The Long House explores belonging and commitment. Jennifer Hawley, an American graduate student in linguistic anthropology, arrives in the early 1990s in Long Awan, a Dayak village in the remote highlands of Borneo. Her research concerns oral history among Punan families, traditionally nomadic, which have recently decided to settle in permanent homes. She also has personal reasons for coming to Southeast Asia: raised in a household dominated by her mother’s anger at a Filipino father who abandoned the family before she was born, Jennifer grew up half-Filipina but without any Filipino cultural influence, in a highly conservative religious community where stories were silenced.

In Long Awan, Jennifer creates a comfortable space for herself, renting a home and even adopting an orphaned sun bear cub as a kind of surrogate child. Complications arise, however, once the bear becomes yet another threat to a community already endangered by exploitative logging, by political vulnerability, and by its own isolation. Jennifer is drawn into the questions of the fate of Long Awan, and discovers these are questions about her own fate as well. Ultimately she has to choose between her romantic fantasy of ideal community life and the hard reality of a pragmatic, troubled people. In this she is helped by her research in the extensive Punan system of death names, which express strong affection by invoking the even stronger ache of impermanence and inadequacy.

In the end, the title The Long House refers to the nomad condition that the Punan call home—a wandering that makes of the journey itself a habitation.
THE LONG HOUSE

by
Gregory A. Harris

A THESIS
submitted to
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Presented August 27, 2002
Commencement June 2003

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Gregory A. Harris, Author
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Keith Scribner for his support, encouragement, and candor about the process of writing novels: without him, I might have settled for a far less ambitious project, or simply crumbled. Tracy Daugherty not only provided invaluable feedback on draft chapters, but by his perseverance and courage made this entire degree possible. Marjorie Sandor helped me see possibilities in the text that I might never otherwise have noticed.

The Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association and the Blakemore Foundation supported the early research on this novel. Many thanks to Tim Jessup of the World Wide Fund for Nature and his willingness to take a risk on an inexperienced 'cultural consultant.'

Two brothers of uncommon vision and wisdom, Tirusel ST Padan and Samuel ST Padan, profoundly influenced the initial inspiration for this novel. I hope that I have done justice to their hopes by writing this work of fiction.

My own brother, David, hectored me until I let him read this, and then he proved an editor of considerable talent. I could not have sat so long, or typed so much, without the support of Alexander Technique teachers Jane Heirich and Peter O'Reilly.

Last, and most of all, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my wife and most important editor, Michelle, for her material and emotional support, her sensitive and honest reading of my work, and for the many nights and weekends she dedicated, along with me, to this project.
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Elliot, who
changed my relationship to the village
and to life
CHAPTER ONE

Jennifer basked in the morning sun on a shelf of rock in the middle of the Upper Payung River, sleeves rolled to her shoulders, eyes closed. Her face was a mask of warmth; blood vessels pulsed red in her eyelids. All around her, rock teeth worried the current to foam and whirlpools.

The sun stripped water vapor from the river, made it dance in thin white tendrils downstream, burned it off. Where Jennifer sat nothing touched her except glorious equatorial sunlight, pulsing strong and clear. In another half hour it would be too strong to withstand, but for now, at 8:30, she was in one of the few places in the rainforest free from leeches, from biting flies, from carrying thirty-five pounds of backpack across ground that turned to mud beneath her heel. She lay back, stretching her arms above her to release her shoulder muscles, then folding her hands to pillow her head, letting her shirt ride up past her navel. She
wanted to be naked, to defy for once the inevitability of an early, industrious rise.
It had already been a productive trip: she had collected several hours of Om Barnabas’s prayers and stories.

“Masa an American researcher wants to be blacker than her subjects,” a voice said in her ear. Startled, she sat upright. She must have drifted off. A finger pressed her forearm. “Yes, now you’re blacker than I am. Look.” She stared at the finger against her skin, an old man’s finger, a working finger, swollen at the joints and with a nail as thick and pallid as oyster shell. When it pulled away, it left an impression, a trace of white, that only slowly filled back in with color.

Om Barnabas squatted next to her and laughed good-naturedly. “The young people will follow you, you know. If Americans like dark, they’ll like darker. Even we out here who know nothing, who see nothing of the world, we know what are the styles, what comes to us from overseas.”

Jennifer smiled and straightened her shirt. “Tanning is definitely in. But white people, when they tan, it’s to get the same color you’d call white. I’m not trying for any color. I’m just happy to be warm.”

“Bu Lejeng’s cooking fish.”

“Did you use the poison?”

“No, I know you want to watch that.”

Actually Jennifer did not want to observe the poison being used—its results predictable enough, a lot of fish bellies pointing sunward—but the ritual surrounding its preparation and application. Though it had been a year of coming to terms with meat, and butchery, Jennifer at heart was still the vegetarian she’d been through college and graduate school. She had nearly passed out yesterday when Om Barnabas had taken a knife and cut a living turtle free of its shell.

“Ayo, makan,” he said. She tried not to grumble as she stood and followed him on a scramble across the rocks toward shore. An invitation to eat could not
be turned down, but it meant she’d have to reenter the shadow world, where the cold still lingered and the trees dripped in darkness along the edge of the river.

They sat on a felled log beside Bu Lejeng, who squatted, working fresh kindling into a small white-smoke fire. Above the flames, two fat river fish flew like kites, impaled through their slit bellies on pointed sticks jammed into the ground. “Only two?” Jennifer said. She gave Bu Lejeng a wink. “I thought you were the master fisherman.”

“They’re fat,” Om Barnabas protested.

Bu Lejeng snorted. “He’s getting old. Tired just from fishing.”

“If you want twenty, I’ll get them. This part of the river is rich.”

“So it’s only the fisherman who’s poor,” Bu Lejeng said, winking back at Jennifer.

“Ah ha.” Om Barnabas said. He’d caught the wink. “In more ways than one.”

Jennifer laughed. The fish bubbled with their own oils, and when they were done she and Bu Lejeng and Om Barnabas tore smoky strips of white flesh from the skin and ate with their fingers, and some rice that Bu Lejeng had conjured from a small black pot half-buried in embers at the edge of the fire.

In the silence while they ate, Jennifer critically compared her own state with that of her companions. Having spent the same three days hiking through old-growth rainforest, she was a wreck—her shoulders ached, her shins were scored by scratches and oozing leech sores, she stank of old sweat—and the two Punan, each almost forty years her senior, were unchanged. Partly this was a matter of more appropriate clothing. Her T-shirt retained perspiration, and bore the traces of the many times she tripped and fell into the mud. Her khaki pants ripped at the cuffs, and gave way to threads at the knees, and recorded the blood and dirt and green stains of crushed vegetation. Her expensive hiking boots rotted in the moisture, slipped on the mud, and harbored leeches beneath the tongue and
along her ankles. The leeches pressed their greedy heads right through her hiking socks and left them spotted with blood.

Om Barnabas, by contrast, wore just a pair of old red denim shorts. His wiry, muscled frame seemed fuller and sleeker in the forest. Sometimes back in the village he seemed shrunken in his clothes, his sixty-odd years weighing on him like ninety. Here, his wrinkles were as deep, his hair as sparse, his face as wizened. But his legs were those of a much younger man, and his bearing upright.

It wasn’t just the clothes. Bu Lejeng, in her sarong and loose-fitting polyester blouse, never fell and somehow never got hung up by the *tunggu sebentar*, the thorned rattan vines that dangled like barbed wire across their path and tore Jennifer’s shirt and skin. There was not an ounce of spare flesh on the woman, and Jennifer compared her, in her mind, to her own mother—also in her fifties, but avoidant of exercise, resigned to vague complaints of the circulation and elevated blood sugar and long Virginia afternoons of heat prostration. Yet which of the two would judge, if they met? Which would look at the other and condemn, see only an unmade-up face worn by years of exposure, earlobes stretched to great gaping O’s, an inscrutable Asian face? Except for the embarrassment that Bu Lejeng might feel, Jennifer would relish being at such an encounter, would enjoy her mother’s unvoiced fear, looking from her half-Asian child to what she would see as an irremediably alien Asian woman: ‘Jennie, is this what you want to become?’ And Jennifer would respond: “Why no, Bu Mary-Jo, no. *Bukan.*”

Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng spoke some words to each other in Punan, and Jennifer sensed that they were ready to move on. This trip, which would total some ten days in all, was to be her most extended foray yet into the primary forest northeast of Long Awan; they were tracing the origins of the Payung up into hills that Om Barnabas had roamed as a nomad before settling into his current sedentary life. The trip itself had little to do with her original research design: as
a linguistic anthropologist she was primarily interested in the consequences to language of Om Barnabas' and other Punans' transformations from nomadic to sedentary living. Her own questions were best served by sitting with her tape recorder and an informant at some quiet table, indoors. Out on the trail it was inconvenient, to say the least: she carried some five pounds of batteries, and Om Barnabas even more. But Mark Reynolds had asked, as a preliminary step in her application for Nature Foundation International funding, that she actually survey the condition of the wilderness that Om Barnabas knew so well. In the meanwhile, her own work did not suffer, even if her shoulders did: being with Om Barnabas this far out of the village allowed her to record ritual speech and names for human and natural features of the landscape. Later, with transcription and analysis—and luck—these recordings might form the core of her dissertation.

Now Bu Lejeng said something sharp, at which Om Barnabas nodded. They stood. Jennifer felt her reluctance to assume her backpack escalate into real dread. "Wait a second," she said. "How about if we stay here another day?"

Om Barnabas stopped and shrugged. "It's up to you."

"But will it interfere with your hunting, or our food, if we need to add an extra day? I'm just pretty tired, I'm realizing."

"Nak Jen carries the heaviest burden."

She shook her head. "Not by a long shot. Your pack is three times what mine is." He'd actually hit on a sore spot. She stood a head taller than he, yet much of what he and Bu Lejeng carried—batteries, tapes, blankets—was for her, because she couldn't carry it all.

Om Barnabas put a finger to his temple and tapped, twice. "Up here. You have all the burden, up here."

A pair of white butterflies wrestled each other across the clearing, from the dark high spaces through the sunbeams. This relationship where she paid for their accompaniment as guides had its unnatural aspects, and sat uneasily beside what she considered their genuine friendship—or even, in ways, her adoption as a
kind of foster daughter to the elderly couple. “You’re sure? We won’t need to rush later?”

He laughed. “Why make life hard? When we moved from camp to camp, we stopped as soon as anyone felt like stopping.”

Bu Lejeng nodded, already sitting back down. “When I was carrying children, two in the arms and one in the belly, you better believe they couldn’t make me go any faster than I went.”

So Jennifer pulled out her tape recorder and inserted fresh batteries, burying the old ones in the soft ground beside the log, hating the thought of the mercury and whatever other contaminants she was introducing to this pristine area. But it just wasn’t worth packing out all that weight, especially not if Om Barnabas brought down a wild pig and there was another hundred pounds of smoked meat to shoulder. There was still half an hour left on the tape; last night, they had left off with what he termed forest lore, she termed ghost stories—accounting supernaturally for glowing fungi, for the wide eyes of the tree-dwelling Slow Loris.

She pressed record and pause. “May we begin?” He nodded. “Why did the Punan become nomadic?” she asked. It was an inversion of one of the first questions she’d asked him almost a year ago when she’d first reached Long Awan: why, after forty years as a forest nomad, he’d gone sedentary—the first Punan to have done so in this region.

While she had gotten set up, he had wrestled from his woven rattan pack a thick wedge of palm stem, and he had pulled from his mandau scabbard not the mandau itself, the long machete, but a small carving knife, also wood-handled. Now he bent his head to the task of fashioning blowgun darts from the palm stem, carefully shaving a strong, thin spine from the core. She watched his hands expertly trim irregularities from the dart, sharpen the tip, flatten the bottom of the shaft. He set it aside and started to carve another, still not looking up.
"I don't really know," he said, as she lifted her thumb from the pause. "We have many stories of how the Punan came to be here, but even the oldest grandfathers were already forest dwellers."

