quest for the Spice Islands took on a whole new meaning for me with that meal. I began to understand their obsession.

The air conditioned Sultan bar was still empty. My request for scotch rocks fell on the uncomprehending girls so I demonstrated. The dusty bottle was half full. Some fellow inebriate had once stopped by. Tuti and Alli watched attentively the lesson in drink making and quizzically my move to a table, drink in hand. I needed to sip and think.

My circumspection was disturbed when a short, slightly rounded Chinese man in dark blue double-breasted suit entered the bar. He walked to my table and I felt good about him right away. He stood quite erect but was not foreboding. Rather serene, actually.

"Miss Jestin, I am Saudara Biharn. Welcome to Hotel Sultan." To show respect he did not make eye contact, but gave a slight bow of his head. The slightest press of a soft warm palm met my firm American handshake, a difficult habit to break. The down-sloping eyes, straight eyebrows and thin mustache on his round face accentuated a receding hairline. Chinese or Indians, both minority cultures, owned most of the businesses in Indonesia.

"Thank you, Saudara Biharn. Your hotel is very nice, the service excellent."

Another slight head dip. "This is my son, Suhantu. He is home from university and I offer his services to you. His English is far better than mine."

Well, I admit to impure thoughts when I turned attention to Suhantu. He was taller than his father, about my height, slender, skin of a soft fawn shade, thick black hair of unruly character. Those dark, almond-shaped eyes pulled me right in. With the shift of manners generations bring, his gaze locked on me and he returned my slightly subdued handshake.

"I am very pleased to meet you," he gave a slight smile. "I will assist you in any way I can."

Remembering myself, I turned back to the father. "Thank you, I will accept your generous offer." Over the years I had learned to study the inscrutable Chinese face very closely. Rarely were reactions obvious. As I explained my mission I was convinced there was the slightest tightening of his jaw.

"I wish you luck in finding your friend. If you like, Suhantu can guide you through the

market in the morning.” Subject closed. We agreed on a morning plan and they left me to my drink.

Three o’clock came quickly. The neighborhood housed poultry, not dogs, so the cock-a-doodle chorus enhanced the dewy morning sounds. A familiar scratching at the door and my name was softly called. Was Tuti still working?

“Okay, Okay!” I’d have to learn ‘okay’ in Indonesian.

The market was a city unto itself. Action began at about half past three and everything arrived fresh. Even the stall owners seemed fresh though some had slept in their stalls during the few non-business hours. They marched in carrying, pulling and pushing tubs of fish on ice, baskets of tempting fruits, boxes of fiery chilies and luscious red tomatoes. Trucks, bechaks, pushbikes and donkey-pulled carts unloaded goods. The concrete market building populated quickly with every possible place taken up for sellers and their wares. Virtually everything necessary for day to day life was available. There was hardly room to walk for the first wave of customers. They were the professionals who would prepare food for large groups so bought in quantity early. The morning carried on with a parade of citizens for me to watch and study as they bargained and gossiped.

I was enthralled with the many-headed creature come to life but Suhantu seemed rather bored with the whole thing. After a while I requested a stroll down the Gold Street. He politely suggested we ride through since his father’s jaga (body guard) was driving us around in the air-conditioned hotel Ford. Yes, but I wanted to walk. He looked more Eastern when he dealt with my Western stubbornness. He had the car follow close at our heels.

As the afternoon unfolded I questioned and Suhantu came forth with some interesting information about the wealth, strength and persecution of the Chinese in Aceh. Indeed, in most of Indonesia it would seem. For example, his real name was Awë but law forbade the use of Chinese names so he was called that by his family within their home. Suffice to say I got a much better understanding of all I was seeing. The prices were low and most of the workmanship top quality but the red tinge given by adding copper to the gold was not my style. I purchased a delicate silver bracelet as memorabilia or gift and we were on our way back to the Sultan.

I read and napped in the afternoon and Suhantu met me in the empty bar at sunset. I reminded him of the purpose of my visit and asked if he could fill in any blanks.

"I have been away at school for a year and do not really know much about things around the hotel, except the finances of course. My business studies are preparing me for my future position here."

"I appreciate that, but could you at least ask the personnel manager where your bartender is? Please."

With a small nod he left me. I had polished off another beer by the time he returned. With closed face he said, "It is possible Syed will work tomorrow."

I did feel a little closer and after further probing I managed to get the name of Syed's kompong.

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The first Saturday night of each month was big-time at the Sultan. A rock-ish group came from Medan to put life in the place. My table was beside long windows that opened onto a small rock & shrub garden. Though heavy and still, the worst of the day's heat had dissipated. I was comfortable and engrossed in the social scene. Muslim families listened to the music over dinner then departed. Chinese families and groups of males tarried over coffee enjoying the rare entertainment.

The foreign contingent was there, bottles in hand, hungrily absorbing the kind of social life that was virtually non-existent in Aceh. Ex-pats. I'd encountered them in the various parts of the world my camera had taken me. They worked for multinational companies or UN type agencies or aid groups or were on government contract. Dispensing western health, wealth, dreams and technology in the 'developing' world. Of course, these foreign representatives are altered by their years overseas and find assimilation back into their old social strata hard to impossible. They form a subculture of educated, family-oriented, well-traveled, conservative gypsies. As was always the case, they invited me to join them. We partied. Stories were told, toasts were made, addresses were exchanged. My lifestyle appealed to them in a romantic way.

I gained many invitations but no solid info concerning Louisa. One had heard that a tall blonde woman had arrived months ago and perhaps stayed; one heard there was an American woman in one of the kompongs. Gwynn, a Canadian whose husband was showing the locals how to build a highway through the jungle, had met Louisa when she first arrived. They shared a few hours in the Sultan bar and Gwynn, who made artistic

jewelry from uncommon materials, had given her a black coral bracelet. She had understood that Louisa was just passing through. Gone walk-about, dissatisfied with the life she had come to know as a fashion designer in New York. Gwynn lived outside of Banda Aceh, had not been in town since then, and hadn't heard from her.

Sharing the ex-pats' wine was great fun that evening but made the following morning unappealing. A sleep-in did wonders. Time to solve the case of the missing bartender. With Suhantu at my side and the jaga driving, we headed for the Tungkuan Kampung. Through questioning I learned that Suhantu had been unable to get more info because the Muslim employees (as most were required by the government to be) would never open up to their Chinese employers about a fellow Muslim. They often missed days of work with no explanation but were difficult, sometimes impossible, to fire. Suhantu would stay in the car across from the kampung entry. He would not be welcome and they might be less co-operative if he were with me.

We were in the more residential section where every block or so a general store or food stall was servicing the neighborhood. It was actually a series of connected communities, *kompungs*.

"The kampung may house anywhere from ten to a hundred," Suhantu told me.

"Everyone is part of the extended family, whether the tie is blood or friendship. The members work together for the good of the kampung. Traditional law or custom, unwritten, unquestioned, runs them. Everything from eating to inheritance to rice sowing is governed by 'adat', rules that are passed verbally through the generations."

Suhantu sounded like an anthropologist, making observations of a lifestyle. I reflected that the tight family unit was a fading commodity stateside, and part of me envied the solidarity and insulation. However, the stifling reality of small-town life had been part of my childhood with my grandparents, and I had revolted. Add strong religious structure and . . . I was suffocating just thinking about it.

A wide, collapsing wooden frame marked the entry. It became crowded with dark-eyed, tawny-skinned children shouting "Hallo! Hallo!" The deafening chorus, punctuated by laughing squeals, quieted only slightly when a small man in the old shirt, faded sarong and knitted hat of a fisherman appeared. Sinewy and muscular with skin of oak, this spokesman welcomed me. Each halting English phrase was begun with a proud sing-song, "Aceh people . . ."

I followed him into the kampung. It seemed to consist of a dozen run-down houses. Well

shaded by ancient trees, the grassless grounds were being swept by several females of various ages in sarongs with oversized shirts. A group of men in sarongs and shirtless were repairing nets. Three women who had obviously birthed their share of little kompong dwellers were arduously laundering under a rusty pipe the cotton pieces that would allow their families at least another wearing. Smells of cinnamon and coriander and garlic and of fish cooking brought the scene together as homely and inviting except for the solemn, staring faces watching from many windows and around the yard.

My host, Tuan Abdullah (the rest of his long name I did not understand), was gracious. The hot tea with sweetened condensed milk, served by one of his wives, was tasty. I carefully used right hand only, left shoes at the door with everyone else's, and kept my feet flat (directing one's soles at another is a grave insult), but I was sure I was breaking rules unconsciously. The tension kept my senses honed to all details. Though I would bet my quest was well known, I played the necessary question and answer game. Tuan Abdullah was not the village elder but his English had placed him as intermediary and it was obvious I was getting no further than him.

"I understand Syed, who works as a bartender at the Hotel Sultan, lives in your kompong."

"Aceh people prefer living together and helping one another."

"Is Syed here today?"

"If Syed is here we would see him, but we do not."

"Have you seen or met a tall blonde American woman called Louisa?"

"Aceh people, when old as humble Abdullah, meet and pass by many people."

"But she was here only recently." I silently cursed her for the lack of date and address on her letter. There was no knowing how long it had taken to reach me. It had been forwarded to my Delaware business address from my old one in Vail, and then on to PNG. With the unreadable postmarks, even Holmes would have had trouble.

"Aceh people think in lifetimes."

Our meeting lasted about half an hour. My departure was my arrival in reverse. The 'Hallo!' chorus was repeated and adult faces remained solemn.

By sunset I had lowered the level of Johnny's amber liquid and rearranged the puzzle pieces repeatedly. Why would no one tell me anything? I have always had faith in my instincts, have 'felt' my way through some tight spots, and I sensed something was out of sync. One very large frustration for westerners in the East is that sectors of the

populace do not want to give bad news. Indeed, silence or a lie is better than a negative answer. If it's truth or beauty, beauty wins out. The consequences are not considered. Knowing this didn't really help me deal with it but I tried to be careful how I phrased questions.

The arrival of Suhantu was no consolation. College had helped him understand the language but not the mind of the 'orang putih', foreign devil. He was politely attentive to my monologue about my frustration at being unable to find my friend, but said nothing.

Holding back remarks that would bare my growing anger, I smiled and asked, "Where is your bartender at this moment?"

"Syed is in a bed in the hospital."

I could only stare in silence. Breathing slowly I contemplated what my next question should be and how I should phrase it. Lack of communication is an ongoing international problem, the catalyst of many a war and lost love.

"Why is Syed in the hospital?"

"For medicine and to see doctors."

Yes, well, we could have gone on into the night. "I will go to the hospital to see him," I said decisively. "Please come with me, Awë." He frowned. "I mean, Suhantu, sorry." I do believe I blushed. I did want to get intimate with him but could get us both in trouble. I would have to be careful.

Anxious to put my faux pas behind, he was up and smiling, arranging the car and driver. Saudara Biharn's jaga was in attendance to the body he was paid to guard. So, at minor expense, I would now have the official hotel driver, Djuniedi, and his car at my disposal, as there were no other guests.