"The same as now? Were there differences?" It took some fishing before a topic inspired real conversation.

He thought for a long while again, carving more darts. "People now are smaller," he said, finally. "In the old days they were giants. Like you." He smiled to show he was teasing. "But bigger yet—bigger than the Dutch."

"Why were they bigger?"

"Maybe because game was plentiful? It was easier. In a day, in an hour, you could get a pig, get as much sago as you could eat in a month. Now, near here—I'm not saying the Dayaks are bad people, but they are different people, and they have different ways. They stay in one place and hunt there, and cut the trees, and drive away the animals. They go hungry when the insects eat their fields. People die in their houses, and they do not move on."

"And they put on airs," Bu Lejeng interrupted. "*Sombong*, that's what they are. They think of us as primitive." Inwardly, Jennifer groaned. Bu Lejeng, as the eldest and most prominent of the Punan women of Long Awan, with her strong opinions about the Dayak among whom she and Om Barnabas had settled, had seemed an ideal informant for Jennifer's project—which, in its initial formulation, focused primarily on how women conceived of their domestic space (and neighbors) once they resided in a permanent home rather than a series of wilderness camps. But Bu Lejeng never explained or modified her opinions, just repeated herself, no matter how much Jennifer pressed. Jennifer had recorded her voicing the same resentments a dozen times, and never gotten an answer to basic questions such as why Bu Lejeng had settled down in the first place if she disliked it so much. The woman seemed not even to hear such questions.
"Who are they to look down on us? That Nita is so spoiled; the best clothes, the best food, all the things that the missionaries fly in. However many batteries for her radio. If there are biscuits, ya, Nita has the sugared ones."

"So you think Nita is spoiled?" Jennifer asked. Nita, the village schoolteacher’s fifteen-year-old daughter, had been unfailingly nice to her. Did Bu Lejeng begrudge Nita the fact that her father earned a tiny salary from the government, paid in part in broken rice of such an inferior quality that he fed it to the dogs? Or was she warning Jennifer of something, since Nita had attached herself to Jennifer and seemed to idolize her?

The mosquitoes were out in force this morning, and now as the fire grew less smoky they began to hover. Jennifer sighed and reached up to scratch her eyebrow, finding and crushing a mosquito already tangled there. The anopheles came out at night, and whined the highest, and posed the greatest dangers: bone-break fever and malaria—*falciparum*, around here, cerebral malaria—often fatal, though hopefully curable with the three tablets of Fansidar she carried with her in a watertight case. The daytime mosquitoes, whose name she could never remember, landed quietly and carried encephalitis.

Jennifer turned back to Om Barnabas. "What if we were leaving Long Awan now—if this wasn’t just a short journey, but a moving-on to a new home. Is there a prayer for that? May I record it?"

"Bring it to life," he said, indicating the recorder with his thumb. She released the pause button, and he chanted, his voice assuming a high quavering tone that neither rose nor fell. She wrote a few notes in the black-bound journal she carried with her so she’d know what she recorded.

"Now please repeat it in Indonesian," she said. This was their ritual. She knew what he’d say next.

"It’s not exact."

"It’ll be enough. Later I’ll learn the real words."
They went back and forth like this for a few minutes, until he appeared to feel that he'd sufficiently impressed on her that what he was about to say was inadequate translation and not at all worthwhile. She yet insisting, he went on, speaking in Indonesian:

“You, Kingfisher
You, Sender of signs
You, Hawk,
You, Spirit of signs
You, Crested Jay
Let a good sign appear to our right.
Travel with us on our way
As we form this path, as all of us hunt,
As we walk.
Tomorrow we’ll eat—if we meet animals.
Only if we meet animals can we eat tomorrow
We are ones who hunt as we wander
Let it be simple for us to meet animals,
To fulfill our wish to get meat—
To get sun bear, to get pig,
To get fish, to get snake.
Let it be simple to fulfill our wish
To get porcupine with bezoar stones
Do not let us die.
Do not let us go short of breath.
It is good how we relatives talk with each other,
Good the affection we relatives share with each other,
As we find ways to go.
Om Barnabas paused. “I like that,” Jennifer said. “Let it be simple.”

Om Barnabas’s eyes twinkled, “If it ever was simple, I wouldn’t recognize it.” Bu Lejeng laughed in agreement.

At that moment a furious sound of thrashing, of choked breathing and breaking twigs and torn undergrowth exploded from the downriver bushes. As the three of them stood, Om Barnabas’s hand on the hilt of his *mandau*, five tawny forms with slitted eyes and hanging tongues rushed among them—Dayak hunting dogs, which sniffed once or twice at their legs and then honed in on what was left of the fish. They crunched the heads and scattered the bones and growled at each other viciously, ignoring Om Barnabas’s yells and sidling away from his kicks.

Bu Lejeng caught Jennifer’s eye and slowly shook her head: “*Kurang ajar.* Not like when we have pets—we train them to respect humans.” Jennifer nodded. She knew. The first week of being in Long Awan, she had lost the leather off her sandals to dogs such as these. They were fed a rice diet, which kept them eager to sink their teeth into flesh during the hunt.

Now the dogs aligned themselves like iron filings in a magnetic field, stood facing the direction they’d come from, ears raised. It was like being overrun by an occupying army—as a civilian, Jennifer was irrelevant, though at risk. She hated these dogs, which slept in knotted packs and bared their fangs at each other in snarling fights all night beneath the floorboards of the village longhouse. Ratted fur, black gums, stubby legs—they were small and vicious and were thrown into the river with their legs bound when they got too old to chase boars.

Jennifer glanced at Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng and noticed that they faced the same direction that the dogs did, and no less expectantly. Were her senses so dull that she was the only one who wasn’t alert to someone coming? She stared into the fantastically ornate wall of forest, its infinitely detailed texture of green and thorn.
Still, she didn’t see him, not even with the yellow T-shirt he wore (reading, incongruously enough, *What a Day: at the Mall!* with a cartoon picture of two young girls holding hands and shopping bags) until he was fifty feet away, and even then only because he stood out against the backdrop of the river.

“Datu!” she hailed him. He lifted an arm in greeting, but he didn’t speak until he was quite close. He first greeted Om Barnabas, then Bu Lejeng, clasping her hand in both of his then pressing his palms to his chest. Then he turned to Jennifer.

“Forgive me,” he said, the voice always incongruously high coming from his large, square head. “Pak Apuy sent me to get Bu Jen. The plane will be coming today.”

The plane, today! She had made a request of Pak Apuy that the next time a Missionary Air Federation flight came to Long Awan, she be reserved a place. In a month she was due to have a key meeting with Mark Reynolds, present some of her research findings from this year, and this trip, and—Mark had assured her—get funding from NFI for another year of research in Long Awan. At the rate she was spending money, her original fellowship through the Asia Association would last only until February, and she estimated that she’d need another six months, at least, before she’d have the material for her dissertation.

But now she had to make a decision: the plane rarely came to Long Awan because of its inadequate and dangerous airstrip. Should she get out now, and risk not getting her funding due to being ill-prepared, her research undone? She had not even begun transcribing tapes yet. But if she didn’t take the plane, would there be another chance between now and the December meeting?

“Wait a minute. How do you know the plane’s coming?” she asked.

“Radio,” Datu said.

“That’s what I mean. The radio’s broken. It’s been broken for more than a year.”
Datu smiled. “A friend of yours is in the village, a bulé. He fixed it, and Pak Apuy was able to radio out that you needed the plane.”

“A friend of mine? Not Geoff by any chance?”

“You poor girl, no.” Geoff, her ex-boyfriend, played the part of husband; she needed a husband to avoid some awkwardness about her status as a single female researcher. Since they were on relatively good terms and she knew he’d be one of the only people regularly writing to her (it was one of his habits when procrastinating work on his dissertation in computer graphic information systems), she’d nominated him for the role. She had asked out of a kind of joke—they had even held a mock ceremony at the going-away party, with one of Geoff’s Deadhead friends presiding (‘you may now pass your toke to the bride’).

“Well, is it someone I know, at least?”

“No, I don’t think you know him. But he’s asked a lot about you.”

So, just a generic bulé. A foreigner; literally, an albino. Jennifer still got called that sometimes, despite her Filipino coloration-- not here, but in the cities of the coasts, in Samarinda, and Balikpapan, or in Jakarta, when she was studying Indonesian and working up her nerve to depart for the interior of Borneo. Julie, another American, working as English language resource for a business magazine, had sent her a photo of the two of them at a party, dancing, and she had it up on the wall of her house in Long Awan, with Julie’s caption: Two bulés to tango. In it Julie had leaned backward so far that her head nearly hit a teak sideboard, and Jennifer steadied her at the waist with an expression of drunken panic.

Not many tourists made it as far as Long Awan, which was inaccessible except by the missionary air flights or by strenuous overland trek. It was also nearly unstudied by other researchers, who tended to gravitate to nearby villages of Kayan and Kenyah where traditional culture survived more flamboyantly. Long Awan represented as unsexy a setting as could be imagined: a rump remnant of dispirited Lengilo—those who had not joined with the rest of the village in moving downriver and out of the headlands in search of better access to
jobs, medicines, and transportation—and the handful of Punan who had settled among them. Jennifer had seen just two foreigners in the year that she had been there, an indestructible German couple who had hiked from Miri, in Malaysia, and who carried in their packs (they had shown her with a fierce, simple glee, like children showing a scab) hundreds of packages of wrapped single-servings of Nutella. “This is our secret,” the woman had said. “This is our obat kuat.” Their strength medicine. A day after they’d come, and duly recorded Jennifer’s presence with a camera and notebook, and impressed on her that she should seek out their book when it was published in a few years, they’d faded precipitously into the jungle.

“So you missed me and had to replace me right away,” she said. “It’s getting so Long Awan needs a bulé in it.”

Datu chuckled and rubbed at his shoulder. “Not just any bulé would do: we miss Jennifer, of course.”

She had asked for that compliment, though she hadn’t meant to. Her own possessiveness amused her. She imagined herself coming back into the village with a swagger: “This town ain’t big enough for the both of us, pardner.” Hilarious, especially if he mistook her for native—some Westerners did so, overlooking telltale things like her size and body language.

“How can we even make it back today?” Jennifer said. “It took us three days to get here.”

“Three days! I left at six and got here at nine,” Datu said. “If we go now we’ll be back by noon.”

Jennifer turned to Om Barnabas in surprise. He nodded. “Four hours, I think, for Jennifer.”

“But how could we--?”

Om Barnabas said, “If you cross the river.”

Datu laughed now at Jennifer’s face, which must have shown her shock. Bu Lejeng also smiled.
“We didn’t go the straight ways,” Om Barnabas said. “We go the pleasant ways. You said you wanted to see the territory. Seeing doesn’t mean shoot like a hornbill right over the trees.”

Jennifer looked at the two old Punan, the one more gray than the other, equally wiry, equally unconcerned, equally amused at her shock. Then she looked over at Datu, wondering if his grin hid a judgment. “You knew we’d be close by,” she said.

He nodded.

This was one of those moments—she wondered if other anthropologists had them—when the impression of a conspiracy against her rose so powerfully in her mind that it forced out any other conclusions she might draw. Not that the Malaysian border absolutely mattered. But she needed to feel competent, to feel like she could express a purpose and have it happen more or less the way she expected it to. Moments like this, among friends who grinned at her and showed no sign that any betrayal had taken place, proved that she could not.

Jennifer stepped a few paces toward the river, saying, “Give me a moment to decide about the plane.” She crossed her arms in front of her and pinched at the inside of her left elbow, hard. She wanted to whirl on them, ask if they ever had any intention of getting to the Malaysian border. But she knew what they’d answer: dekat, dekat—close by. Close enough for Jennifer, who wouldn’t know the difference, and who didn’t travel well in the forest anyway.

Had she asked to stay put another day? How they must have been laughing at her! Or pitied her. Well, there was no loss in catching the plane out now, then. This research trip wasn’t going anywhere. She might as well throw these tapes away, since they were based on a false premise, that of leaving the village’s immediate vicinity. “Ayo,” she said, turning. “Let’s get to the plane.”

But a second shock awaited: rather than return with her, Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng chose to stay in the forest. Datu pressed his hunting dogs on them. “Rather than waste an opportunity,” Datu said. Om Barnabas thanked him.
Jennifer bristled, silently—would her own research trip qualify as a wasted opportunity? Her recordings seem like so much empty time? She didn’t know exactly what status her activities were accorded by the villagers, but she feared that they might be utterly incomprehensible despite the great pains she’d taken to introduce herself, to acculturate, and to explain. She’d gone the first months without ever pulling out the tape recorder, simply learning local hospitality and characters and orienting herself to the language and people.

She and Datu descended the path along the river, moving in and out of sunlight, catching the sparkling cascades’ reflections across their bodies. He moved speedily and with total assurance, a rattan backpack slung across his shoulders like a toy. She picked her way along unsteadily under her own load, trying to find her balance on the mud of the trail, which was pitched toward the river by a considerable angle. At one point, looking behind her, she saw her own footprints set an inch or more deep in the mud, sliding away. Datu’s, beside, were fifteen neat dimples—he wore rubber soccer cleats, extruded by a factory in Malaysia in one waterproof, leech resistant piece, like moccasins with teeth and three stripes painted down each side. She was intensely jealous of these shoes.

She was also envious of Datu’s size. His shoulders were astonishingly broad for his slight build and small size, something she noticed again as she followed behind. The heat and humidity, the leafprints of moisture and his own sweat made his shirt stick like a second skin, registering each movement of his muscles as they shifted. Jennifer, at five foot seven, had never felt remarkably large in America, but here she felt like the neighborhood giantess, a lumbering oaf. Each extra inch, and she had perhaps four or five on Datu, made one likelier to fall. Each extra shoe size had the same effect. And to be overweight here—but who could be overweight here, where all transportation was by foot, where the wheel might as well not have been invented, where all loads had to be carried on someone’s back? Jennifer, afflicted her whole childhood by a tendency towards chubbiness, had gone rail thin from the exercise, the at-times lean diet of
vegetable broths and rice or sago, and the occasional dysentery. Whatever the reasons, she was a one-person Keystone Kops, and the only thing that saved her from taking even more headlong spills down embankments was what Nita called her “lightning-fast stagger.”

The embankment above which they traveled looked particularly treacherous, with the trail a narrow slippery ledge canted towards a steep fall that would land her in the river, which here slowed and took on brown depth. Om Barnabas may have had his reasons for avoiding this direct route. She sweated continuously, and as they passed through the inevitable clouds of darting gnats, she was afraid to swat without stopping first to check her balance. Datu frequently slowed to let her catch up.

After a couple hours they stopped, and she pulled back her pants legs with familiar dread to reveal the hunched black suckling form of a leech. “Goddamnit,” she said, irritated that she hadn’t taken the tiny pinch more seriously. Now the thing had swollen thick as a finger with her blood, and had had time to secrete enough anti-coagulant that even once Datu daubed it with tobacco juice and pulled it away and cut it into wriggling pieces with the edge of his mandau blood continued to ooze from her leg, and would for hours. She didn’t want to open up her hiking boots for inspection, but she did, and found there two pin-size leeches that had managed to insinuate themselves through her bootlace holes, but had not yet found the thin points of her socks. These she killed herself, flattening them to the ground and carving them up with the blade of her Swiss Army knife. “Ugly little bastards,” she said, and Datu, though he didn’t understand a word of English even after the six-week conversation course she’d offered last March and April, smiled.

He did a lot of smiling at her, which made her wonder what his feelings towards her were. Much argued against the smiles being significant. She was, for official purposes, married. And Nita, whose friendship Jennifer valued highly, adored Datu and would be crushed at any hint of betrayal. Furthermore, Jennifer
knew herself to be somewhat clownish, possessed neither of the survival skills that would make her at home in the forest, nor of the grace that came with a true Asian upbringing. Here no less than in the United States she was an anomaly with no particular place; she had learned that quickly enough, and had perhaps even known it ahead of time. Even as she had made her plans with Dr. Ashwright to do her fieldwork in Indonesia and told herself that it would be a necessary part of her life, this trip “back” to a Southeast Asia that she had never seen, she had known that it would not be a coming home. How could it be, when as an anthropologist she was by nature and training and purpose the most marginal of marginal people, someone who cribbed notes in a corner about the settled habits of others? And lacked them herself, lacked settled rituals, other than this act itself, of observing others?

And yet the smiles did seem significant. Perhaps, as was definitely the case with Nita, he saw something rich and glamorous to her being American. There was an irony to this. If in the States she was exotic for her looks, inherited from a father she’d never known, in Indonesia she was exotic for her identity as citizen of a country to which she’d never quite felt she belonged.

When they started off again, she called out: “Is it dangerous, do you think, traveling without mosquito repellent?”

He stopped to squint back at her. “I thought Bu Jen took pills.”

What they observed about her! She hadn’t realized that her mefloquine prescription, her anti-malarials, was public knowledge.

“Not that kind of mosquito repellent,” she said, hoping he’d get the pun.

He continued to squint for a moment and then he laughed. “Oh, you mean Bu Lejeng! Oh no, it’s better she stay with Om Barnabas. They’re used to being in the forest together. Punan.”

He continued laughing until he abruptly turned away, leaving his feelings more of a mystery than ever. He had caught her meaning: Bu Lejeng’s accompaniment would assure the villagers that nothing romantic had gone on
between Datu and Jennifer when they came traipsing together out of the underbrush. Showing up as they were, some risk existed of assumptions being made.

Such assumptions would not be good for either her friendship with Nita or for her fieldwork; in her position as researcher she occupied an unstable middle ground between the genders. She sat with the men while the women were in the kitchens, and spoke to men for long hours alone. They told her ribald tales, and drank with her, in a way that they would do with no Dayak woman. Still, she could, when she wanted, join the women—pounding laundry against the river rocks, for instance, bathing, or in the kitchens, she was a woman and privy to women’s talk, as well. What would it do to her status to be part of a couple, to be definitely in a category? For that matter, what would it do to be one man’s woman? To cast loose from her fictive married state? Surely a disaster. But as she watched the alert set of Datu’s neck, the broad muscles of his thighs, the easy swivel of his hips, she felt a heightened awareness of just how much discipline it would take, if she stayed here long enough, to avoid such a disaster. Although she had no wish to be a celibate in some holy order of ethnography, and that’s what she had become.

What kind of lover would Datu be? A powerful one, certainly—she had seen him carrying enormous bundles of split firewood up the pole ladder of the longhouse, neither winded nor thrown off balance by the load. Probably immature—though as son and presumptive successor of the village’s kepala desa, or village head, he showed a sensitivity surprising in someone who seemed, most times, like the deep woods equivalent of a frat boy: mischievous, boisterous, and fond of getting drunk. Datu had spoken to her on tape about life in the logging camps, how a dozen shivering, lonely Dayak boys would spend their limited cash to hire a local grandmother—ostensibly as a cook, but more importantly, as a scold and nag and reminder of family life.
But he was younger than she was—twenty, she’d guess, to her twenty-
five, and that really mattered here. She was an old maid; girls not in school
married in their mid-teens, if not before, and to older men. Never the
reverse. And she wondered about sex—yes, sex, why be shy about it? It was
hard—no, impossible—to imagine true intimacy, a secret, shy tenderness
developing. Everything was so out in the open here, so crude and direct. In the
longhouse, thirty families lived in thirty rooms and a single, wide gallery. Not
only were parents, grandparents, children and teenagers jammed together with the
dogs scrounging beneath, but the walls were mere formalities, like cubicle
dividers in an American office—they did nothing to suppress the sounds that
reverberated promiscuously beneath the high roof of thatch and hardwood beams.
And Jennifer made noise, especially when—but it was impossible to imagine
someone like Datu going down on her, his tongue forceful and warm between her
legs. Dayak men didn’t do such things—or did they? Tom Harrisson, writing
just after World War II, claimed the existence of a kind of cult in which Dayak
men wore “crosses,” or palang, through their penises specifically to enhance
women’s pleasure. And this cult mattered enough that when young men,
otherwise renowned for their bravery and prowess, came to visit a distant
longhouse, they were asked Ana palang?—and if the answer was no, the ladders
would not be lowered to allow them in.

Jennifer and Datu had climbed higher for several minutes when he
suddenly edged out of sight around the tangled trunk of a banyan, which stood, a
whole cluster of trees unto itself, as the anchor for a lip of earth that stretched out
over a sheer bluff above the river. Jennifer followed him around, taking care not
to touch the banyan, and watching out of the corner of her eye for the snakes that
often lived in the wet crevices between the thickened roots. It smelled strongly of
rot and heartwood.

“Ayo,” Datu said. He stood with one foot on the land, the other on the
bole of a good-sized felled tree that stretched across the river at a descending
angle, forking in the middle into smaller trunks that descended even more sharply to poke like two fingers into the opposite bank. Someone had nailed a handrail to part of the trunk, low and to the outside and flimsy.

Jennifer felt a rushing sound in her ears and her breath began to shorten, which was her reaction to most Dayak bridges. Datu walked straight across. She watched him go. His magic, possessed by all Dayaks who grew up in the interior, was to render whatever he stepped on into solid ground. So he walked, and in walking, made the tree trunk, with its great chunks of old bark peeling away from a slimy core, a broad and sunny highway. But when he was across it reverted to what it had been and would be for her: death. The river, motley in color, concealing hidden rocks, crawled by thirty feet below.

Datu stood on the other bank and turned to her, waving her on. She slid a foot out past the land's end, tested the grip of her boots on the smooth wood. Then she pulled back. She called out to Datu: "Is there another way?" He shook his head. After a moment he came walking up the bridge again, and, standing easily in space, took the backpack from her and said "It's better if I carry that." Then he waited again on the other side.

But the loss of her backpack only made her feel lighter and more precarious. She worried about the wind. She began to berate herself for being so nervous. It was a trick of the mind: she knew that, she had studied it in others, had learned it in herself. The secret to any balance beam was not to think about balance at all, but only about where you were going. She took two steps out, then suddenly dropped to a crouch, and then to all fours, and soon she was straddling the tree and trying to scoot backwards by the seat of her pants. She said to Datu, who was coming back for her again, "I guess Om Barnabas was right not to go this way."

"Om Barnabas is not someone to make foolish choices," Datu said. "He is someone we respect and learn from."
The *we* that he used was inclusive: the Indonesian language distinguishes between "we" (who are not you) and "we (all of us including you)," and it was the latter that he used, for which she was grateful—especially grateful at this moment when she clung, humiliated, to a rotten dead tree at his feet. After the display she’d made of impatience with Om Barnabas, it would have been in Datu’s rights to be much harsher with her. “So how am I going to get across?” she said. “I can’t walk it, Datu: I’m not Dayak, I didn’t grow up with this sort of thing.”

He grinned at her; it was the grin he gave everyone, but it was also the grin that made her think there was more than friendliness in his feelings toward her. It was a grin, which promised good, fun misadventure. “You’ll forgive me, Ibu Jen? I’ll have to carry you.”

She scooted back to the riverbank and brushed the new dirt from her backside. “How are we going to do this?” she asked. She was nervous. As when she couldn’t tell when Om Barnabas was her employee, or informant, or friend, she had no idea what considerations of obligation or role she incurred by having Datu seek her out for her own plane ride, give up his morning, and now risk his life to carry a very unsteady American researcher across a log. Could such a thing be paid for in money? Could it be taken for granted? What was she to him, anyway?