Small but clean, the hospital was an old building with good lighting. Djuniedi was the offspring of the 'peranakan' (children of the Indies), the group that evolved from Chinese-Indonesian intermarriages. As a Nonya, looking more Indonesian, he would be the intermediary, and Suhantu would translate for me. We waited in the car surrounded by the dark, almost cool, evening. Djuniedi returned slowly, got in and sat behind the wheel in silence.

"Well?" I demanded impatiently. Suhantu began questioning him in a firm, almost rude tone. Suhantu's sharp intake of breath was all I understood of the exchange. Silence.

"Well?" I repeated.

"Syed is not here."

“Where is he, Suhantu?”

“He is with his family.”

“Good, let’s go to the kampung and see him.”

Silence.

“Suhantu, tell Djuniedi to take us to the kampung.”

We drove without a word. The evening was quiet when we stopped, the children in for the night. “Djuniedi, please come inside with me,” I asked as I opened the door. He sat in silence until Suhantu gave him a sharp command. We walked through the kampung entrance. No screaming children, but there was a large fire in the centre of the yard with several people sitting around in silence. Djuniedi stepped in front and turned to face me. In a low but firm voice he said, “Hotel Sultan”. I knew it was time to go. I was going to get answers that night, and had a feeling I wasn’t going to like them.

An invitation to my room was quickly refused. Socially taboo. So it was a pot of coffee in the empty bar. After ten minutes of niceties and silence I realized I was to play the role of inquisitor. The questions had to be the right ones or I’d get nowhere.

“Is Syed dead?”

“Yes.”

“Why is he dead?”

Confused look.

“What caused him to die?”

The translation came haltingly, “He has no blood.”

Djuniedi’s large dark eyes scanned the room swiftly as if to ascertain no one was listening, then he spoke to Suhantu in a low voice.

“Tell me,” I demanded.

Suhantu would not look me in the eyes. He tried to smile, gave a small shake of his head. “They say the tall white-haired foreign woman took all his blood.”

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Djuniedi didn’t have much more to say, so Johnny Walker and I headed to my room. I had begun to undress when Tuti appeared at my door with a pot of tea and a sandwich. “Do you remember a tall white-haired American woman who was here a few months ago?” I asked as she carefully placed the tray on the small teak table.

*“Oh, yes! Nona Louisa, the beautiful blonde star.”*

*I laughed aloud at my stupidity for not having asked her before. And, I could picture Louisa carefully explaining to pretty, intelligent Tuti that her hair was not white, but blonde. “Did she stay here?”*

*“For two days only and in this same room. We spoke together many times. She thinks Tuti could be a model in America. Maybe someday there is money for fly America.”*

*“Have you seen her since then?”*

*Hesitantly, “Some say she is very happy.”*

*“Where is she now?”*

*“She was at kampung of Syed last week.”*

*With immense self-control I asked more questions but got no further so sent her bright spirit away. Time to sip and think. The Casa Blanca fan spun a lazy rhythm overhead as the night sounds kept time through the open window. Not much happening at 2300 other than a few aggressive mosquitoes. Only females of the species drink blood, I reflected. I began to giggle at the thought of the serene, poised Louisa wiping blood from around her fanged mouth as she turned away from the Indonesian bartender who lay across the black marble bar, and finally collapsed into weakening laughter.*

*Sobering, I sat up. Had I entered a time warp or a sick joke? Or, a dream, a bent dream from being too deep too long too often. . .divers talked of such things. No, it was just a series of misunderstandings that needed sorting out.*

*Anthropology had been her major, though abandoned for time in the mountains and San Francisco. Then the fashion world had captured her attention. She'd told Gwynn that life wasn't going well in New York. So, maybe she was trying to get back into her studies. Sumatra would have been perfect. I didn't know a lot about its history. Perhaps she had gotten into researching the Banda Aceh area in the only way one really could, by getting in with the locals. She either talked or paid her way into Syed's kampung, part of the process of study. Or, was I giving it too high a motivation? Was her life going flat and in search of new adventure she had fled to the remote island and was simply having an affair with a local? But, playing around with the hotel bartender was not her style.*

*The sandwich and tea were good, seemed to sort my thoughts. I decided that Syed had probably been her interpreter and assisted in gathering literal and mystical stories from village elders. He had become ill, some disease they didn't know. The local 'dunkin'*

gave it his best shot without much luck and they had then taken him to the hospital for western medicine, but it was too late. They were a superstitious lot and the alien in their midst had to bear the blame. I had banged my head on the low door frame when going into the hotel toilet (a first in my life). Louisa would have towered above locals with her six-foot frame held like a dancer's. Her ice blue eyes must have enhanced her enigma. So, Louisa was in danger. Perhaps at that very moment they were pounding a spike through her heart or crisping her over a raging fire or. . . time to go to sleep. I crawled under the mosquito net. Morning would clear the mist.

Breakfast was list time. I got out my laptop and began organizing known facts, rumors, theories, names, customs, rules, words. It was my orderly approach towards understanding the situation, the method with which I conducted shoots. I accepted that I understood cameras better than customs and fish better than people, but coming to terms with one's short-comings was part of the challenge. I had to piece together a trail. Indonesian officialdom is notoriously corrupt so I knew that if need be I could get help as long as I kept cash at hand. They had to buy promotions and uniforms, not easy with the low pay. With 1900 rupiah to the US dollar, you can understand why 'corrupt' is a way of life. But, to me it spelled inefficiency and confusion so I hoped that tack would not be necessary.

A little headway was made with a call to the American consulate in Medan. After six weeks of wandering through Sumatra Louisa had approached Ms Stoll about a research visa for continuing her anthropological studies. With her tourist visa ending it was departure time but she really wanted to do a study on Aceh. The request was entered to the many departments in Jakarta for approval. While waiting Louisa went to Singapore to utilize the libraries, then to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Ms Stoll acquired a research visa for her and she had returned to Medan six weeks ago.

Ms Stoll laughed, "One of the few things I've accomplished while here. I can honestly say this is the most frustrating assignment in my 18 years of diplomatic service."

I supplied the latest facts, no mention of the scenarios my sick imagination had brought forth. In her most diplomatic voice she, quite reasonably, saw no reason for concern. Since we had no firm communication, Louisa had not expected me and was involved somewhere, probably living in another kampung. She was obviously very wrapped in her studies.

I hung up feeling a bit of an alarmist. She was right, of course. I should just relax and

enjoy the place. Spread the word around I was there looking for her and the drums would do the rest.

I arranged reservations with Air Garuda for the end of the month to fly from Medan to Jakarta, then Manila. There I'd rejoin the dive boat. I then tried to redirect my energies. The Aceh museum, a short walk away, had a wealth of period costumes, home utensils, silver pieces, ceremonial paraphernalia, beds with gold canopies, etc., but no info about them. That had probably been the first spark in Louisa's growing curiosity. Ah, she'll have some stories to tell, I thought. We would exchange tales over tea in one of the local cafes (I used the term loosely). If she showed up.

I needed the ocean. A good long swim with the therapy of fish-watching in the reefs. The expats had warned me off swimming along the north coast. Besides strong currents and low visibility there was a plethora of the big guys and no healthy reef to keep them fed. Seems the Dutch, while in the area attempting to exploit the Acehnese, had to build wire enclosures to insure safe swimming. I decided a walk on the beach would suffice.

The bechak took me to Oeelheue (pronounced ooh-lay-lee), a small fishing village a few kilometers NE of town. In a generous mood one could call it a beach, though rough and in varying shades of gray. The stroll served to depress rather than lift my spirits on that muggy day so I turned toward the woods through which the road was visible. I had the feeling I was being watched. As the odd visitor I was accustomed to having all eyes upon me but out there it was a bit disquieting since there was no sign of life.

'That's it!' I realized, 'There are no birds.' I couldn't remember seeing or hearing one since arriving in Banda Aceh. There had been no gulls around the fishing boats. Odd. Had they eaten them all?

Village sounds greeted me after a short walk along the pitted road that was just wide enough for one car. It's a two-wheeled society in most Asian countries. Some say it's the main form of birth control since a couple can't fit more than three small children with them on a motorbike. A police car pulled up beside me very slowly. Fat policemen in sunglasses make me very nervous. He looked rather old but that didn't engender trust.

"You should never walk on that beach alone."

I tried to smile, "Hello. You have very good English. Saya bichara sadikit Bhahasa Indonesian."

He chuckled, "But you are learning quickly."

"I'm trying. Is the beach restricted?"

He laughed, had his driver pull up in front of a food stall, heaved his sweating bulk over to the shade and the sunglasses watched me approach.

"Would you like some tea?" I knew he wasn't buying. I ordered a coke and waited for the hook.

"The people here are very superstitious. They believe that beach is haunted so no one goes there. Even if you were in need no one would go to help you." He slurped the sweet tea to punctuate his heavy statement.

"Why do they think it's haunted?"

"Where are you from?"

"America."

There followed the niceties that are often muttered about the big, rich, modern country with friendly, rich people that everyone loved to have visit. "Why are you here alone?"

"I usually travel alone. Here I'm looking for a friend." I guess it was the uniform. I had spoken without thinking, so I carried on. "She's a tall blonde American who loves Aceh and has visited many times. Perhaps you have seen her."

Slurp. "I am from Jakarta, not like these country people and I know the superstitions are silly. I have just returned. My last assignment here was in '68." That was obviously a weighty statement, but lost on me.

"You must like Aceh."

"We are sent where we are needed. Are you married?"

So, he was either trying for a pick-up or wanting money for info on Louisa. I could ward off advances but wasn't very smooth on the bribery thing. What would the proper amount and procedure be?

"Here, as in all the world, there are poor people. I would like to help them a little, so life is not so hard. Especially those who are friends of my friends." Subtle neon sign. I must develop the art.

"I believe there is a kompong in which she stayed."

"Ah yes, the Tungkun kompong people were her friends."

"Old friendships don't always last. Then we make new friends."

I fished a handful of bills out of one of the many pockets in the photographer's vest I always wore. I handed one to the smiling woman in faded floral headscarf. When she

turned to make change I laid five thousand rupee on the bench between us. Its quick disappearance said I'd made the right move.

"My assistant and I are going by the Pundat kompong now. Perhaps you would like to visit your friend's new friends." His sleazy smile made my skin crawl, but the search for Louisa was inhibiting my sleep.

"Does my friend live at the Pundat Kompung?"

"It gets late, we must work." He was sweating in his perfectly pressed uniform. No money, no answers.

As his assistant drove he filled me in on the haunted beach with obvious pleasure. I remembered then the late '60s when President Sukarno handed power to his general Suharto. Under President Suharto over half a million people were labeled 'Communists' and shot, strangled or hacked to death. Hundreds of thousands were imprisoned without trial. That beach had been the execution sight for Banda Aceh, he explained with a smirk. The throat slicing he acted out while relating the gruesome story. He slipped into Indonesian as his enthusiasm grew into heavy breathing. The disturbed spirits took a vampirish form on the beach where so much blood had flowed.

With great relief I realized we were stopping in front of a cluster of houses. There was no marked entrance but the largest house had a wide front porch with benches and chairs. As I got out of the car two men came out of the house, the younger dressed in western clothes. I tried to make my farewell civil to the odious captain.

As soon as the car pulled away I was surrounded by a few exuberant kids and the 'Hallo!' chorus. I could only laugh with relief. The touching and pulling didn't even bother me this time. This was a reality I needed. The younger man came down the steps and began dispersing the children with gentle admonitions understandable by tone. Here was an open face and gentle smile though the eyes were distant, possibly troubled.

"So, you've met our honorable constabulary. Good of him to bring you to our door. Rather thought I'd have to collect you myself at the Sultan." He extended his hand, "Hello, Ms Cheyenne Jestin. I am Muhammad Mursidah Ibrahim. Please call me Muhammad. Welcome to Pundat, the kompong of my family."

With an effort I emerged from my stunned silence. "Thank you. Hello Muhammad."

"You seem relieved. Did our uniformed friend give you a hard time?"

Wishing to erase that bad dream, I shrugged, "He can't be easy to live with. His explanation of the haunted beach left little to the imagination. But, at least he brought

me here, so I'm not complaining."

"Please come take tea with us. You will be studied carefully and silently but don't let it put you off. We Acehnese are very different from you open Americans. However, once we accept you the friendship is akin to abduction."

Was this the way Louisa had become absorbed? I didn't think I'd find her there but knew I was closer. Such a relief to see another side to the people. Muhammad sounded of English education. His would be an interesting story. The large garden between two rough houses in the cluster looked well-worked. There was a well to the side where a group of women were cleaning and shelling green beans, the long skinny ones. The comfortable chatter ceased as I was studied but the children noises covered the silence.

Following Muhammad into the house I became aware of a very old person on the porch huddled in the corner on a piece of floral cotton. The legs seemed at odd angles, the bent head nearly bald. A sarong was draped over the shoulders and you could just hear a constant mumbling.

Inside was cool and drab but for two bright posters. One was of skiing in Switzerland and the other of an English castle. I guessed they were souvenirs from his school days in Europe. The table, bench, straight chairs, bunk and short stool were all of rough wood and very old. One dim light bulb burned overhead as trees hid the afternoon sun's rays. I was introduced to his father, who was the kompong elder, and his uncle. They were seated at a sarong-covered table and a middle-aged woman was serving tea.

I obviously blundered with "And this is your mother, Muhammad?"

He studiously added sugar to the chipped china cup on unmatched chipped saucer. "I believe you saw our mother on the veranda as we entered. This is my sister, Aziz. She speaks some English, more than anyone else in the Kompung, and is trying to teach some of the children. You can become friends later but it is not proper to converse with her while her father, uncle and brother are in the room. I have limited time but wish to help you. I know a little of your friend's plight."

I may have sighed audibly at this point. I was accustomed to being face to face with real physical dangers. That I could handle and actually thrived on such situations. However, I've never been good at guessing what people are really saying, at trying to see through their camouflage, at perceiving their needs. The only oceanic parallel to the human is the shark, but even they become predictable if you spend enough time with

them. We humans are sort of a cross between shark and porpoise with the shark contributing the more dominant gene.

"Is she here?"

"She was here for a short time."

"Don't tell me you're going to play verbal games with me like everyone else."

Those black eyes flared. "You have forgotten perhaps that you are visiting us. It is our custom to be kind. To protect your feelings when possible. There are many things we could teach the western 'civilized' world that would enrich and add beauty to their lives."

Certainly hit a nerve there! "I'm sorry. Please, I'm just frustrated because I don't know how to ask questions here. I would welcome any news. Everyone seems to know about my friend but me. I'm frightened something has happened and I feel useless."

"Yes, of course. I have not met La, as she is known to my family, but they like her very much. Especially the old ones, as she would sit with them for hours recording their stories with Aziz or Syed translating. Everyone was quite taken with the way she looked as well. They have not traveled like I and seen the extreme differences in the design of people and the way they live. No one's head came even to her shoulders. It seems Syed was infatuated with her, which concerned his Kompung. He was expected to unite kompungs through marriage. His wage at the Sultan was very important for finances and face. Our family invited her to stay here since there was no one in danger of infatuation. I have been away you see." He gave a slightly embarrassed smile.

From the look of the place they must have put every penny into educating Muhammad. What a heavy burden on him. And, there were no other young men in the kompung, no one to be enticed by La. Their future was in his hands. I smiled my thanks when Aziz refilled my cup with averted eyes.

Muhammad continued, "She helped with chores and brought back some food each time she went to town. A pleasant guest. However, Syed kept hanging around and missed some days at work. He had been losing weight and became weak and feverish. A dunkin was working on him but could not do anything and believed Syed was under a curse. You would probably consider him a witch doctor but he knows natural healing and understands my people. They tried the hospital as a last resort. The complication is this. La was fascinated by the plant life of this area, especially the Rafflesia. Aziz will show you La's favorite tomorrow, if you like. La used to go and stand by it in a sort of

meditation. We respect anything remotely spiritual so she was left alone on her forays. La told Aziz she was giving the plant a special fertilizer that should make it open earlier and smell stronger. Someone from Syed's kompung saw her pouring thick red liquid onto the plant several times. It would seem someone was following her into the jungle. Hence the belief she was taking blood from Syed for her plants. The worshipping of plants and animals is not unknown in these regions, and sacrifice is as old as man."

I had become mesmerized as he revealed the story, feeling like a child being told a fantasy. 'And then what happened?' I wanted to ask.

Aziz went for fresh tea. Muhammad had been speaking slowly while she translated for the old men. Nothing was said for a while as we each contemplated the events. My stomach knotted as the worst possible consequences sprang to mind.

Aziz returned and Muhammad rose to finish the narrative, seemingly moved by the events he had not experienced. "Father received the news of the death of Syed from the Tungkuan elder, and of their suspicion. They discussed the problem then had Aziz tell La in their presence. In watching her reaction both considered her innocent of the charge. Having spent time with both kompungs, La realized that she must leave. She was gone when they awoke this morning. She left a note thanking the kompung for sharing time with her as well as four of her sarongs as gifts."

"But, I've been here for five days. How could she have not known?"

"Syed was the only connection either kompung had with the Chinese hotel. No one could afford to go there, certainly . . ."

"But," I interrupted, "I went by the Tungkuan the day before he died. I spoke with Tuan Abdullah, told him I was searching for Louisa. He said nothing!" My head was whirling. Relax. Think. Call Ms Stoll. Call Gwynn. Find out if she left. Call her sister in New York.

"I have told you all we know. If you wish to stay tonight you are welcome though humble would the pallet be. Or one of the children will find a bacek for you."

"Thank you very much for your time and help. I must return to the Sultan. Possibly a few phone calls will put me in touch with Louisa."

Aziz withdrew to arrange transport and the old gentlemen talked quietly.

Muhammad said softly, "I would enjoy having an affair with you. It would be inappropriate here, of course. Perhaps we could exchange addresses as I travel a good bit."

Taken off balance, I smiled dumbly. Very 'have-able', I felt, though probably ten years my

junior. He turned and spoke to the men, then handed me his card as they watched. "Now give me yours as I have explained that we will each notify the other when La is contacted."

I fumbled for a card and presented it with a cool, "Until we meet again."

With laughing eyes and a polite nod he turned to talk with them. I had been dismissed.

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Louisa's sister, Pat, had modeled to pay for college, but dropped out after two years to devote full time to her promising career. She had quickly become one of the big names on the catwalk and after a few years started an agency. By the time she was thirty she was a millionaire. It was good to hear the voice of the intelligent, level-headed woman. Though many years since she had joined Louisa and me for Christmas in Vail, she remembered me right away.

"I received a note from Louisa while diving in Papua New Guinea. We've not kept in touch over the years so I was pleased. She included no address, just Banda Aceh, so I don't know where to find her. I've been here for a week but had no luck. Have you heard anything?"

"Oh, Cheyenne, I've been so worried. Tossing up a successful career, Louisa took off a year ago. She called me one morning from the airport, said she was finished with this 'farce called life in the western world'. The East offered an explanation, she was sure of it, and had just booked a flight to Bangkok. You know Louisa as well as I so you can understand my concern over this uncharacteristically impetuous move."

"Have you heard anything lately from her?"

"There was a message with my answering service that she had called last week from Aceh, would ring later, but nothing more. I visited her in Singapore four months ago. She looked terrible, having gone 'natural', wearing sarongs, sandals, no make-up and that hair definitely needed attention. But her head was good. Such enthusiasm I've not seen for years. We had two days for talking, eating and drinking at the Shangri-La where I virtually had to force her into the spa for a once-over. Though financially comfortable, she was staying in a 'losman', a rough boarding house affair off Arab Street, developing her grasp of the culture. I understood and was pleased at the commitment to her studies. I can't really tell you why, but I was still bothered. I have not heard much since.

Three post cards, each stating how fine she was.”

“What went wrong in New York?”

“That was unclear as well. I was married five years ago to an Austrian. His family’s industrial interests kept us traveling and my agency took the rest of my time. Louisa’s career kept her busy so the communication lapsed until last year when I had Stephan. She took time off to stay with us for a month. We were totally wrapped in the marvels of the baby, like kids with a toy. I could tell she wasn’t happy but could only draw out so much. William, the alcoholic fool she met in Vail, had been in and out of her life many times. He fell or had jumped from her balcony just before that and she was still deeply bothered. Louisa had become well known throughout the fashion world and quite a few males were interested but no one could get close. She expounded on the shallowness of it all and would just disappear for days at a time. After a few visits to my shrink she declared all was well. I didn’t hear much from her after that. I was guilty of being too wrapped in my own life to give my sister the attention she needed. What have you learned there?”

I pondered how much I should tell her. From halfway around the world she could do nothing but worry. But, I reminded myself, she is her sister. “It seems some young man who was infatuated with Louisa died yesterday of some rare disease. His family blames her in some roundabout way so she took off to avoid complications. It was a wise move but she told no one where she was heading.”

“She knows how to take care of herself, Cheyenne, but I’m so glad someone is there who knows her. I will come out if she needs me or if you think I can help. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll be here ‘til the end of the month. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything. Have you got a pen?” I gave her the Sultan info as well as Muhammad’s fax number in Jakarta. According to his card he was a solicitor specializing in ‘international investment’. Not as young as he looked? Off-shore banking? I was interested, but first things first.

The consulate was closed and Gwynn had no phone so I crawled into bed. Had some very kinky thoughts about both Suhantu and Muhammad. I stowed any action plan on either for the future as life was sufficiently complicated at the moment. If Syed was the only tie with the Sultan, how had Muhammad known so much about me? He’d even pronounced both my names correctly though hardly anyone did outside the States. Syed had been sick, then dead, during my presence in Banda Aceh. Were there marks on

Syed's body to indicate that his blood had indeed been taken? Had Louisa actually given the plants blood? Where would she have gotten it? She must have given it to them fresh or had something to add to keep it from coagulating. How would she have tailored it to each plant's needs? She'd been good with our potted plants in Vail, but this was a step beyond basic gardening.

I got up and paced. The characters in the play were all working together. . .it was a plot! She was locked up somewhere for satanic rituals or breeding or ransom. If I got closer I too would be used. . .etc., etc. I cursed the crow of the roosters and the morning light with its false promises.

"What's wrong with this place?" I asked of the mirror. Dawn gave my reflection an eerie quality.

"There are no birds."