For the moment, at least physically, the answer was clear: a sack of rice. After several embarrassing and inconclusive grappling attempts, after a few unsteady paces of practice on the riverbank, Datu felt that the best way to carry Jennifer would be cradled in his arms, the way a groom might carry a new bride across the threshold. When she was on his back the center of gravity was too high, and if she were off to either side the balance was wrong. So he hoisted her with one hand below her thighs and the other below her shoulders, and she put her arms around his neck and held her head very close to his, and kept closing her eyes out of acute embarrassment and fear, and tried not to think of how she might smell, and tried not to think of what they were enacting, and failed in her effort
not to notice the smooth powerful muscles along his backbone, and the smoky,
good scent of him, sweat and all.

When they got going again, on the other side of the river, she could not
look at him again, and walked with a stagger like a drunken sailor, and generally
felt as if her nerves were going to pop through the surface of her skin. She could
be flushed any color imaginable, pale or dark. She kept clearing her throat, and
then kicking herself for doing it. She felt like she ought to say something.

As they passed now through dense patches of secondary forest, growing
back now after having been burned and farmed perhaps fifteen or twenty years
ago, the grasses clung to her and the fanned palmettos pressed.

“Ibu,” he said, not looking back, “I’ve been thinking you might give me
some advice about women.”

Oh God. She was prepared to lie, to do anything necessary to head off this
oncoming moment.

“Because you are an American, I think you know more than we do”—not
the inclusive we, this time—“about dating, and especially about modern
conditions.”

He still did not turn to look at her. It was nearly intolerable, watching the
glossy black hair bounce on top of the back of his head, just in front of her, not
seeing what the face expressed that was turned away.

She cleared her throat again. “I don’t think I do, but if there is something
you need to talk about—”

“There is.” He sighed and stopped and turned. “It’s about Nita.”

“Nita.”

“Yes. I think she won’t marry me because I’m the next kepala desa. I
think she wants to leave Long Awan, and I can’t do that.”

Jennifer held his gaze as a kind of penance. Here was why a researcher
didn’t get involved: because the researcher was, by definition, clueless. You
forgot, Jennifer told herself, you forgot that fact. Been here too long. What do
you, alien and old and half-masculine, offer compared to sixteen-year-old Nita, so ripe and full and laughing that she made the very air around her ripple? "Ya," she said. "It’s a hard situation. Let’s talk about it while we walk. The plane."

Datu apologized.

"Don’t apologize," she said. She was relieved that relief was what she felt, mainly. They walked on. "Is it because of your father?"

"No, it’s because of me. My obligations."

As the cover above them decreased, the way got increasingly hot and unpleasant; all the plants bursting out in thorns and barbs and burrs and, across the near slope of a hill, thousands and thousands of deathtrap pitchers, around which the flies buzzed as around nowhere else. Jennifer slapped at biting gnats.

"Besides," he said, "I’m not a Samarinda person. I don’t have a good education."

"That’s nonsense," she said sharply. "You’re an expert woodsman and hunter, you can make everything from rifles to baby carriers with your hands, and you’re a natural leader. You can’t be afraid of living in the city."

But apparently he was, because he did not respond except with an empty "ya," which signified neither yes nor no—signified nothing, in fact, other than its own sound, the sound of a small yawn, the noise a person might make as they tune out a subject and disappear into their own thoughts.

Jennifer spoke on, but to everything she said, he contributed only his one noncommittal syllable. She tried to hold out hope: even if he could not leave Long Awan, he could talk Nita into staying. The village wouldn’t remain as isolated as it had been. The geographical accidents that had so far spared it from the rapacity of Indonesia’s plywood industry would soon be overcome, loggers would arrive, and with them, modern conditions of development. Or Nature Foundation International (was it Nature Foundation Indonesia? She could never remember: NFI, anyway) would succeed in preserving the area as a national park, would bring in ecotourism. Either way, jobs would open up; opportunities would
appear that hadn’t been there before. Even a teacher’s daughter, the most
educated young woman in the village, might be persuaded.

“Ya,” said Datu.

Eventually she stopped talking. Then he said: “Ibu Jen knows a great
deal about these things. Will you talk to her? She admires you.”

Now it was her turn to fall silent, as she realized that she could not in good
conscience advise a girl as bright as Nita to pass up an opportunity for education
even if it meant travel or giving up Datu for a time. She had spoken too blithely,
wanting to support Datu. Much as she liked Long Awan, much as she wished to
help preserve traditional culture, she had to admit that when it came to a bright
and sensitive young woman like Nita, the village presented few opportunities.

This part of the trail, mounded and boggy and overgrown, made more
obvious the fact that they traveled previously cultivated fields. They crested a
small hill and came down among the ghosts of burned-out stumps and erosion
contours in the land where gullies had formed and now only alang-alang,
elephant grass, grew. The low trees seemed under assault, overtaken by climbers
and massed weeds.

Datu stopped suddenly and looked up. Jennifer squinted into the sunlight,
which, diffused by high white clouds, sat over the world like a heavy glaze.
“What?”

He didn’t move or answer, and then simply said, “MAF. It’s Ronald.”

It took another minute before she heard the propellers, and it would take
the man getting out of his airplane and shaking her hand before she’d recognize
which missionary it was. But she didn’t question Datu’s judgment. The Dayaks
had spent hundreds of years observing the skies for bird omens, judging
auspicious occasions by the wheeling flight of hornbills. If Dayaks now looked to
small Missionary Aviation Federation planes for their lifelines, they were well-
prepared to be excellent observers of minute variations in flying styles. When she
could see the plane as a drifting speck above the distant trees, she asked, “What’s
Ronald’s style?” She was grateful that he was speaking again.

“He always overshoots the airstrip and circles sharply back,” Datu said.
“The direction he’s coming from doesn’t make sense otherwise.” Ronald, a lanky
Texan with a grizzled goatee and a piercing, blue-eyed gaze, whose legs were so
long he had to shift in the seat of the little Cessna when he banked, had been the
one to fly her in almost a year ago. As he took off for home he had wagged his
wings at her, probably out of pity at the expression that came over her face at the
precise moment she realized that she was really doing this. That she stood high
on a mountain pasture in one of the remote places of the world and would have no
quick way out. That she was alone, and survival was a big part of what was at
stake.

“A day like today, he’ll leave early rather than risk the afternoon rains and
not being able to see where he’s going. Even if this is his last stop, we don’t have
long.” But they stayed put and watched the plane as it grew closer and took on
detail: the white underneath the wings, the stenciled numbers. It flew over them
with a roar that, as airplanes went, was not much of a roar, but in this land
virtually without motors, resonated like thunder from the gods. A thrill of
excitement shot down Jennifer’s spine. She would be on that plane, up in that
endless light. After a year of walking everywhere, of attaining a top speed best
described by the word ‘trudge,’ she’d sit in a rattling cockpit and soar above it all.
Heavens be praised, she thought, recognizing the echo of her mother’s voice in
her. And for the first time felt, in her own secular way, what her mother felt when
her eyes rolled up in her head and she was like to fall down, all those dusty
Sundays in the rows of Gallton, Virginia’s Second Pentecostalist Church.

Datu, being Dayak, could walk from Long Awan to cities on either coast,
Kuching in Malaysia or Samarinda in Indonesia, without significant disorientation.
A Punan could wander the length and breadth of the island. Jennifer, a few
minutes out from the heart of the village, would be lost. She realized this afresh as
the village church came into view and the fields of rice and cassava—which had
seemed unfamiliar—suddenly snapped into place: they had entered the village and
approached its heart, and she hadn’t known. Nor could she make sense of the fact
that she and Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng had left heading northeast along the
river, and she and Datu were now coming back from the south, across it.

A structure of wooden planks covered in graying whitewash, the church
was marked for its holy purpose only by the cross that stood above its front door,
and the elaborate scrollwork of dog-demons carved along the corners of its roof.
On the near side, the church held dominion over an orchard of jeruk trees, yellow
pomelos twice the size of grapefruits and hanging in clusters so heavy that the
boughs of the low-growing tree threatened to break. Beyond these, on all sides of
the church, pineapple sprang from earth like green, leggy burrs, the leaves serrated,
the fruit—called ‘thousand eyes’ in the local tongue—hunched within.

“Ah!” said Jennifer. “Here we are!”

Datu let out a short laugh. A few steps later, though, he froze. “Rusak,”
he said. Broken. He pointed to a corner of the pineapple field they now skirted,
where something had knocked the heads off the plants, had gouged and trampled
the fruit, had profoundly disturbed the soil, dug out a pit like a shallow grave.
They studied it a minute, he with intensity, she with a certain impatience.
Agriculture was not on her mind—they had been lucky so far, but people still
didn’t know she was coming for the plane—it could take off any moment. It was
a miracle that it hadn’t already.

“It’s a sun bear,” he said, kicking at a furrow left by its long claws.

“With your permission?” he said to her, and she had no choice but to nod.
Datu followed a trail of bent and broken plants that led up towards a corner of the
church itself. Jennifer trailed after. Close enough to the church that its shadow at
sunset probably reached the spot, they found another place where the soil had
been disturbed, the plants trampled and twisted into a kind of death nest. Blood
soaked the soil and stuck plant leaves together, a dull matte rust, dark. “My God,” said Jennifer. “What happened?”

Datu stepped into the middle of the disturbance and out again, his cleats caking with dust and blood. “The bear got poisoned,” he said. “Sumpit. The blowgun. And here it convulsed, and died. Someone must have butchered it into pieces here, too.”

Great, thought Jennifer. Can we go now? Bears were an endangered species, but were also significant agricultural pests to the Dayaks—just one of those issues that Nature Foundation International, if it were to successfully have this region declared a national park, would need to take on. The Dayak diet included bear meat, as it included the meat of nearly every living thing that could be brought down with a blowgun, trapped in a net, or shot at with a gun.

Datu stood, looking about him almost wistfully, as if he regretted not being part of the hunt. “They just got it this morning.”

“The airplane...” Jennifer said. Datu motioned to her to be silent. Then she heard the whimpering—sounding at first human, then not, then she couldn’t tell. It started off high, a whine, and then settled into a low moan at the back of the throat. The whimpering went on, rhythmically, unceasingly—from the direction of the church. If it was human, it was someone crazed. Jennifer felt a chill at the back of her neck. Datu stepped away from her, toward the sound, toward the church, drawing his machete. Then suddenly he was bending apart one of the hibiscus bushes in the shadow of the church, and when she approached, she saw that beneath lay a bear cub, limbs splayed, dark fur powdered in dust.

“The bear’s child,” said Datu. The noise had stopped, and Datu turned to her and said. “It’s dead. It must have died right now—without its mother.” That phrase, without its mother, and its helpless form, dead there on the field, caught at her throat. She felt her stare get hard, tears start to come.

“So that was the sound we heard?” she asked, to bring herself back.

“Ya,” said Datu, letting the bushes snap back. “Ayo. The plane.”
But the sound came again almost as soon as he turned away. He turned as pale as the church.

"It’s still alive!" said Jennifer.

"Bukan." The flat, categorical form of no.

"Datu, it’s weeping!"

"Bukan," he said. But he continued to look troubled. Both of them stared at the bush. The noise died away, then renewed itself louder. At one moment it seemed to ask a question, at another, to express the finality of despair.

"Datu, it’s alive. What else can it be? A ghost?"

But of course, that was exactly what he thought it would be. There was story after story in Dayak legend—she had collected them herself—about supernatural punishment meted out to humans for their treatment of animals. At the site of the previous village of Long Awan, just upriver from the current one, a set of towering dolmen stood, stone faces fissured and crumbling—these were supposed to be former longhouses. Datu’s father, Pak Apuy himself had told her the story: on a stormy night the people’s fire had gone out, and they had sent their dog to get fire from a neighboring village. Having had nowhere else to carry the glowing coals, the dog had the inside of its mouth scorched black—which sight the people found so amusing that they laughed until hail fell and turned them to stone.