"Well, since I didn't come for birds, it's irrelevant and there is nothing wrong with this place. Pull yourself together, kid. Louisa might need you. Yeah, she's probably having breakfast in bed with some naked hunk sleeping contentedly beside her. Please let the shower be hot, oh Powers-That-Be, and I'll take that as a positive sign. You do realize, don't you, that the majority of the American populace has never faced lack of choice in shower temperature? I know, I know, when in Aceh. . ."

I've always found that I'm a good person to talk to.

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Fried rice for breakfast with sweet black tea. Sure, I was ready. The becak driver seemed disappointed I didn't bargain but it just didn't seem important. I was rallying my spirit for meeting the Rafflesia.

At the kompong Aziz greeted me in the same pale blue long-sleeved high-necked long cotton dress. A floral scarf covered her thickly plaited hair. Her face was barely lined, skin smooth, eyes clear and bright. How could I have thought her old yesterday? Though shy, the wide smile was more self-assured than before. Perfect pale brown skin accentuated the dark depth of those horizontal teardrop eyes. I was intrigued. Did this docile, shrouded figure house surprises, strength, imagination? Had she ever known freedom of movement, the wind on her skin, bursts of animal passion, dreamt of a man's penis within her body as she throbbed with pleasure?

“Good morning Miss Cheyenne Jestin.”

“Salamat pagi, Aziz. Please just call me Cheyenne. I received my daily lesson in Bahasa Indonesian over breakfast so I’ll practice some if you don’t mind correcting me.”

Her laugh was a soft giggle. “That is good. Most people here only want to teach visitors our Aceh language.” She stopped. “That was at Sultan Hotel?”

I nodded.

Her smile was tight. “There are no Aceh people at Chinese hotel.” She turned, “Please follow me.”

So, Syed had been the only local person they had employed. Each employee I had talked with had been from Medan. Suhantu had told me his family had lived there during the years the Chinese had been banned from the Aceh area. When Saudara Biharn returned to reclaim his land and open the hotel he’d begun building, he must have brought staff back with him, and probably still hired from the same families.

“Are the children at school?”

Aziz turned with the same thin smile, “There is only money to send two boys to school. Muhammad is paying for that. He will send them all, boys and girls, when he can. Everyone is at Tungkuan. This is a very hard time for them. My family shares their grief. As Allah has willed.”

She continued walking then stepped over the shallow stream that served as latrine for Pundat kampung, and probably several others. Her movements were those of an old woman, her back slightly bent and she had a hint of a limp. Her fingers at rest didn’t quite straighten. I wondered if the pathetic form that was her mother had a degenerative disease that she had inherited. How sad. It would seem that she was now the mistress of her house, of the kampung, but was slowly becoming crippled, as had happened with her mother. In Aceh each daughter was given a house when she married and she kept it for life. Aziz would receive a hand-me-down house as she had a hand-me-down affliction. Did she rage about the unfairness of her plight? Or, did she faithfully accept Allah’s will as the only way, no complaints? I would kick and fight all the way, trying to squeeze every ounce of life. I told myself there was a moral in the experience.

I love the jungle, but have always felt insecure there. I knew my limitations so concentrated on recalling the path in, just as I do underwater. Ironically, I only get really lost in cities. My trusty lifeline, the multi-pocketed vest, is always worn and for treks a daypack is also in tow. Besides a Swiss army knife and basic first-aid stuff, it contains

something drinkable and eatable, water purification tablets, lighter, mace, flashlight, repellent, sarong, pen & pad, flare, money, basic toiletries, sunglasses, visor, small automatic camera, and floss, which has a multitude of uses. In respect for the jungle I had added snakebite kit, salt tablets and malaria medicine. I was prepared.

The sun was undeniably in the East and my trusty Casio kept track of the passing time. A child could handle the navigation but the jungle was thickening ahead. At the edge human evidence was difficult to trace as the determined strength of abundantly nourished plant life had taken over. One would really have to search for any flora deserving of 'delicate'. The vines covering so many trees above the path were parasites on the offensive. Their lacy tentacles entered the ground and the Strangler Fig would slowly kill its host. I knew the dead tree would fertilize the soil and new life would flourish, but my thoughts were on the negativity of we humans, the parasites who don't replenish the Earth.

So many experiences I associate with smells. That jungle trek presented the memorable smell of rot. The deeper we went, the stronger the unappealing odor. In silence we took a turn into a less traveled path. The stench of putrefying flesh was overpowering by the time Aziz stopped in front of the unique plant. Its five giant lobes were fleshy, deep rusty red with white splotches. I gagged and pulled my T-shirt neck up over my nose.

"She would stand here, as if praying, though I could not bear the smell and would return home."

"I would have left with you! Foul. Is the smell stronger than normal?"

She shrugged, obviously uncomfortable. "Yes. . .it seems stronger."

"Did you come here often?"

"At first, no." She gently adjusted a black hair comb, its pale jade cat's eye just visible under the edge of her scarf. She turned, walked away.

I wanted to demand more, to search for clues to Louisa's many visits, but my guide was retracing our steps quickly so I followed. On the main path we resumed the southerly route into the thickening biomass. How inconsequential was a human amongst that virulent vegetation that felt like forever.

"Where does this path lead?"

"Many places. It becomes many paths. Some say it has no end."

Well, so much for that line of questioning. I was certainly not going exploring. She

stopped, turned to her right and nodded. Shocked by the splash of orange-red visible through the undergrowth, but not by the smell now that I knew it, I began pushing aside vines for a closer look. Aziz grabbed my arm as I heard but didn't see swift movement at my feet.

"You must be very careful when away from the kompong."

"Yes. Thank you. I forgot myself." I shuddered as a multitude of venomous reptiles flashed before me, chided myself for being careless.

The color was even more vibrant than the first had been. And the size of it! "Are there others?"

"There are a few further down the path. None are so large. She did not feed them."

"What did she feed these two?"

"La did not tell me. It is time to return. There is much to be done." She turned and was nearly out of sight by the time I caught up with her.

"You saw her feed the plants, didn't you?"

Her eyes told me more than her, "My brother has told you everything."

No good pushing. I followed her docilely but my mind raced, trying to sort and organize. Behind me there came the sound of struggle, as of prey trapped and fighting for life. My skin crawled as imagination brought forth the possibility that the prey might be a human. The world of the jungle took some getting used to.

With the sun high overhead as we emerged I welcomed the cool of the kompong. Serious food preparation was underway so my 'thank you' was cut short as Aziz was called into action. The feast would be shared with the family of Syed through the final rights.

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Suhantu joined me in the hotel restaurant as I consumed a fiery fish curry. "Enough of this and my soul will be cleansed." He looked blank. "Never mind. Any luck?"

"The jaga must drive my father today and Djuniedi's car will not start. The bus leaves at two o'clock but you will not want to take it."

"But of course I will! I have to see Gwynn, she might have heard something, Louisa might even be there. How long will the bus take to get to her place?"

"There are many people on these buses and they often break down. If the rains have

been heavy, and this is the season for rains, then they have problems crossing the rivers.” His inscrutable face quickly covered a concerned frown.

“Thank you for your concern, Suhantu. Now, I must make a quick call. Please get me a becak and explain my destination so he can assist with the bus driver.”

His inscrutable face quickly covered a concerned frown. With a curt nod he left me.

I rang Ms Stoll but was disappointed to learn she had no news. I filled her in on the latest, leaving nothing out.

With reserved concern she said, “These are a superstitious people. Generally they don’t like outsiders, especially if they’re unmarried since it strikes them as unnatural. Keeping the blood pure, even to marriage within a family, is important. Sounds like Louisa broke a taboo, perhaps unwittingly. I’ll see if she’s cleared out through immigration or if there is any mention of her anywhere. Call me in a day or so.”

The bus was a beauty. Beat-up and sagging but the paint was lively. ‘Biz Kelat’ (Lightening Bus) was driven by a sinewy old man who wore a sarong with clean cotton shirt and no shoes. His mouth was stained beetlenut red. I’d read that 20% of the world populace chewed beetlenut and was beginning to believe it. The smell of durien permeated the bus as locals proudly carried the delicacy home from market. I, like most westerners, found the flavor, texture and aroma revolting. It reminded me of the Rafflesia. The equatorial heat brewed the mélange of durien, a baby’s dirty bottom, two nervous pinned chickens, and collective body odor in the metal cauldron. The humidity was, at a guess, 98%.

Gathering thunderheads hinted that perhaps some relief was on the way. Each departure and entry of passengers along the pitted dirt road initiated the shifting of bodies, baskets and bags. A seasoned traveler, I had grabbed the window seat by the door for more air, quick escape and less sun as we headed south with the Indian Ocean stretching out to the West. Lack of shocks made reading impossible so I dissolved into sights and sounds, trying to ignore the smells. The downpour began and I realized my window, which had been such a blessing, was in a permanently open position, as were all the windows on that side. The driver stopped and pulled down a clear plastic sheet that we anchored with our shoulders, closing out some of the rain, so I was getting wet but not soaked.

We were cruising through the perimeter of the jungle. It would thrive on the abundant offering. The river crossing was hairy but successful on a decidedly shaky wooden barge

that was twice poled across. First it took the bus with the trusting souls who remained seated, then with we pessimists who clung to our possessions and the barge rail. It was about 300 meters across and the brown torrent was thundering through, fed by turbulence from the hills that had caught the heavy rains.

The bus dropped me, rather bedraggled and dripping, at the Highway Department kompong in the early evening. The little group of trailers and shacks was well lit with a generator pumping away in the background. Gwynn's smiling, "We don't get many guest out here!" put the trip behind me quickly.

"I now understand the infrequency of your jaunts to Banda Aceh. That 150 kilometer battering took seven hours!"

Gwynn gave her horsy laugh, "Oh, that was pretty good. If the barge isn't there or you've someone blocking the narrow road for any reason or you've car troubles it can take days. That's the norm."

A hot shower made me feel that all was well with the world. We feasted on smoked Norwegian oysters, French Camembert cheese, black Greek olives and German pumpernickel bread, all freshly tinned in the respective countries. The tangy radishes, snappy spring onions, ruby red tomatoes and crisp green peppers were freshly picked from the garden. All this we washed down with a full-bodied Margot burgundy.

I was amazed. "There are those who would call this 'the good life'. I didn't know you expats fared so well."

"One learns in time how to tap resources. While I can't reveal my procurer, you should know you've just consumed contraband. Stu and I have resided in some remote locales over the years and I promise you culinary luxuries are necessities."

A tall Canadian woman, Gwynn was warm and direct. Over coffee and snifters of brandy she had me roaring with laughter with her tales of trips around Sumatra and interactions with locals. Charlie the Mynah bird sat on driftwood in his corner. He shouted obscenities from time to time and mocked our laughter as we relaxed on the screened veranda. Beneath Charlie's end was a terrarium and his job was to keep it fertilized. He gave comic relief to the Louisa story I told.

"I've been in Sumatra for three years, alone much of the time since Stu is usually on the construction sites. Aziz was our maid for the first year while we rented a house in Banda Aceh. We helped each other's language skills and she was a pleasure to have around. I moved down here to be closer to Stu and to have water I could swim in. She

moved home to care for her mother. She was sixteen and betrothed to Syed.”

I stared at her, unsure if I was more shocked by Aziz’s age or her connection with Syed. The pieces began fitting together.

Gwynn sighed, “I’m sad she inherited the ‘wasting sickness’, as they call it. I hadn’t realized it was genetically transmitted. That is clearly why the families called off the wedding. Poor Aziz. And this complicates matters, doesn’t it? Muhammad was at school in England when we arrived. She sent part of her salary to him, as did everyone in Pundat. That plus a scholarship and part-time work helped him graduate. He returned to Jakarta and worked at Barclays’ Bank. I hear he has started his own business giving investment advice.”

I fished his card from my vest pocket. She read it and smiled, “I met him once. Rather charming in a dangerous sort of way, isn’t he?” Her short laugh was sarcastic. Charlie echoed her sentiments as she stood and went inside.

I wondered if she too had contemplated his hidden assets. I sipped the brandy, loving the warm bite. I was the most relaxed I’d been since my last dive. Had that been only two weeks ago? Syed and Aziz. I could hardly believe she was not yet 20. How painful the time with Louisa must have been! Had Louisa known about their engagement?

Gwynn rejoined me carrying a small pouch.” I don’t know if you smoke but this is good stuff, grown locally. I know I need one now.” She began rolling with nimble fingers.

“I would like to see the things that you make if I may, Gwynn. The pieces you wore last week were bold, a statement. Only you could have worn them.”

Again that bark of a laugh. “Copper wire and black coral. I’ll show you what I have tomorrow. Want to be my agent? I could do with one.”

“Do you just give away all your stuff?”

“If someone wears my adornments they’re wearing me. They’ve taken a small hunk of Gwynn to show around and enjoy. I’m making them feel good about themselves. I’ve not asked money yet. Maybe later. Right now, take a hit of this. I waited until I was fifty-two to try grass. My gardener Abdah, who you’ll see at sunrise, invited me for a bong one day. How could I refuse the toothless old fellow who keeps vegetables on my table? Well, he grows this as well and has taught me to make an incredible hot green ganja-based curry.”

We sat back and listened to the sea and the night music around us. Charlie was relatively quiet, involved in a papaya. It was definitely quality herb.

“Tomorrow you should swim and snorkel around for a while. I’ll show you a perfect place, protected even in this monsoon.”

“Just exactly what I need. What do you know about the plant Louisa was fertilizing?”

“Well, I don’t know its blood type,” she smiled. “The *Rafflesia Arnoldii*, or Stinking Corpse Lily, is the biggest flower in the world, can be a meter across and one member of the family has a 9ft spire. Starts as a brown bud about cabbage size. It only blooms every 1000 days. No green tissues, scale-like leaves. The striking color and scent you well know. After a week or so it rots to a spongy mess on the moss-covered jungle floor leaving sticky seeds that stick to passing animals for transplanting. I told Louisa about it one night at the Sultan when Syed was bartending. She was fascinated and he promised to show her one. So, he fell for her did he? Love over the *Rafflesia*.” She re-lit the joint, passed it over.

“Young fool was barely breast high to either of us. She is striking. Like a thoroughbred or a Russian wolfhound but with brains. Aloof, though when her attention is upon you it is 100%. Will question you to exhaustion but never just makes conversation. Yeah, I enjoyed that short interlude immensely.”

We smoked and hovered in memories. My concern and deep feelings for my friend moved toward melancholy then lightened as Charlie began running through his score of curses punctuated by whistles.

Gwynn mused, “Blood often enters into the superstitions on this island. I wonder if they think Syed donated it while under her spell or that she drugged him and stole it. If she gave it to the plant it must have been diluted with something or would never have been absorbed.”

We looked at each other. Gwynn nodded, “There must be some trace of whatever she gave it if it was blood red, whatever shade that is perceived to be.”

“I didn’t get a chance to search for a jar or container since Aziz was in such a hurry. But what difference does it make if she did or it was all conjecture? We can only prove if she did, not that she didn’t due to lack of evidence.”

“No, but the more we know the more logical each step becomes.”

“True,” I conceded. “Have you any knowledge of a fatal disease with the symptoms Syed displayed?”

“We don’t know enough to guess. This area has medical knowledge about as limited as my own, I’m afraid. They don’t name babies until they’re a year old in many cases

because the death rate is so high. Rick, a doctor sponsored by the World Health Organization, left last month after a two year effort. His frustration was immense. Some have curable diseases but won't trust the proffered medicine, nor will they answer questions about ailments, so little can be learned. Rick convinced some to let the government spray for mosquitoes since malaria is rampant, but they would not be coerced into cleaning up the standing water where the breeding is the worst. Gardens are fertilized with untreated night soil so worms and parasites are passed on one to the other. Rick tried to educate them about the need to wash the vegetables since so many diseases are spread that way. A few took heed, most smiled and carried on."

"When in the market I saw bloated fish being sold," I told her.

Gwynn sighed, "Some are sold intact, no cleaning, so the buyer knows they've not been cheated of anything. Fine, but while waiting for that crafty shopper the fish was probably stewing in the sun. Oh, it goes on and on. Things that shock we naive westerners. Perhaps it's all just a form of population control. I do like the Sumatrans but have watched so much suffering and death during my brief stay. The possibility is that someone put a curse on Syed and his deterioration was psychosomatic."

"I had considered that. Could it have been Aziz?"

Gwynn nodded, "Would explain a lot, wouldn't it? Impossible to prove." She stood up decisively, "I'll share some home brew with you."

It was a remarkable copy of Bailey's Irish Cream and it tucked me into a deep sleep as gently as a kiss.

Gwynn had told me the Mosque was a few kilometers away in the fishing village where Abdah lived. Their loud speaker was obviously well powered for the morning call to prayer inspired the roosters as well as the jungle populace.

'Damned sun-worshippers,' I growled, regarding the rising sun through non-focusing eyes. I crawled from under the mosquito net and looked out the window at the garden. On a prayer rug amidst vines was a prostrate figure. Must be Abdah, I shrugged and went back to bed.

"Good morning. Wanna fuck?" told me Charlie was awake as I opened my bedroom door.

"Charming, isn't he?" Gwynn laughed. "We inherited him from the bookkeeper who lived here before. Island life and the lack of female companionship got to him so he trained Charlie as his alter ego. He contracted one of the incurables from a working girl on a trip to Bangkok so is undergoing a series of designer drug treatments in Texas. Company

pays for everything. This feathered low-life keeps my sense of humor intact, actually. That's important when you're the only western female for 150 km. Tina, Abdah's daughter, is making tea and a kind of rice porridge for breakfast, it's the local cuisine. Women aren't allowed to drink coffee, so I learned to go along with the program. Makes life easier. My sins are indulged in private after they leave at noon."

I liked her brusque sensitivity. "Do you enjoy life out here? The solitude would be hard for most."

"There are worse places. And better. I learned long ago to make the most of my situation. As a geologist I usually worked alone. It suits my nature so Stu and I get along fine. Let's eat then walk down for a swim. Promise I'll keep quiet for a while."

The jungle's early morning glow was soft and belied the intensity of life within. Past the mangrove swamp where the gnarled roots claimed part of the ocean you could see huge waves breaking on the encircling coral reef. The roar proclaimed power accumulated in crossing from Africa. Through osmosis my batteries were already recharging. I admired Gwynn's aggressive stride but was not ready for it so early in the morning, especially without coffee. My two weeks of inactivity was showing by the time we reached the well-sheltered alcove. We left our sarongs on the beach and swam in silence for an hour, each totally involved.

I need the ocean, its part of my being. It was cool, stimulating, and I had to remind myself we were only 5° north of the equator. The Indian Ocean was probably the first large body of water sailed by humans, but we seem to know the least about it. After the Philippines assignment, I decided as I floated contentedly, I would head for the Maldives, those spectacular atolls that crown a submerged mountain range. They were about 2000 miles of open ocean away, two and half weeks under sail once the monsoon changed. Dreams birth plans.

I rejoined Gwynn on the beach. "You're lucky to find a year-round swimming area."

"Yes, and you should see it in January, after the NE trade winds have set up. The visibility is awesome in its clarity. The small islands and reef that protect us now become my private aquarium. I'm a shameless voyeur. The fish have difficulty finding privacy when I don mask and snorkel!"

We draped over the rocks and talked of our mutual love for the ocean world for a while. The overland quick-time return stroll was interesting as well. Jungle in full sun takes on

an edge. We grabbed some fat yellow mangoes from a vulnerable nearby tree. Luxuriating in the sweet luscious fruit, we had juice dripping from elbows and chin. First stop was the cistern for a clean-up. A fixture in village life, the open cement well was used by all. We laughed and talked, dumping buckets of water over each other to rinse juice and salt. A local woman squatted over her laundry, slapping and scrubbing in silence. The warm smile when we gave her a mango was a gift in itself. Gwynn asked about her family and chatted for a while. As exclusive water source, the well was essential and served as social center for the area.

We returned to the Highway Department kompung. It was actually a cluster of converted containers. Cheap, strong, practical, easily moved. One served as office, three were connected for spare parts and tools, and one housed the jaga. The four 'houses' were each made up of three connected containers with tacked-on porches. Gwynn's had a homey look with Charlie's screened porch, the garden, plants in window boxes, and vines struggling to cover its utilitarian look.

Gwynn gestured towards the undisguised chain-link fence. "A necessity. By the end of their first year here the company had to replace their entire inventory as it disappeared bit by bit. They were only allowed to have local employees and the series of jagas they hired each absconded with a wealth of goods. They don't view it as stealing. You have something you are not using, so you must not need it right now. They do. Simple. If I leave shoes outside the door they'll disappear. A discreet statement about how I really need them will probably bring them back. I do have a special closet in my bedroom where I lock away food stores and valuables. They would never break into it." She smiled, "It takes time to understand a different culture, especially the Acehnese."

"Well, I'd say you are qualified. Want a new challenge?"

"Helping you find Louisa you mean. I've been thinking about the situation. I'm standing by twelve to one for radio contact as Stu will be calling in today. No one is here but the jaga so I'll see what's happening with Stu before I get committed. Tina's fixing fish-head curry with ganja base. Delicious, believe it or not. After that the afternoon's up to you but I can guarantee rain so you may just want to sleep. You need it, right? Lunch is at eleven."

Yes, the soup was great. The flesh of the fish's head is the most delicate in flavor. The sauce was a masterful combination of herbs and spices perfected by generations. We both ate with gusto and abandon, as one must to really enjoy food. Gwynn is a rare

woman. She reaches out for life, takes it, and relishes each experience. We finished with fresh mint tea and Oreo chocolate cookies (more contraband), the ultimate munchie delight. By noon we were both laughing at everything.

I joined her in the office. The needlepoint on the wall read, 'You know it's time to leave Asia when you recognize the footprints on the toilet seat as your own'. You have to have been there. I was sitting on the floor with a terminal case of giggles when Stu's call came through. Gwynn's efforts at self-control inspired a, "Curry for lunch, eh?" from Stu. However, we were very somber by the end of the transmission.