Datu seemed not to be about to move, so Jennifer stepped up to the bush and pulled it back. The cub still lay there, its position unchanged, its limbs expressive. Then, as she watched, it gave a violent rocking motion and started to double. A third set of paws appeared, and then another muzzle, splashed blond, and then two more eyes peered at her while the dead carcass of the first rolled back. Jennifer gasped and stood frozen. She heard Datu’s machete leave its sheath again.

The second bear cub came out, as if summoned, standing on all fours, its eyes half-closed, wobbly as a two-month-old puppy. Its mahogany fur lay flat across its round body; it did not yet have the markings of a sun bear, the splash of
blond light across the chest and muzzle. As she looked at the cub its eyes, dark and astonished, seemed fixed on her, and when it opened its mouth--its tongue and gums a delicate pink—it seemed to call to her. “Awas,” Datu said. Beware. He stepped right next to it, machete raised, but it did not move away.

She knew reasons why he’d kill the cub: because it had seemed, already, a ghost. Or, more practically, to keep the cub from growing into another pest in the fields, or because he knew it was too young to survive without its mother, and would die anyway. But it had looked at her, had risen as if from the dead for her, and she discovered she could not give her assent to any of those reasons. “Datu,” she said. “Don’t.” She had the feeling of courting danger, passing into its realm through a thin membrane that, once broken, could not be healed. “Don’t kill him.” The cub seemed enfeebled, half-dead, barely moving except for its keening, desperate cry.

He looked at her, no less astonished than the bear cub. She would have to come up with an explanation. “There are places that rehabilitate motherless animals,” she said to Datu, to explain herself. “On the coast.” She started to say that sun bears were endangered, but stopped herself in time. “I can get him there.”

“They’ll take him on the plane?” Datu asked, with a tone of alarm. She realized this might be offensive in itself: people in this remote hinterland sickened and died for lack of adequate medical care; they went decades without seeing their children, all for lack of available planes or money to fly. Her privilege—to take a dumb beast—in that context—was glaring.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll ask.”

Datu sheathed his blade. He looked at her. He wasn’t going to help with this, she realized. So she took off her backpack and knelt next to the cub, which still swayed, and gently laid her hands on it. Its fur was softer than she’d imagined, its claws—which one day would rip apart termite mounds and fallen trees with ease—were still short, though they looked sharp. She lifted, and as she did, it let loose a golden stream of pee which—luckily—she was able to angle so
that it landed on the ground instead of on her. When she held it, it neither struggled nor protested, but instead curled against her stomach. After a moment, it licked her arm, twice. Its tongue was not rough. Its eyes closed, and it breathed, and it was asleep. How many hours had it been waiting for a safe place to fall asleep?

She knew nothing about babies or about bears. But she felt the charge of trust that had been placed in her. She let her hand trail to the bunched fur behind its ears. She slid her fingers into the stiff, furrowed hackle, and marveled at the size of her own naked hand against the cub. The cub weighed less than her pack; far less.

“How old do you think it is?” she asked Datu, who remained standing at a distance.

“A month or two, no more,” he said.

“We should get to the plane,” she said. “Do you mind—?” Without a word, he picked up the backpack, slung it over one shoulder.

Along the south side of the river, the side of the church, the scrub was thick and stately kapok trees towered. The crossing here, the most substantial in the village, consisted of twelve enormous bamboo poles lashed together into a footbridge bent in a shallow arc above the water, suspended by rattan vines from two steel cables, donated by the missionaries and anchored to good-sized tree trunks. Although the structure swayed, and Jennifer would not normally have crossed it without hanging onto the cables for balance, it was the one bridge in the village sturdy and wide enough to risk crossing with a bear in her arms. So intent was she on her footing, though, that she didn’t notice the scene on the other side of the river until she heard the shouts of children: “Here she comes! Here she comes!” She stopped to make sure of her footing—annoying Datu, behind her, as she could tell from his exasperated sigh—and looked up.

Before her stretched the soccer field, a broad apron of grass that swept gently uphill toward the longhouse, thirty doors wide, standing on massive posts
that lifted it eight feet above the ground—above floods, and above marauding headhunters. Built of sun-bleached ironwood, the longhouse wore an aspect of late middle-age, the natural black color of the wood faded to gray. At the corners of its roof and above the broad veranda that stretched its full length, fantastic carved hornbill and dog and dragon figures stood as guardians and ornaments.

The airplane stood close to the foot of the bridge, nose up, wheels half sunk in the marshy grass, angled on a diagonal that would (ideally) take it through the gap between the longhouse and the orchards adjacent. Where it had landed and taxied, wheel furrows cut deep into the earth; water had seeped in. It was madness to land a plane here, Jennifer thought. She wouldn’t do it, not for any faith in God. Nearly every adult in the village stood crowded around the plane, and Ronald, the pilot, loomed over them, talking to Pak Apuy—Datu’s father, the village head.

A soccer game seemed to be breaking up, and children ran back and forth, some toward her to verify the intelligence, some away to deliver it. Where the sorties met in the middle they dodged each other, giggling, or grappled and rolled. Stirred in the rising wind, the kapok trees beneath which she stood let loose their white cottony tufts and the whole scene was as if awash in confetti.

Of the children, only Nita—no longer a child, really, Jennifer reminded herself—and Lawé, Datu’s youngest brother, actually stepped onto the bridge. “You’re late!” Nita said, teasingly, and Jennifer understood it was not herself that was being teased even though it was she who was being addressed.

“What’s this?” Lawé asked. He was eleven years old, the youngest of the family, an elfin boy as quick as Datu was solid. He stretched a hand out to touch the bundle in Jennifer’s arms.

Datu said something to him, sharply, as Jennifer turned away to shield the bear, which startled briefly from sleep. Lawé snatched his hand back and his eyes widened. “A bear child, Ibu Jen?” His golden T-shirt, Jennifer noticed, read *Old Lovers Make the Best Friends*—another time, she might have laughed. Unless they were from some going local concern such as Caterpillar, all of the T-shirts
people wore here spoke in broken and decontextualized English. Even the hat that Pak Apuy proudly wore for official duties said Boing, and it was only the picture of the airplane that let you know what was originally meant—and how awful the unintended meaning.

“Ibu Jen, are you all right?” asked Nita, steadying Jennifer with a hand behind her elbow, escorting her from the bridge.

“I’m fine,” Jennifer said. “This bear cub is very sick, though.”

“But his claws are sharp, Bu Jen.” Jennifer looked where Nita pointed, and saw that when the bear had stirred, its claws had pierced her skin, and spots of her own blood now showed through her white shirt. “Be careful, it will get infected.”

There’s too much going on, thought Jennifer. The crowd, the bear—and Datu’s sudden distance—and the plane, she couldn’t process it all. She let herself be led as if in a procession from the bridge to the gathered community, the children all ringing around her, exploding in titters and whispers and half-laughs. Datu said to them the same words he’d said to Lawé, and they hushed somewhat.

Along the flank of the plane, every face was familiar, and every one of them looked at Jennifer holding the bear. Pak Apuy spoke. “Nak Jen,” he said. “What is this?”

Datu answered for her, speaking this time in Indonesian—for her benefit? She didn’t know. “It’s the bear’s child,” he said. “Whoever hunted the bear left...two children.” Pak Apuy’s weathered face bore a grave expression, and he seemed to think this over for its implications, scratching at one ear—lobeless, as many of the older Dayaks’ ears were, since they had stretched the lobes to enormous lengths and then discovered that it marked them, in the larger world, as primitive, and so cut them off. His arms were sleeved with tattoos, once black but now faded. After a moment he raised his head and gazed at his son.

“It was Pak Donal who hunted, but the tourist who wanted the skin.”

“The skin?” said Jennifer.

“Iya. He’s still cleaning it, in hopes he could take it on the plane—if Nak
Jen doesn’t fly.”

“Oh, I’m flying,” she said.

Ronald spoke now. Immensely tall and faintly yellow in color—not just his hair but also his skin tone and even his eyes, he spoke in a lazy drawl. “Girl, you’ve changed. I think you’ve lost ten pounds since I dropped you off last. And grown a bear, looks like.”

The English registered on her forcefully. How many months had it been since she’d heard it spoken by a countryman? She was rusty enough at it that her mouth shaping the syllables felt awkward. “Well, it balances out, then. You won’t even have to recalculate the weights.” In these small planes, the weight of each passenger and each bag had to be distributed for an even load.

“Uh, no. That bear’s not going anywhere. That would be a great example of something you leave behind when you fly the friendly skies.”

“I need to get it to rehab, Ronald. It’s lost its mother.”

He shook his head with finality. “Now come on, use your head. Let’s say that sleepy little bundle wakes up mid-flight—no cage, no tranquilizers, no one who knows how to handle him. What then? You want to see how good a pilot I am with that thing biting into my leg?”

Jennifer had no answer.

“And you show up in the middle of a city with a wild thing like that—then what? It’s going to need to come right back to the jungle. So just leave it here.”

Jennifer still said nothing.

“One way or another, I’ve got to get going. Afternoon rain’ll be here. I got another passenger wants to go if you don’t, so don’t sweat it.”

“Give me a minute,” she said. “Let me see what I can do.”

She turned to Datu—but he had gone some distance away, stood overlooking the bank of the river. As she watched, he dropped down out of sight. “Datu!” she called. She ignored the stares, pushed through the crowd, and hurried the bear over to where she’d seen him disappear. “Datu!”
He looked up at her from a crouch, holding a bloody knife in one hand, a glistening fold of flesh in the other. Next to him, the tourist stood half in the river, unnaturally white, holding the other end of the same strip of bear skin, rinsing the blood clean in the water.

Jennifer stared at the blond hair falling halfway across his downturned eyes, at the bracelet of local trade beads that traveled with his wrist into the water and out of it, again and again, across the streaked, oily surface of the pale skin. He was shirtless, his pale stomach smeared with blood, his boots and socks soaked black with it. Datu said something, and the foreigner looked up and saw her.

“Apa kabar, Bu?” he said merrily. Then he noticed the bear curled up in her arms, and noticed perhaps the other anomalies—her khakis, her height, her narrowed eyes and clenched teeth. His brow furrowed slightly. Then he said: “Jennifer? Jennifer Hawley?” He ran his fingers across his brow—a nervous gesture that left a bloody smear on his forehead. “God, what a way to meet.”

How was it that you stepped into the jungle for a few days, and came back to find everything surreal, incomprehensible? “Datu, what’s going on?”

Datu shrugged. “He’s a pretty bad Skinner, and he needs to get this done before he gets on the plane.”

“What are you talking about? I’m here. I’m getting on the plane.”

The tourist seemed to have difficulty following their conversation, which was just as well. Datu said, “No, you’re not. They won’t take the bear.”

“Will you watch him for me? A few weeks, and I’ll be back.” Jennifer immediately regretted her words. She had imposed on him an obligation. She was getting flustered—too much was going on. Now he couldn’t say no—at best she’d get the noncommittal ‘ya.’ And would she be able to believe him, to trust it? No. Not when he stood with his hands in the blood of this cub’s mother.

But Datu shook his head. “If he’s anybody’s, he’s yours.”

“What?”

“You can put him down. But no one will pick him up.”
“But—“
“No one.”

She stepped back a few paces, shielding the cub from the scene down by the river. She glanced at the plane, at Ronald talking now to Pak Apuy, at the impatience of this gathering. Then she shifted her hands, lifted the bear by the armpits up to eye level. It woke to look at her sleepily, but hung limp. It might be dead in a day or a week. Even if it didn’t die, she knew nothing about how to feed it, where it could live, how to reintroduce it to the wild. And apparently she would have no help, for reasons she’d have to figure out later—perhaps having once taken it for a ghost, Datu could not dispel for himself the aura of the supernatural around it.