"I saw Louisa this morning at the Banda Aceh airport. I went up for a meeting last night, was catching the early morning flight back to Jakarta. While standing in the Air Garuda line I saw Louisa heading for the Singapore flight. Wouldn't have recognized her but for the height and that black coral bracelet you gave her, Gwynn. When I called her name she walked faster. I ran to catch up, was shocked by the state of her. She had scratches covering her face and neck and one eye was swollen shut, the other red and puffy. Her right hand was swollen and she held her arm as if in pain. She didn't recognize me, backed away and shouted, 'I didn't do it! Leave me alone!' Then she ran for the plane. She seemed weak, her movements unsteady."

He was obviously worried. "Since you'd told me about Cheyenne, I tried to call her at the Sultan, but they told me she was with you. I got a quick call through to Bev so she'll be expecting to hear from you. She was doubtful, but said she would try to catch the flight on arrival and offer assistance. Listen, I've got meetings stacked up for the next two days, then on-site tours that will consume at least two more days. President Suharto's nephew wants to take over the project and cancel our contract. Threats have been made. I'll fill you in later. But, you should head for Singapore with Cheyenne immediately. Tap the expat network, embassy, airlines, whatever."

I sat in silence and balanced out while Gwynn made plans. In an amazingly short time we had collected her stuff and were on the road in the driving rain. We made one stop to get her driver, Rashid, at his village.

My queries as to why we both should leave received a shrug. "Stu doesn't cry wolf. Politics can be volatile."

The bridge was completely gone so we got in line for the barge. Rashid, offered to pay to move up but only the bus driver was interested. Oreos and a thermos of hot tea eased the two-hour wait as the barge was loaded and poled with difficulty from side to

side on the swollen chocolate river. Our crossing was tense but successful and we slid into the ungrooved muck on the other side. Rashid and the Land Rover were equal to the task of deep mud and over-sized puddles as we maneuvered around logs and various stuck vehicles. I looked back to see the bus miss the edge of the barge during loading. It sat with two wheels on the barge, one in the mud, one in the river.

“Insha Allah,” Rashid shrugged.

“Typical,” Gwynn chuckled.

“Thank goodness he was greedy,” I breathed, “but his poor passengers.”

Gwynn nodded, “None of the western luxuries like tow trucks and service stations. We could have been waiting behind him for days. They’ll take their possessions, animate or inanimate, to stand under a tree in the downpour until a solution is found for the bus.”

The remainder of the trip was relatively uneventful as we fishtailed north, avoiding the edges of a road that resembled a motor-cross course. We dropped Gwynn at the Blangbintang Airport to secure transport, and continued to the Sultan for my things.

The maid had tidied my room but someone had done just the opposite with my bag. I had left it locked with everything inside except my day pack which I had taken with me. The heavy canvas had been slashed open along the side and the contents were emptied on the floor of the closet. A quick assessment while repacking revealed no obvious losses except my address book, but the bag was ruined. Swearing, I tied it closed with cord. Best bag I’d ever had.

At the front desk I asked for the bill and called Suhantu at home. Speaking slowly and distinctly I told him about Louisa and about my ransacked bag. The bag upset him. A full investigation was vowed. I said I would call him from Singapore and asked that he give his father my respects. I told him he had made my stay a rewarding experience and could almost feel him blush. Made a mental note to send him a Walkman from Singapore where such things were cheap and plentiful.

Gwynn was pacing in the airport entrance. We had five minutes. The bribes were already paid so they had bumped two passengers but would not wait. She stuffed a handful of rupiah in Rashid’s hand and said, “Stay at your sister’s for a week”. Then we were sprinting for the gate.

We made Medan but that old 14-seater couldn’t get off the ground again. We exhausted all possibilities for getting a flight and finally crashed at the Wai Yat Hotel for the night, too beat to appreciate the classic Sumatran decor. A frustrating

morning at the airport eventually got us on a late afternoon flight to Singapore.

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Bev maintained their communication base in Claymore Towers, a quality high-rise off Orchard Road. Neat and round with a perpetual smile, she was already our established accomplice in the bazaar woman-hunt. She tucked us into her Volvo and served us an excellent chilled Australian white burgundy in crystal. While whisking us away from Changi Airport, she brought us up to date.

“I didn’t make it to the airport in time for Louisa’s flight due to the time spent talking my way out of a speeding ticket on the East Coast Parkway. Stu called after talking to you to give me her full name as well as yours and a more accurate description than the ‘tall, slim, beat-up blonde’ he had supplied earlier. The American Embassy has heard nothing but is helping monitor out-bound traffic. There’s been no ticket purchased under her name, no hotel check-in nor car rental nor police report nor hospital check-in as of noon today.” She gave a small sigh, caught my eye in the rear-view mirror “I’m really sorry, I had hoped to give you a more positive report. They remembered her at Air Garuda and she did get off here.”

I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile, “You’re incredible. I wouldn’t have known where to begin. I’ve a few calls to make then a small losman on Arab Street to check. She stayed there six months ago as part of her anthropological studies of the Acehnese. The wine is relaxing some of my tensed nerves. How about you, Gwynn?”

“Oh, a couple more bottles and I should be fairly relaxed.”

Bev laughed, “You can take one into the whirlpool with you.”

Relaxed and refreshed with yet another refill in hand, I faced the phone. Ms Stoll had news. “An American, Sid Bower, called asking about Louisa. Rather a cross between a lawyer and a used car salesman. You weren’t mentioned. I’m authorized to give basic information, but all I really know for fact is her visa status, and couldn’t honestly tell him where she was or what she was doing. I didn’t like his manner, but he wasn’t really out of line.”

I made notes and told her all I knew, including Bev’s numbers since she’d volunteered to be ‘the link’.

“I’ll call the Singapore Embassy to co-ordinate efforts and ring you tomorrow night. I

feel rather impotent but will see what I can come up with. We can't really put out a full alert for missing person yet. I have a friend, Jesse Bass, a shrink involved deeply in studying Southeast Asians. I've told him about the case so you can call him if you think he can help in any way. He's connected and he's a nice guy."

I took his number and thanked her profusely, then dialed Pat in New York. Her answering service promised to locate her right away and have her return the call. From my doodling pen came a pyramid with Banda Aceh, Singapore and New York at the respective points. From each location I noted the players in a radiating sun pattern and had each speaking their relevance in balloons. I had begun balloons with my own observations when Bev came in.

"My friend at the embassy here says they have no news but a Yank calling himself Sid Bower has called asking about Louisa, said he was a friend, just passing through. They don't have him registered anywhere or on any records. Ever heard of him?"

"No. He tried the Medan embassy. Ms Stoll knows to contact you with any news."

"Well, time to indulge yourself. Joe, our masterful chef from the Philippines, has whipped up a veritable feast. I asked him for a buffet as this promises to be a long evening. Gwynn is waiting for us."

The red snapper had been gently sautéed in fresh coconut milk with green peppercorns. I was giving it my full attention when Pat called.

"Please tell me everything you have so far, Cheyenne. She rang here five hours ago but didn't wait for the service to find me. She said she'd call back but hasn't. The service said she sounded muffled, but in that part of the world it could have just been a bad phone or line, couldn't it?" she asked hopefully.

I gave her the facts, not my conjectures. There was silence when I finished. "Pat?"

Hesitantly Pat said, "This Sid Bower, though I doubt that's his real name, was probably sent by William's mother. She's a cold snob of a woman whose husband died when William was in his teens. She clung to her only child and had big plans for him. The resentment was immense when he took off with Louisa and she blamed her for everything. So, when he died, Louisa was the culprit. I never see the woman but Mom encounters her at various functions around the city. Mom was very upset when she called this morning. Mrs. Graves was at a charity benefit she was hosting last week and listened to her recounting to some guests Louisa's studies in Banda Aceh. Well, a friend rang Mom last night to relate a story circulating that Mrs. Graves has 'proof' that

Louisa pushed William from the balcony. All this time she's been harboring this insanity and heaven knows what she came up with. It seems that she sent someone to find Louisa to get her back to New York with some story about inheritance of the Graves fortune, as she has no heirs. It sounds like she thinks she can lure her back with money and then try to prosecute." Pat gave an exasperated sigh.

"Well, that would explain the mysterious Mr. Bower. What happened to William? He was at Louisa's apartment, right?"

"Yes. He had been trying to write. She said he turned out some really good dramatic poetry. He'd had a few published, but then no one was interested and supposedly he was staying with Louisa because he was broke. His mother refused to give him more money unless he moved home, helped with family business or something along that line, but he was always arguing with her. He had been on an impressive allowance, I don't know what happened with that, but he cashed in some bonds left by his father and published his own anthology. New York is merciless when you break the rules. If you're not good enough to get published here then you're not good enough to bother with. The critics cut him to shreds. He was on a real binge for a while. Louisa returned from a weekend at Mom's to find him passed out on the living room floor. She covered him and went to bed. She awoke to the doorbell the next morning. They were trying to find which balcony he had fallen or jumped from. Imagine the trauma of it! She was devastated. And felt guilty, of course. It was a while before she could work, but it was the work that saved her. She excelled in her field after that."

I asked about her mom, sent regards. "Pat, I need some photos of Louisa. Several since we both know the broad spectrum her appearance covers. I can't believe she never went to the stage with her natural abilities. Maybe later, after this episode is over, eh? Can you fax them to me right away? And, copies of any paperwork, drivers license, insurance card, old passport, anything. Oh, and descriptions of anything she might have had with her that you know of, like jewelry she never removed. I don't know that it will be of any use, but any clues to her state of mind or likes and dislikes. And everything you can remember about the losman on Arab St. Has she ever used any other name or is there a nickname she's had?"

"I can begin faxing photos as soon as we hang up. No jewelry, she left all that behind, but she was wearing a cheap Casio, you know those horrid things with black plastic band and alarm. No one would want to steal it, she said." I smiled and glanced down at my own

cheap, practical, invaluable Casio and blessed the Japanese.

Pat continued, "She had me send her black lace scarf with our family name worked into it for the Mosque. And, two ebony hair combs with pale jade cats eyes inlaid on each." My breath caught in my throat but I said nothing. "The losman was called Mohammads. Original, right? It was about halfway between the Mosque and the open market on Arab St. I haven't been inside, just driven past. Revealing a perverse side to her humor, when meeting people she didn't care for, especially the rich and boring, she called herself Veronica Snatch."

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"The plot thickens," Gwynn smiled after I related the details of my talk with Pat. "Now shut up and eat while we contemplate the new facts."

Oh, and I did! Joe's buffet was an orgy of colors and smells, combining local and gourmet taste treats. "Could I borrow Joe for my dive trips so I don't lose so much weight each time?"

Bev looked at me with mock horror, "Heavens no! But, you can visit after each of them. Joe can fatten you up while I take vicarious pleasure from your tales of dangers in the deep blue. It's a world I'm not even tempted to see in the flesh. Before Joe and Belle entered my life I was an emaciated clotheshorse. Now western men relax and talk with me. I'm not considered a threat so women can be my friends. Chinese men find me very sexy so I get the most interesting propositions (and I don't say no to all of them!). I worry less so am a tranquil person. He does all the cooking, she does all the cleaning and runs the place, and the business pays for everything." Her Cheshire cat smile made us laugh. "Now, back to the dungeon."

As the door closed Gwynn refilled our glasses. "Her 'dungeon' is a converted suite with very sophisticated computer/communication setup and 26th floor view of Singapore. We're not zoned for business here but this is a great place. She's the axis for Stu and partner's highway consultation companies and her brother's construction equipment company in China as well as her own international employee service for road construction. Don't be fooled by the sweet voice and soft curves. The lady's tough and has smut on many of the Singaporean top dogs."