But it had no supernatural to it whatsoever, not from where she stood. Its closed lashes caught the sun, and its face was droopy and sweet, a dozen neat whiskers sprouting from either side of its stubby nose. Its tiny penis, also furry, told her the sex, and its paws hung slightly curled, like a baby’s toes. She lowered the bear and realized in that moment she had given it—him—a name. Oswald. And with that, she had made her decision. She stepped back over to the river.

“What’s your name, and how do you know mine?” she asked the tourist.

“I’m Tim. Listen, Dr. Ashwright told me I might run into you. I’m one of his grad students. Human Ecology. There’s a whole team of us coming up here in a few months, but I wanted to see it on my own first, you know, during vacation.”

“A whole team?”

“Yeah, he got this huge Science Foundation grant. I left letters on your bed, one of them’s from him explaining the whole thing.” Other than the smear of blood, his face, though strange to her for its whiteness, didn’t seem unpleasant.

Ronald bellowed at her. “Jennifer, what’s it going to be?”

“I’ll go another time!” she yelled back, the bear startling again, its claws catching again through her shirt. Perhaps more bleeding. More quietly, she said to Tim: “It’s your plane.”
CHAPTER TWO

For the next few weeks, Jennifer was consumed with Oswald. He demanded total concentration when he was awake, and he was awake—despite her best efforts—all night. As natural as that may have been for a nocturnal creature, it sat ill with Jennifer, who began to grow bags under her eyes, and who found herself forced into a schedule contrary to the rest of the village’s. By the time she woke up at midday, Long Awan was deserted except for the children in their classroom (when school met) and those who were homebound—the very young, the very pregnant, the very old, and the very sick. Men and women formed into harvesting teams and began reaping the bounty of rice; whole families moved into field huts to take shifts guarding the growing plants against predators and nuisances. This was the village’s main food for the next year; attention must be paid, or hunger would be. In the distance, even through her sleep, Jennifer could hear the *thwok, thwok* of the women wielding wooden *tumpuk*, or pestles, that split open the dried rice husks and lay bare the meat.

The sound did not disturb Oswald at all, or if it did, it led him to snuggle closer as they both lay in a late-morning swoon on the floor. Jennifer had given up her sleeping bag after it had been repeatedly soiled, and made do with two woven cotton blankets over the hard wooden floor—blankets that could easily be washed clean in the river with a bit of Rinso. The river solved many problems, including the musky odor, not altogether pleasant, which clung about Jennifer’s hair and skin after a night with the bear.

The river also formed the major part of their entertainment. After waking, and the mandatory feeding—Oswald’s grumpiness without it took on dangerous dimensions, his claws leaving the floor and walls deeply scored—they went everyday down to the riverbank to *mandi*, to bathe. Oswald walked by himself, though she half-coaxed, half-dragged him in his wobbly, directionless gait, seizing him sometimes by the collar or on occasion picking him up and carrying him.
Along the flat rocks by the river they played, Oswald blinking and looking sleepy whenever the sun lit his blond lashes. If it was late enough in the afternoon, sounds came from upriver of sharp smacks—laundry being done, women soaking, wringing, slapping the threadbare T-shirts and rough trousers of their families; a gentler process for the Sunday best, clothes that almost never got washed, in any event. Jennifer’s own clothes were thin with this process, all lint, all nap removed; her jeans smooth as slacks, her shirts transparent to sun and wind, her underwear diaphanous. As long as she did not use too much soap, and rinsed well, everything was actually more comfortable. Against the newly lean, strong body the rainforest had given her, her clothes moved as loose and light as hospital scrubs.

Oswald would neither fetch (he watched the wood chips she threw, but did not stir in the least to retrieve them) nor swim—was a bear too dense? she wondered. Would he float? But he loved to wade. If she ran several stones away, he would come splashing after, grunting like a piglet, and tag her with his dripping muzzle. Then she’d run another few steps, and he’d follow again. He never got tired of this, and if she kept it up, it would take them all the way home. She had to take care, though, never to submerge herself, or she would rise to find his muzzle up in the air and his panicked groans filling the air.

Can a bear smile? Jennifer could swear that Oswald grinned when she sat him on a thick blanket she’d spread across her knees and fed him what she called bear formula—rice cereal and young coconut milk and sometimes mashed banana—thick and white and dripping in clumps from a blunt wooden spoon. He made a kind of whimpering noise that was eagerness and pleasure and complaint as she drew the spoon from his lips to dip it back into the enameled mixing bowl. He swallowed, licking his lips with his black-edged tongue, and then—she swore—he smiled as the next spoonful approached. It was a lopsided, endearing grin, and she smiled back every time.

“Here we go, little guy,” she said, sometimes in English, sometimes Indonesian. She made a mental note to ask about the equivalent Punan term of
endearment. How would a mother address her baby in a society with such a horror of attachment, and such a high historical rate of infant mortality? It surprised her that she didn’t know something so basic, and she had to admit to herself that her intentions (conceived in graduate school) to focus on women’s stories and lives were dead. She simply hadn’t found the informants she needed among the women.

The evidence was concretely before her during the long hours that she and Oswald remained confined inside her house—throughout the daily rainstorms, and all night every night—in the form of the tapes that she had neatly labeled and stacked along the shelves by the front door. Only a few were from women. Dolvi, Jennifer’s sometime laundress—half her teeth missing from old age, and she only 34—was represented by a half-dozen tapes because she claimed to be descended from both slaves and Punan, and had interesting things to say (in private) about her status as a kind of universal servant to the village. Bu Lejeng had collaborated on three or four tapes, most of which were not useful because of Bu Lejeng’s refusing to entertain certain kinds of speculation or indulge in certain types of memory. “Ya, if you want to settle, you settle, if you want to live in the open air, you live in the open air. Bu Jen must consult her own feelings on this, not mine.”

Bu Nardo, the village’s nurse-midwife and family planning representative, had a full five tapes, in part because she insisted that she be recorded. “Listen to me,” she would say when Jennifer met her down by the river. “Turn on that machine.” And then she would proceed to give Jennifer advice, and comment on Jennifer’s good nature, and compare Jennifer to her own daughter who had gone to school in Tarakan and not yet had the money to visit home. She also addressed remarks to Jennifer’s “husband” Geoff, reassuring him that Jennifer was safe, and smart, and staying faithful to him. It was all highly amusing, but the useful part of the Bu Nardo recordings came from her perspective on childbirth, illness and population control. She was the official representative of the government policy *Dua Anak Cukup,* “Two Children are Enough,” and as graphic reminder of that principle she had painted on the walls of her house/clinic the motto and a stencil of two enormous blue fingers
held up in a ‘V’. Nevertheless, she supplemented her income by accepting substantial gifts for her role as traditional midwife (in this role, two children were most definitely not enough, and she could be heard on the riverbank daily relating the encouraging news of the latest pregnancies.

Jennifer had a couple tapes of Nita, which Jennifer had saved because, as the daughter of the schoolteacher and the only available typist, Nita served informally as the village secretary, giving her a uniquely intimate perspective on village conflicts and certain social formalities. Jennifer had recorded a tape when Nita had been over at Jennifer’s house typing up the latest complaints between two feuding families.

“Why type the complaint?” Jennifer had asked. “They live right next to each other in the longhouse.” Nita had replied that Pak Apuy insisted that all such complaints be submitted in writing, and had made clear that he would look more favorably on complaints submitted in typescript than in handwriting. “But why?” Jennifer insisted. “It’s cleaner,” said Nita. “Cleaner than talking?” Jennifer demanded. Paper was heavy, and expensive to fly up. Nita nodded and invited her to look at the complaint, as long as Jennifer promised to show no one what she saw. It was written in formal Indonesian, and it began:

As is known to all people the Lyman family have been savage beasts and a despised tribe on the face of the earth from the time of Adam and Eve if not before. They are evil and their purposes evil, and they fixed their greed on that which does not belong to them, never has, and never will, and if they try for it again they will know ugly death.

“I had no idea there was this kind of thing going on,” Jennifer said. Nita nodded again. “What’s it about?” And Nita had explained (this was what was on the tape) that the grandfather of one family had fathered an illegitimate child within the other, and had left as part of his material legacy one of the finest dragon jars—“You’ve seen
it, Ibu Jen, it’s the Chinese one, pale blue, with the vines”—which sat up on the thick center beam of the longhouse.

“So if the other family gets it, what will they do with it? Wouldn’t they just leave it on the beams?” Nita admitted they would. “Then what’s the fight about? Moving it over a few inches?” And Nita nodded.

So that was that tape. Of the three Punan women other than Bu Lejeng in the village, Jennifer had recorded only bits and pieces, usually incidental to her long interviews with Om Barnabas. This was due not only to their shyness, but their absence—unlike Om Barnabas, who had made the unusual switch to working his own rice fields, the other Punan families had retained mostly nomadic habits and were gone for months at a time in the forest. When they came back they camped in their houses, or even behind them in little raised platforms of lashed-together young tree trunks.

Om Barnabas’s lectures and prayers and stories took up over forty tapes on the shelf. He represented the happy coincidence of someone who liked her, was willing to talk and explain, and had immense breadth and depth of knowledge and experience. With him, she had recorded everything from heroic tales of old hunters to the workings of the market in rare forest products. “In the old days,” he said on one tape, “We Punan were so shy we wouldn’t haggle, only leave a pile of bezoar stones in a basket by a certain tree, and then come back later to see what had been left for us as payment for them.”

Jennifer would look up at the collected tapes at odd moments in her play with Oswald, or when she lay on the floor and Oswald curled up on her belly, the moistness of his nose slowly seeping into her shirt. Late at night the only light came from candles or, if she felt too gloomy, an oil lamp. In either light she loved looking at Oswald in profile, seeing the world obliquely through the dome of his eyeballs. In his calm moments he was so calm, so meditatively, unruffably calm, that he would do no more than sigh no matter how long she stared. When he was active, he was unstoppable: everything was a toy, everything was to be dug into. Besides the
damage to floor and walls, there were also his claw marks by the bed and across the wood of the threshold. And the teeth marks, nearly cutting through the leg of the table and chairs.

Most difficult of all, worse even than her grim and improvised task of housetraining the bear—lifting him up bodily and dashing him outside mid-evacuation, alternating a soothing, cajoling voice with a sharp “NO!”—was Oswald’s habit of throwing up. The bear loved to spit up. Jennifer would catch Oswald licking mud from the riverside, or digging under a corner for the bulbous roots that he could expose like oversize maggots in the red soil. She would order him back, pull at him. She tried placing a rattan collar around his neck so she could yank him back. But no conceivable arrangement, short of lifting him off the ground, had much hope of stopping him from curling forward to the earth.

So Oswald would eat dirt and leaves, making a mockery of her attempts to sterilize spoons, water, and coconut juice. He would eat the good food she provided, and then swirl up a lick of saliva-soaked mud, and throw up fifteen minutes later in a fat, odorous stream that left stains she couldn’t get out.

She worried that the bear’s damage to the house would anger Pak Dayung, the schoolteacher (six tapes—he told interesting stories of the logging camps in Malaysia, and the schoolteacher training in Samarinda) from whom she rented it. Long Awan only contained seven houses. One was the longhouse, which had about one hundred and ten people in the thirty apartments, and was the traditional mode of life for all of the Dayak in the village. The other six, which flanked the longhouse upriver and downriver, had been built either by the government or in response to government policies. In the case of Pak Dayung’s house, the government had decreed (in a fit of attention completely out of character for that remote part of Borneo) that schoolteachers and other civil servants should have official housing. The state built half a house and charged full rent. The schoolteacher took on both the remaining carpentry and the lease, which he paid by remaining with Nita in the longhouse and subletting the government’s property out to anyone with the money.
Jennifer had the money—and would, for another few months or so, though she was running dangerously low.

There were letters waiting on her desk, as Tim had promised; somehow he must have known to check *post restante* in Samarinda. These she did not open right away, both because she was distracted by Oswald and because of her mixed feelings: on the one hand dread, which argued for avoidance; and on the other, anticipation, which argued for savoring the deliciousness of hearing from the outside world. The opportunities had been few—she could count on one hand the number of mail deliveries that had reached her this year.

So she spaced out the opening of the letters, one per day, starting from the least promising/threatening. Several were junk mail: the marketing department of a credit card company in Stevens Point, Wisconsin would be happy to know that it had so successfully camouflaged its solicitation (with “urgent—final notice” and “official documents enclosed” and the like) that her mother had forwarded it halfway around the world. Still, it met its inevitable fate in the wide mouth of her small clay woodstove.

Her brother Brad had sent an aerogramme, dated last February (it was now September) which spelled out in large block letters: “Hey kiddo, don’t let the mosquitoes (or anything else) eat you alive. I’m VP for customer service now: longer hours but a better car. In summer I forget to be envious of you, but another Boston winter might just kill me—or drive me your way. When are you going to be Dr. Hawley? You know we’re proud of you, right? Even if you’re deeper in the muck of Southeast Asia than the Nixon administration. Who knew you’d grow up to take this stuff so seriously?” Beneath this he’d drawn a cartoon of a grimacing Chinaman, which evoked an equal grimace from Jennifer. The return address was the logo of the automobile importer he worked for, and the date of posting was last June.

One letter had been sent from the Asia Association, and it had traveled the ocean twice, going out and coming back. Dated February, it asked to her to evaluate
what it called her "inaugural" period of research. "How would you rate the level of support from Asia Association personnel?" Pretty poor, she thought, if they thought she was in the United States while she did her research in Long Awan. Not only that, but the only support she really needed from the Asia Association was money and sponsorship—and they wouldn't be giving more of either.

In fact, finding new sponsorship was her major worry of the moment. In the back of her mind as the plane took off had been a certain relief that she would have time to go back to her research. She could use an extra few weeks to begin transcribing tapes and sifting through her data more thoroughly for the kinds of things Mark Reynolds and the Nature Foundation International would need to see: patterns of migration, demographics, ethnobotanical materials, traditional herb lore, and the like. The plane had been so rushed. Ronald had not even given Tim time to rinse the blood off himself; what would she have been able to do by way of gathering her thoughts and belongings for an absence that could last a month or more, and concern the viability of her future here?

There was a double risk to not getting NFI (or some other agency) to sponsor her. The obvious risk was simply running out of money to complete her research. But even if she obtained money somehow, lacking some institutional affiliation she would not be able to get permission from the government to carry out research in a remote area. In the 1960s there had been communism scares and border antagonisms with Malaysia; the government had a strict national ideology and wanted to limit outside influences. People without proper letters of permission could travel on a tourist visa, but that involved shuttling back and forth from Singapore every two months at great expense, and the subterfuge, if exposed, could get you blacklisted.

The reality was that if she left and did not have in hand the analyses necessary to convince NFI to fund her, she might not get back for a year or more. She'd have to fly back to the states, and reapply all over again for one of the major research fellowships. Or—like Julie, who still languished in Jakarta a year after Jennifer had left for the field—have to take a menial job as English language flunky for some
organization, scrape by in a kind of exile in Jakarta, neither here nor there, and hope that avenues of funding would somehow open. Julie’s experience stood as ample warning against that kind of life: her letters had been uniformly morose, one story after another of being hit on, or overlooked, at the business paper for which she ostensibly proofread, but actually wrote. In her last postcard, it sounded as if she had quit, but she’d written so vaguely that it was hard to be sure. “Taking it all off, even time,” she’d written, on the back of a photo of topless Balinese maidens bathing in a roadside ditch. “Getting out of the fast lane.”

The Asia Association form asked further questions (“Do you feel you were adequately oriented to field conditions?”), and Jennifer dutifully pulled out a pen and began to answer: yes and no. I found adapting to the village hard at first, of course, but now it feels like a genuine home. I’m not sure if I got better at adapting, or the village adapted to me. I feel like a known quantity, like in some ways they’ve taken over my research for me and are telling me what they think I most want to know. Do these lines blur for everyone? I assume they must, since—her eyes had caught the notice at the bottom: please reply no later than April. After some thought, she consigned the form to the clay stove.

She opened the other professional letter, the one that Tim had mentioned from Dr. Stewart Ashwright, her advisor. It was dated September, just a few weeks ago: Tim must have brought it with him from the U.S. Her hope was that Tim had misspoken, that a whole team of graduate students would not be coming to Long Awan, but the hope was dashed immediately. “You’ll be seeing me,” he said, “and probably several others from the Anthro Department that you may or may not know. The National Science Foundation has seen fit to throw us quite a bone, and we’re still chewing over plans, but the current target is February next year. The team approach is a new one to me—as you know, the classic anthropological method is immersion—but I proposed a hybrid qualitative-quantitative approach that will have graduate students administering a schedule of interview questions that will be numerically coded…” The good news was that nothing was required of her, other than to host the
team if the village had no other places to stay. And the other good news was that the project would be over quickly—weeks rather than months. Jennifer didn’t like the thought of compromising her own position here: the villagers might lump her together with the other outsiders, or would she have earned a sufficiently unique place for herself in their estimation? —but Dr. Ashwright had been the one to steer her into anthropology in the first place and she supposed he knew what he was doing. Besides which, he had invested a lot of time and energy in training her and finding her funding through the Asia Association. “By the way,” he wrote at the end, “I approve of your ideas for enlarging your study to ideas of territoriality and possessives. Did you get in touch with Mark Reynolds at Nature Foundation International yet? We’re doing this in conjunction with him; he may be useful to you as well. Did I mention that he was an old student of mine?” He hadn’t; but it immediately relieved her of some of the anxiety. Okay, Dr. Ashwright, she thought: a few weeks, no problem. As long as I get my year.

She had just two letters left: Geoff’s and her mother’s. She left them sitting on the desk a while longer.

Late nights with Oswald, Jennifer realized how far away she’d gotten from her research process. Not only had she not had the energy or time or focus to do the hard work—composing short papers that would begin to synthesize her data—but she had stopped conducting new interviews. There wasn’t time for that either, and her schedule was now off; when she approached people holding the bear, their faces went carefully blank and their diction took on a flat, evasive quality. She knew nervousness when she saw it. She also knew there would be no point bringing up the issue with anybody: the village, like Datu initially, clearly wanted the bear gone, and if she kept it, that was her problem alone. She was okay with that: to her surprise, Oswald was thriving under her care, and though she didn’t have access to any books about bear-raising, she figured that after a short while he’d be able to fend for himself in the wilderness anyway. Then she could get back to interviewing, and laugh with
people about her foolish bear raising. She knew how these things worked. In a way, it would probably humanize her further, the way her klutziness on the trails did. When in the course of a midsummer canoe race she lost not only the lead (having been granted a generous handicap) but even the battle against the current, so that she ended up needing a rescue by the other canoers, she had been humiliated—and reaped the dividends immediately in terms of a more relaxed quality to her friendships and an enlarged niche in local folklore. The story got told behind her back, in front of her, everywhere until the sting wore off and she began to trust that people were basically for her—once that sheen of being an American, always rich, always sombong, the world’s only remaining superpower, wore off.

How long would it be, though, before Oswald could be on his own, so that her research could begin again, and her relationships with people pick back up? She guessed a few weeks. What was lacking in his development? He could smell food and find it even when she covered it from his view. And he could track—she’d experimented with hide and seek games around the house where she’d go sit in a hidden spot while he slept. He’d found her every time. Found her once, too, when she’d crossed the soccer field to Om Barnabas’s house for a quick chat when she was sure he wouldn’t wake up. She had been sitting in her chair by the front door—so familiar a spot, from hundreds of meals and conversations, that she found herself getting grumpy on those rare occasions when some other visitor was in it when she came—catching up with Om Barnabas after he got back from the trip that he’d initiated on her behalf.

“How was the pig hunting?” she’d asked.

“Two,” he said, apparently misunderstanding her ‘how’ for a ‘how many.’ “One we ate just the organs of, and the other we smoked and brought back.”

She pictured him and Bu Lejeng squatting on the edge of a camp platform, the fire burning beneath the glazed rolling body of a wild boar, its hair singed off and its flesh sweating oil. Was it romantic? Did the old married couple (at least nominally married—among the other Dayaks, Nita for instance, there was a widespread
assumption that the two had never formed any legal union—who would officiate, out in the jungle? What records would be kept, among a people without police, without paper? And why did they have no children together?) look for excuses like this, moments to get away? Did the nomadic life beckon, in shacks built like rafts, the trunks of dozens of saplings lashed together with rattan vine and floating above the forest floor? Or were they glad to get back? They had stayed gone eleven days, more than she'd originally contracted for—plus, she wasn't there. It had turned into a regular hunting expedition. This was ticklish in terms of paying him. She wanted to pay the original amount—but could see arguments for paying him less, since he had actually only guided her three of the ten original days (and they had gone the equivalent of only three or four hours, to boot!) She could also see arguments, though they would cast him in a bad, greedy light, for paying him for all the days he'd stayed gone, since she had broken off mid-travel and left him on a trail of uncertain length (the trail was always uncertain in the rainforest).

"Was the trail difficult, Om?"

"The difficulty of a trail always depends on one's traveling companions, and the weather, and the omens, and the hunt."

"Yes, but... was this one difficult?"

"I don't think so. More or less, no."

"Well, good."

And so on. They talked a while longer while she worked up the necessary courage to hand him the small stack of rupiah in a white envelope, and the eloquence necessary to overcome his resistance to payment. It was another aspect of the ritual that was their relationship: she ate meals, most days, at his house, and did not pay him or Bu Lejeng, who cooked—except that she bought from them rice and vegetables that she herself did not cook, or ever in fact carry home to her kitchen—they were bought in theory and eaten in fact, as friends, sitting down together. Except that once it had been established that Jennifer aligned more in the male realm than the female, Bu Lejeng served her as she served Om Barnabas. Even on those occasions
when Jennifer ate alone, Bu Lejeng’s tendency was to leave the plates full of food on
the front table and retreat to the kitchen. Although it felt strange (what didn’t?)
Jennifer often let Bu Lejeng disappear to the kitchen, and ate slowly and alone,
appreciating the freedom of her own thoughts.

So now Jennifer needed to calculate in her head how much to pay Om
Barnabas and Bu Lejeng for the escort into the jungle, without ever referring to it as
payment or asking how much would be appropriate. She would have to project on the
basis of what in the past had been acceptable. But how acceptable had her payments
been in the past? It was impossible to say, and she really would have no idea
whatsoever if she hadn’t had a good tourist’s handbook with her.

A bee came in at the window, a fat black one, its buzz as abrupt and loud as
ripping paper. Jennifer flinched as it bumbled past, and Om Barnabas rose and
opened the door to shoo it out. But the moment he opened the door he froze,
transfixed, and there was the scrabbling of nails on the front stairs, and a snuffling,
panting sound. As Om Barnabas reached toward the wall for his machete, a furred
muzzle poked into the room. “Oswald!” Jennifer said, and the bear burst into a full-
on wail, the same nearly human sound he’d made the day his mother died, and
barreled forward, a furry brown thing, and buried his snout in Jennifer’s sarong. She
saw Om Barnabas’s eyes widen, his machete start to move.

Oswald seemed to be trying to pass through her skin into her bones, so eager
was he for reunion. His head pressed against her shins, his forelegs tried to climb
onto her knees. She struggled to keep him at bay and hug him, and communicate
with Om Barnabas at the same time. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’s just Oswald.”

But the old man did not relax his guard, and as the bear kept swarming her his
claws scraped at her, and the whole situation was ripe with misunderstanding. So she
scooped the bear up in her arms and backed off until she stood outside the door. “I’m
sorry, I thought he would sleep,” she said. “They’re supposed to be nocturnal. No
one told you--?”
Om Barnabas just looked at her. She realized suddenly that no one had told him about the bear, about why she remained in Long Awan when her plan had been to leave.