From invisible speaker floated a breathy giggle, "Necessary for survival here, I assure

you. There's a call coming in from Stu, Gwynn, I'll buzz you when it's your turn. There's a fax coming in for you from New York, Cheyenne. I'll bring it down when complete."

Gwynn laughed, "Sleazy."

"But invaluable," Bev sighed. "You can safely talk about me now, I'm signing off."

Shaking her head, Gwynn said, "There's also a SSB setup, totally illegal. The antenna is in the top of a palm on the roof. They're so paranoid here they over-regulate everything, even family planning. Lee Kuan Yew knows his people, I suppose. They're workaholics who seem to like structure and planning."

The phone hummed and she took it out onto the balcony. I was studying a delicate black oil Yin & Yang screen when Bev entered with faxed photos of Louisa. She looked more interesting. Age had served her well. Somber in one, coolly sophisticated in another, contemplative. I had forgotten that her smiles were infrequent. These were professional prints, I wondered for what she had commissioned them.

Bev and Gwynn were involved with the takeover crisis so they went to the office and left me with the phone. I rang Suhantu and he agreed to check if a Bower, or any other American, had been or was at the Sultan. I also explained that the only thing missing from my wrecked bag was my address book and in it was the note I'd received from Louisa. It wasn't a serious matter as I had everything recorded in my laptop, but I didn't tell him that. There's something personal about an address book and I did want it back.

Then for the call I had been avoiding. "Hello Mohammad, this is Cheyenne. I'm surprised to find you in the office at this hour."

"Ah, a young executive on the rise, you know. How do you like Singapore? A bit more your style than Aceh, I would say." Always there was an edge of sarcasm.

"Well, the drums have been busy," I said. "Actually I'm not a city person. The water is my preferred domain. However, my injured friend is on land, somewhere, so that is where I shall stay until she is safe."

"Admirable sentiment. I should have such a friend."

"You have your family."

"We both know that's quite different. La hasn't been in touch with me and I rather doubt she will. Having been injured in Aceh she probably finds little to trust in any of us."

"I can understand that."

"Now, now. Please remember I am trying to help you both and don't rise up at everything I say. But, of course you're worried. What do you wish of me?"

“How was she injured?”

“The ‘drums’ have it that a curse was put on her as well as Syed since she was interfering in a marriage that would have united the families and been advantageous to all.”

“But I understood Aziz has your mother’s wasting sickness so she could not marry Syed.”

“Your source is obviously not a Muslim, not even from Aceh for that matter. My sister is a healthy young woman. The marriage would have continued in any case. My people care for the whole, not just for the self. No, it has been well over a year since Syed asked to be allowed his trek to Mecca first. Understood and appreciated. The date was delayed. His hegira should have begun six months ago. The wedding would have been the night before Syed died. Weakening to your friend’s charms, he was endangering everyone’s future. As to your question, I know neither the agent nor the nature of the curse.”

“She has already been through what must have been a terrifying experience and has left Aceh. They should leave her alone now.”

“Perhaps. But the damage has been done. Who is the man who is searching for her, an old boyfriend?”

“You are certainly well-informed. No, she doesn’t know him. He’s the agent of an old adversary and is trying to get her back to the States. Is there anything at all that you know that would help me find her, Mohammad?”

“I like the way you say my name, Cheyenne. Beyond advising you find her before the night of the new moon, I can not assist you.” Click.

I tried to recount verbatim the surrealistic exchange to Gwynn and Bev, as it was doubtful my assessment would be objective. We were having coffee on the balcony and the city night’s sounds were strangely soothing. Bev went to consult her calendar.

“How’s Stu?” I asked between bites of almond cake.

Gwynn grunted, “Tired and frustrated. Politics are the real stumbling block so often in his business. Though more diplomatic than I, he lacks the eye for faults or weaknesses in his adversaries. If you can’t play them or trap them, they may win. His qualifications and impressive track record only go so far with a money and power hungry group like the Jakarta politicians. What really bothers him is they won’t know what they’re doing and will skim off so much money that what’ll remain is a piss-poor road that will be rendered

unusable after a year.”

Bev returned. “We’ve got until tonight to find her.”

“Thanks Bev. Time for me to search out Mohammad’s losman. Perhaps she returned and we’ll have one helluva party tonight.” I was not, in honesty, the least bit optimistic.

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Ah, Singapore. Multi-cultural with a Chinese base and an awesome number of tourists that are easily absorbed. The 21<sup>st</sup> century island nation is the only seaport in the world free of crime and dirt. There was a five thousand dollar fine for spitting on the street, in Asia where spitting and breathing seem of equal importance. Western capitalists flock to pay half the price they would at home for designer fashions, electronics, jewelry and hotels. Everywhere there is construction, the old coming down as the new goes up and up and up. High-rise buildings, high fashion, high technology, high finance, high energy, high profile, high times. Orchard Road nearly out-dresses New York at Christmas, though many citizens know not what they celebrate. The almighty dollar. But, I like the place, accept it as an example of the East/West fusion.

Arab Street was real, even with the tourist scene. The little guesthouse was doomed; its termination date posted on the smiling tiger sign on the corner. A Scandinavian couple with expedition backpacks sat in one corner seriously perusing their Southeast Asian Handbook in rickety wooden chairs at a tile-topped table. The steady hum indicated the overhead fan that was trying to turn; a periodic flicker that the one bare bulb was trying to die. Various signs in various languages, a heavy smell of urine, and screaming kids by the blaring TV. All seemed at odds with the environment preferred by the Louisa I had known. It was at that point that I acknowledged for the first time that I was searching for a stranger.

A once-attractive woman in tattered traditional dress took possession of one resistant child. With a solemn nod she indicated we’d been seen, then departed. We exchanged looks and waited standing, as the gold plastic sofa did not invite lounging. In black felt fez, sarong and western shirt, a smiling dark-eyed Mohammad rushed in apologetically. Yes, of course they remembered the ‘fine madam’ in the picture very well and had aided her studies in every way possible. They had even sent her to his very own family’s kompong in Banda Aceh where she was welcomed as family. Tacked on the wall

above the desk was a post card from her of which he was very proud. Her flowing script in that rare gray ink of preference thanked he and his gracious wife for their hospitality and for enlightening her on their Islamic beliefs.

“She will be famous in your country, yes?” he beamed. “For they know so little of the true faith.”

“Yes, she may be. Has she been here since that first time when you taught her so much?”

He flushed at his acknowledged importance. “No, she has not returned but we are expecting her soon.”

“Why?”

“Our cousin Risari from Tungkuban has told us she is here.”

“How does he know?” Easy girl, I told myself, or you’ll scare him off and get no answers.

“Oh, of course, he is from your kampung so he is a friend of Louisa’s,” I smiled.

“Yes, he too has helped the fine madam with her studies. We have not seen Risari since we were children together in Tungkuban. Sadly we were at market when he came this morning. My wife says he will return for he too wishes to see the fine madam. The humble Mohammad feels good in his heart that he sent her to experience the one faith with his people. As Allah has willed.”

“Louisa is like a sister to me. Her mother is very ill,” I lied, “and I must speak with her immediately. Please, will you have her call this number the minute she enters? For the sake of her old mother. My name is Cheyenne.”

In the taxi Gwynn patted my arm, “Good thinking, my Dear. You’re learning. The thing that amazes me is the speed of communication amongst these people. Fax was created to try to keep up with them.”

“Perhaps I’m being paranoid, but I fear this Risari was sent as tormentor. Or executioner.”

“No, there is a good chance your fears are well-founded. Two years ago a German couple moved to Banda Aceh to set up a fish-canning plant. Fine with everyone as it promised jobs. But both wore shorts while walking around town and he often wore no shirt. Holding hands and kissing in public added to the insult but the real scandal was that they weren’t married. ‘Living like cattle’, a local paper printed. Soon afterwards she disappeared without a trace and he was shipped out with some illness. No one knew anything, of course, but the ex-pat community drew definite conclusions. Keeps

everyone conscious of customs, if you know what I mean.”

It felt better to be inside the refined enclave of a world I better understood with a smiling Bev offering the cognac we needed. “There’s a message with all airlines, hotels and car rentals, both names, to call you here. Still nothing from hospitals or police.”

I was impressed. “How did you manage all that?”

“Joe, Belle & I were busy plus I have a travel agent who owes me. His computer link-ups were the key.”

“Bev, do you know Jesse Bass?”

“Not as well as I’d like to,” she replied with a dirty laugh.

“Tell me about him. Facts, please, not your private fantasies,” I smiled.

“Shrink of top caliber. American father, Chinese mom, grew up in Hong Kong and educated in California. Fine body, receding hairline, lives with two highborn Thai women. I read one article he wrote as a grad student, ‘The Yin and Yang of the Far-Out Brain’. Once you get past the title, which serves its purpose in getting your attention, it was a very intelligently written query on the fundamental differences in eastern and western thinking. Why?”

“I was told he would help if need be. Could we invite him over and pick his brain?”

She headed for the door. “I’ll see what I can do. Thanks for the excuse,” she winked.

“Any chance Bower is a hit-man?” Gwynn asked abruptly.

“Hadn’t thought of that. I don’t know Mrs. Graves at all, but Pat’s opinion of her is fairly low. I suppose it is possible if she really believes Louisa killed her son. A very rich blue-blood with no surviving relatives. Yes, that could instill a strong desire for revenge. That’s just the complication Louisa needs now.”

Gwynn nodded. “How true. Passing on the name and wealth is sacrosanct among the well bred of my acquaintance. So we can’t ignore him as a possible danger. Have you contemplated Mohammad’s roll in Syed’s death? Like why he won’t acknowledge his sister’s condition when it’s so obvious. And, what did he stand to lose or gain by the joining of the families? It would seem it would have taken some of the burden off him since Syed had a decent job with regular income. But, the ruling position in the kompong is very important, even if he is working in Jakarta. For the whole of his life he’s been groomed for the position. Would the marriage have enlarged his ‘kingdom’ or would Syed, being always present, have threatened his sovereign position?”

“But, he’s well-educated, has seen the outside world, Gwynn. This curse business is

more indicative of the insulated Tungkuan clan.”

“Don’t assume that reading a few books and observing alternate lifestyles alters generations of teachings and fears. Ambition, Cheyenne, power.”

Bev joined us with, “Jesse Bass will be here within the hour. I think he is going to enjoy this.”

We adjourned to the buffet when Jesse arrived, to get acquainted while indulging. An intense but relaxed man, he inspired in one all that a shrink should. And, yes, I understood Bev’s hunger for him immediately. Recounting the developing saga for our new colleague was a lengthy endeavor, which he occasionally interrupted for clarity. Most questions were for a better understanding of the people and lifestyle within the kompungs. Having been attracted by the mystery of the place, he had made several trips to Banda Aceh himself and become fairly close to one of the elite families. Their history as silversmiths, presently gold jewelers, with all children in or graduated from college, separated them from the Aceh kompungs I had encountered. Jesse had some house. Fine works in silver from earwax cleaners to jewelry to massive serving platters of delicate design. Their healthy appearance, quality western clothes, and the tastefully selected jewelry they wore, bespoke affluence, old money. This side of the social divide didn’t socialize much with foreigners. Bev was off to answer the phone as Jesse began to question Gwynn about Aziz.

Bev’s voiced came excitedly over the speaker, “The phone is for you, Cheyenne. An American woman.”

I leapt up, “I’ll bet it’s Pat. Maybe Louisa has called her!”

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“Hello Cheyenne.”

I gasped. “Louisa! Are you okay? Where are you? I was so worried! Are you at the losman?”

“Ahh, dear Cheyenne, you haven’t changed. I’m fine. I’m at the Shangri-La. I just spoke with Pat and calmed her. Hopefully she’s dispelling Mom’s fears now. You should know better than to upset yourself and them about something you just don’t understand.”

“But I . . .”

“No, now let me explain a few things. Pat told me all you’ve been through on my behalf. I

appreciate your concern, as I know it was from the heart. My injuries are negligible, though I didn't handle the situation well, being the pampered American that I am. It seems a nightmare now, quite unreal as I only have flashes of a ritual of sorts, masks, and blood; probably mine. As I stood saying adieu to the Rafflesia I had nurtured, someone grabbed me from behind, threw me to the ground and pressed something vile onto my face. This was predawn, after the news of poor Syed had forced my withdrawal from the kompung. Luckily I had left my bag behind the cookhouse before taking that ill-fated walk or I'd probably have lost the few things I have and the cash for this little recuperation jaunt. Destruction of the beautiful Rafflesia was definitely part of that nightmare. The smell will be with me for life. Anyway, I understand your reasoning but the culprits were not of either kompung, of that I'm sure. Besides the fact that it's not in their nature, they revere the Rafflesia and use it for medicine. They wouldn't have so dishonored it. I must have been out for a couple of days, or perhaps the ordeal dragged on for that long. I really have no idea, only vaguely recall becoming aware of the jungle around me, then of walking toward the kompung roofs that seemed so far away. Such a mess I was and every inch of me ached. Things go in and out of clarity until I arrived here, I even imagined people chasing me at the airport. I created quite a commotion during check-in here but somehow had the presence of mind to check in under my sister's business name. She used it when she was here visiting me before, so I have received royal treatment as a return customer. Champagne took care of what the hotel doctor could not. I've had a long sleep and solid food so a new woman has hatched. Pity you were not with me for the entire scene, Cheyenne. It would have appealed to your slightly twisted sense of humor. But, enough morbid details. Tonight I sail with Risari of the Tungkuan Kompung back to Aceh in his prahu along with supplies for the kompung, and three fighting cocks for competitions. It's quite illegal but they've done well here and we'll stop in Malaysia on the way to Aceh. It should be quite an experience."

I interrupted, "But, Louisa, are you sure it's safe, I mean, don't they blame you for Syed's death?"

"Dear Cheyenne, you just do not understand. They are such good people." She laughed, "Listen to us. You used to say I was too lofty, out of touch with 'real folks'. Have we shifted position?"

"Louisa, I'm just worried you don't appreciate how serious this situation could be."

"Believe me, one look in the mirror at the state of my face and I know better than

anyone. It is history. Now, I will return to a ceremony relinquishing plant worship. Don't laugh, this is important to them. They don't ask that I adopt Islam, but I do have a translation of the Koran and find it more theologically sound than any religion I've studied. Anyway, I rang Aziz's brother Mohammad in Jakarta. He will be with the family next weekend, will aid in my repatriation. I do look forward to meeting him. He said that I am blessed to have a friend like you. Cheyenne, you of all people should understand my need for a totally revised life. I don't wish just to study this culture. I need to learn how to live contentedly, feel complete. Theirs is a complex simplicity that's been alien to me. Not that I want to live without running water and indoor toilets forever, but I do need time, uninterrupted by my past or the outside world. You find so easily that which I can only envision." She sighed, "It's all outside Pat's reality, but I know she's there if I need her. You saw how empty my life was, be happy for me now, Cheyenne."

"I do understand, Louisa. My concern is for your physical well-being."

That deep laugh I remembered so well. "I'm tougher than you think. The blood loss was not serious, though I'm a bit weak so got a B12 shot along with a vast assortment of vitamins and nutrients, and the doc pumped me full of antibiotics. Fractured wrist is in plaster, pulled shoulder muscles just need inactivity for a while, scratches cleaned up nicely and only had to have a few stitches. I've stuff for the trip and will stop by the hospital for a check-up when we arrive. Not to worry. Easy to fly back if there are complications or if I feel the need for some decadent Shangri-La pampering."

"Well," I rallied, "I'll grab a bottle of bubbles and be right over. I'll admit I'd like to talk you out of that 700-mile sail up the Malacca Straits. It's a rough ride, especially in this monsoon. I've done it on a ship. That prahu, while I'm sure it's safe, is not going to offer the ride of a yacht, you know. Besides, I've got some great people for you to meet. It's been a long time since we partied together. We can have a 'new moon party' before I head to the Philippines and you head back to Banda Aceh. You do know you're cursed and tonight is the night for pins to be stuck in your doll, don't you?"

"Don't tell me you're beginning to believe that curse rubbish. Come on, be serious. I'll pass on the champers, thanks."

I was feeling frustrated. "What about Mrs. Graves?"

"Well, her man won't be able to get near me at the kompung. I'm not concerned. If William hadn't jumped I probably would have pushed him eventually. Are thought and deed so far apart? Relax, Cheyenne. If you still do yoga, send some of your positive

meditations with me. I'll write to you before too long. Goodbye, my friend." And she was gone.

Three concerned faces turned towards me when I rejoined the rescue operation. I smiled and shrugged but when I tried to speak the lump in my throat interfered and tears just sort of appeared. Jesse, the professional, placed me in a chair, handed me a snifter and began gently kneading my neck.

I took a sip, let out a long breath. "It was Louisa. Too bad we don't have an instant replay because whatever I say will not recount properly that conversation. I can't even tell you if she's okay."

Bev interrupted, "Since the call was on the business phone, it was automatically recorded. Now, it being very personal, I can give you a copy, erase it, put it on the speaker, whatever you wish."

"Bev, you're a jewel. I would like a copy. Let's put it on the speaker so you can get to know Louisa." The gentle fingers and potent brew rejuvenated. The entire chapter was seeming fictitious, a melodramatic creation. I felt a strong longing for my ocean world.

All drinks were renewed and we listened. Jesse's hands kept rhythm with our voices and I floated. The click when she hung up resounded. The end.

Jesse's voice was soft and warm, "No, Cheyenne, you didn't blow things out of proportion." How dare he read my mind? He kept stroking my head and shoulders distractedly. "The dangers are real and she will be totally vulnerable in her present emotional, mental and physical condition. The moonless night is, by the way, the favorite the world over for secret deeds and trysts. Your warning will go unheeded, as her need is overpowering. If a guardian angel sees her through this one Louisa will find another train to hop in front of. The cloak of guilt about William must be shed or she'll destroy herself. If she's right and no harm comes to her at their hands, she may be entering the perfect therapy situation. I doubt if she's ever bent to anyone's needs or demands the way she has to the people in Aceh. You know, it is very possible the scare tactic in the jungle and the ceremony they are planning will assuage the distrust in the kompungs. She is returning in demonstration of good will and sincerity. They are not a bad people, but fear what they do not understand. That's normal."

"Well yes, but what if. . .?"

"No conjectures. They only get blown out of proportion and guesswork gets one nowhere. Physically punishing, this sail is her purgatory. She doesn't feel she's paid

enough yet and that's the final payment. She couldn't save William from himself and feels she helped drive him to the suicide. In not understanding the Acehnese she feels guilty for Syed's death. The need to pay for mistakes is much greater in the western mind than the eastern."

What followed was an all-night round table discussion covering a myriad of subjects and the emptying of a few bottles. Bev was expounding on the hidden talents the doctor must have when Joe appeared with Eggs Benedict and Bloody Marys.

"Saved by Joe!" Gwynn chortled with obvious relief and we all dissolved into uninhibited laughter. Sunday breakfast is always special and that one embodied life and death as well as healthy camaraderie. The final toast was to Louisa.

Gwynn phoned Stu to inform him she was on her way to, 'besiege those greedy bureaucratic bugger-uppers.' She and I had become very close and goodbyes were a bit sad but we vowed future shared adventures. Bev decided it was time to sleep some of it off as her sons were arriving from prep school in the afternoon to spend two weeks with their 'respectable Mother'. She was giggling as she bid us farewell.

Jesse had stayed close to me. "Why don't you stay at my place until you have to head for the Philippines? I have a series of lectures in Hong Kong in two days but then Rochanna and Busaya will look after you. You'll like them. They were my students when I was teaching in Bangkok and are staying with me while they study here." He started laughing.

"What?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Your face," he shook his head. "Wrong assumptions. I'm like their uncle, no complications, no kink. But I will admit to some very basic thoughts about your body."

Rochanna and Busaya were as perfect as human beings can be. Natural Thai beauties with unimaginably soft skin the color of a golden sunrise, they radiated health and well-being. Gentle and graceful, each movement was a soothing dance. I didn't even mind feeling rough and uncoordinated as they greeted me with warmth and childlike trust. In uncontrollable giggles they chided Jesse for his unkempt state after our all-night session. We all went for a swim in the roof top pool, then turned in to sleep the day away. Rochanna volunteered a traditional massage, worked out the tension that had knotted my body. Never had I felt so totally spent and was quickly sound asleep.

I emerged at midday, violent seas exhausting my dreams. I opened my laptop to try to write away the disturbance and realized I had e-mail waiting. My scheduled rendezvous

in the Philippines had changed. The dive couldn't wait. A sunken schooner from the 16th century had been located and we had to get there before the competition beat us to it. With a mixture of emotions I confirmed I would honor my contract.

There were reports of storms in the Malacca Strait and my heart was heavy when Jesse took me to the airport.

"There is nothing you can do," he assured me. "You must get on with your life. Have faith in your friend. But, promise me you'll come back to me after this dive." That I promised without hesitation. It felt right.

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I've just returned from Hudson Bay with quite a collection of shots from the gorgeous Canadian wilderness. Stu lost the Sumatran contract so he and Gwynn are now living there and have built a real log cabin. I stopped in New York on the way back. Your mom is busy with charity work, more than ever now. Pat is occupied with Stephen (he's cute & spirited, finger painted my bag for me). Your family has tapped every connection throughout this period of frustrated searching and Pat even went with me to Aceh.

Many boats were lost in the storms of that moonless night. When you and Risari didn't arrive at Tungkuan we entered a missing person's report with the US Embassy. Someone had also filed one on Sid Bower. The mysteries remain. As do the hopes.

My base now is with Jesse here in Singapore, though I spend a lot of time with my 'sisters' Rojanna and Busaya in Bangkok. I thank you, Louisa, for these special additions to my life. That's why I've written this. You've been on my mind much of late. Three years and I've heard nothing.

A gallery on Orchard Road is showing some of my better photographs from coral reefs of the world. Impressive, eh? As I write I'm enjoying almond cakes, espresso and cognac in a little café next door to the gallery.

You really must visit, Louisa, it's your kind of place.

finish