"This is embarrassing. I really thought he'd stay quiet. But this bear—Oswald—he's my new responsibility, just for a few weeks until he can live on his own in the forest. How long do you think until he can survive on his own, Om?"

Om Barnabas shook his head. She couldn't read his expression. "Depends on the mother," he said. "Her milk."

So Jennifer explained what Pak Dayung, the schoolteacher, had helped her with, the bear formula. Meanwhile, Oswald, at her hip, continued to struggle, but it had become a calmer, sweeter nuzzling, too. She excused herself to go take care of the bear (Om Barnabas not having any strong opinions on the bear's feed), only reflecting later on the fact that she had left the envelope with the money lying on the table, and not ever actually presented it or offered any defense of it. Oh well, she thought, as relieved as she was chagrinned. He would know what it was for.

She opened the letter from Geoff, which was dated May. "Hey wifey," he began, a light note to begin a long, dark letter cataloguing with morose thoroughness the reasons why it was impossible for him ever to finish his dissertation. "I suppose you'll ask me when you get back to the states why I never sent any news. It's because there is none. I only have olds, olds, olds. Sometimes I think I'll never finish: those are the good days. Other times I know that someday I'll have to give birth to this monster."

He went on. "For one thing, I'm incapable of writing code without bugs. I've got bugs to rival your bugs, whether they be flying cockroaches, thumb-sized ants, or fish-catching spiders. My bugs can bring an entire Unix server to a halt and require the intervention of three lab techs." Or: "I've gained weight, because I'm incapable of sitting down in front of the computer for longer than ten minutes without popping back up and grabbing another bowl of Life cereal. Why the hell am I in this career
path? I’d rather be out in the woods with you, taking shits in the river with children watching and giggling.” It went on and on and on in the mode of self-pity, and Jennifer must have had a frown on her face as she read because Nita came up to where she sat on the porch and said, “What’s wrong?”

“A letter from Geoff,” she said.

“Your husband?” Nita, naturally enough, was puzzled why such a letter would make her frown.

“There is a sadness between us,” Jennifer said. “A problem with...with...” How to explain something like a dissertation, and how a person can wall themselves off so thoroughly with work—and the avoidance of work—that not even a loved one can get through? Nearly all the work in Long Awan was communal in nature, and the harder the task, the more people shared the burden. For that matter, how to explain the nature of her relationship with Geoff, a relationship that was like a pact between them to avoid the discomforts of seeing other people or encountering social situations that neither of them knew how to face? Could she say, Nita, we spent five years locked in one smelly, dark apartment or another pretending we liked nothing more than watching movies and having sex that slightly embarrassed us. And we broke up because after his second extension on his dissertation he was too stressed even for that much interaction. But of course she couldn’t. “A problem about children,” Jennifer said, finally.

“Oh.” Nita nodded. She sat down next to Jennifer while Jennifer went on reading. “What if we really were married? I think I’d like it, to be honest. You were always so good for me. The safety we provided each other, well I know it wasn’t enough but it was far better than now. I guess what I’m saying in this letter is that since you left I haven’t done diddly. I know we were broken up and all, but it’s a real difference your being so far away. It kills me you won’t even be able to respond to this letter for a month or more after I send it.” Was this the man whom Jennifer had regarded as so mature? He had been a graduate student when she was still new in
college. Now he was still a graduate student. She put the letter down and stood and stretched.

"He’s a very patient husband?" Nita asked.

“What? Why do you ask?”

“To have his wife so far away for so long, while he stays at home?”

“Yes,” said Jennifer. “It’s killing him, apparently.”

Although adopting the bear had strained certain of her relationships in the village, it had strengthened others. Pak Apuy seemed highly distracted, and Datu had remained distant (was that the bear or the tension between them—or just imagination?). Bang Kaget, the policeman, a Javanese and a nominal Muslim, gave her wide berth, lumping the bear apparently into the category of unclean—an interesting twist on doctrine, given that he ate pork like everyone else in the village, and kept hunting dogs, and fermented his own palm wine. On the other hand, he had recently received a letter from the district police chief asking if he wanted to move on to another posting, and that had inspired a burst of self-importance, with him reeling around the village displaying the letter and pronouncing, “See, I am wanted” for as long as his wife would tolerate him being drunk.

Nita, on the other hand, grew closer, seeming to share in Jennifer’s delight with the bear, to see in him also a project much like raising a child. She began to join Jennifer and Oswald on their afternoon jaunts to the river. This was especially helpful because Nita had an uncannily accurate sense of weather, and she appeared on Jennifer’s porch simultaneously with the petering out of the day’s rains, or in the one window between light and dark when the clouds would part and the red-limned sunset briefly show through.

As Nita drew closer, so too did her father. Pak Dayung had been an immense help. Originally from a kampung closer to the coast, Pak Dayung had been village teacher since he finished two years of junior college in 1971, and could point to generations of Long Awan students who were literate because of him, and dozens
who had gone on to the district center and completed junior high school, a few who
had made it to high school, and a couple who had even made it to a college degree on
the coast. He had done all this while essentially supporting himself the same way
everyone else in the village supported themselves: by burning and clearing a small
section of forest in order to grow enough rice and cassava to feed himself and his
family. The government payments did not amount to much, and the house lease took
out a big chunk of it. Because the agricultural work took a great deal of time and
energy at certain seasons, he canceled class frequently, and far from pursuing the
truant, he happily worked alongside them at an even sweat under the sun.

He was a man of seemingly limitless energy and talent; a tremendously
competent and willing landlord, able to rebuild the place from the ground up if need
be, and a great resource for helping her to adapt to the challenges of life in the village.
He had become an unofficial consultant in her work with Oswald, and had not only
(by consulting with Bu Nardo) come up with the bear formula, he brought over fresh
batches of it in the early evenings. A serious man, he had nevertheless developed
deep laugh lines, in the same inexplicable way that his nose had broadened and
reddened despite his avoidance of strong drink. He was slim, with a slight pot-belly,
and his daily wear were the wrecked black dress slacks and broad-collared pin-striped
dress shirts he’d worn for teaching five years ago.

To Jennifer’s relief, Nita was the one who told her father about the bear’s
damage to the house, and rather than get angry or charge her money, Pak Dayung
instead insisted on a larger role in taking care of the bear (frequently joining Nita and
Jennifer and Oswald by the river on afternoons when he came back from the fields),
and made a case for the bear’s education.

“Of course he scratches the floorboards,” Pak Dayung had said, cutting off
Jennifer’s apology, “Government lumber is terrible quality. Look at the longhouse:
_kayu ulin_. Ironwood. No one even knows where to find trees like that anymore.
They brought the planks down from the old longhouse upriver, and used them again.
Maybe those planks were used before, in the Long Awan before that, before the
Christians. They could be two hundred years old. Not a single flaw. You can still see the notches where the old guys planed the wood with those old adzes.”

“So what can I do?” she asked. She held Oswald by the rattan collar that Pak Dayung had made just a few days before.

“Ya, simple,” Pak Dayung said. “We need to teach this bear to use his claws more outside the house. To find food. The milk isn’t going to be enough anymore.”

“How old do you think Oswald is?” Jennifer asked.

“At most three months,” the teacher said. “Or maybe more.”

What she really wanted to know was why people were so afraid of the cub. Yes, he had teeth, small and sharp, and claws that were strong enough to tear through boards. But he was remarkably sweet and docile--no bigger than the village dogs, and far more affectionate. When she asked Pak Dayung, though, he became uncharacteristically evasive: “For that question, you’ll have to ask someone else,” he said. When she pressed him, he asked her a question back: could Jesus rise from the grave? “I don’t know,” she said truthfully. “Exactly,” he said. Undoubtedly he had noticed her aversion to church—she couldn’t help it, it had too many associations with her own mother. It was the same restrictive, evangelical Protestantism here as in Culiton, Virginia, the Dayak church having been formatively influenced mainly by American missionaries. “That is something you don’t know, and this is something I don’t know.”

So Pak Dayung came with them on the river trips, and much of the time the two women bathed he took Oswald touring through the underbrush in search of termite and anthills to break open. By the water’s edge there were half-sunk and long-rotten logs, driftwood from floods, and those too he encouraged Oswald to crack open in search of food. While Jennifer bathed she’d hear the sound of Pak Dayung’s rough exhortations and the splintering rip of Oswald’s claws echoing above the wash of the river.

Nita accomplished her bath gracefully and discreetly beneath a sarong, squatting in the sheltered current behind a large rock. Jennifer tried to do the same
thing, but even after a year she hadn’t mastered the art of getting clean and not flashing anyone, so at a certain point in her bath routine she tied the sarong tight around her and swam out into the middle of the river where the current was swift, there facing upriver and battling forward with her best crawl. Many times Nita had warned Jennifer that this was dangerous, but Jennifer knew she swam better than any villager, and did not feel at risk of being swept away. If she was, then all she’d need to do was make for one of the banks. When there were floods, which was often enough in the early rainy season, she made do without the swim.

It was on coming back from one of her swims, with Dayung and Oswald on a trek through distant scrub upstream, that Nita asked her if she thought Oswald might possibly be her lost child.

“What?” asked Jennifer, shaking water from her ears, and seating herself to dry on the sun-drenched rock.

“Do you think Oswald could be a child that you lost sometime?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’ve never lost a child.”

“You and Geoff?” Nita asked. “You said you did—you called it a great sadness between you.”

“I did?”

Nita met her eyes calmly, a trick that she’d worked up to in the past year. When Jennifer had first showed up, the girl had been nervous and silent. Now she had come into an internal power—call it womanhood—which gave her dark eyes a compelling quality of depth and willfulness. “At the last letter.”

Jennifer couldn’t remember exactly what she’d said. “That’s not what I meant,” she said, leaving it ambiguous. She stood and squeezed water from her hair, leaning over so that when the vision appeared it appeared sideways, and she doubted it. But when she straightened her head, three canoes remained fixed to the surface of the river. The lead canoe, a simple dugout like the ones used at Long Awan but larger, had fluttering at its middle an improvised canopy, a blue sarong spread to the raised corners of four poles to keep out the sun and dance in the wind. Beneath it sat
a portly woman with Chinese features, round as the Buddha, with eyeshade and sundress to match her shelter from the sun. At prow and stern sat two rowers, Kenyah men with tattooed arms and unsmiling faces and shoulders as sculpted as the river rocks. The canoes behind featured similar rowers; one canoe seemed to contain supplies packed in plastic bags, the other more supplies and, perched among them, a pale young man with curly black hair and a wisp of moustache.

The canoes were about two hundred yards away, just coming round a bend in the river, when Jennifer saw them. Nita stood up beside her and looked, too, as the canoes floated downstream, the rowers’ blades serving merely to guide them. “How did they get past the rapids?” Jennifer asked. She had never seen boats cross here that weren’t Long Awan’s own.

“They carried them around,” said Nita. “That’s the only way.”

“Have you seen someone do that before?”

“No. That’s from the headhunting days.”

“Should we be scared?” Jennifer laughed. Nita didn’t join her. “Oh come on, those aren’t headhunters. It’s some kind of weird tourism. She clearly paid those guides. Look at the level of enthusiasm.”

It was true that the rowers barely moved their wrists, but also true that they moved efficiently, in an ensemble, around all obstacles in the river, obstacles both apparent and submerged. As they passed by Jennifer and Nita, the woman with Chinese features narrowed her eyes and nodded and murmured something to her rowers. They both looked at Jennifer and the lead one said something back, and the woman nodded again.

“The rich woman knows you,” said Nita. The girl was clearly pleased; it seemed to have confirmed a world order for her, and Jennifer’s place in it.

In the wake of the group’s passing out of sight around the river’s next bend, the wilderness seemed subdued, and it was several minutes before the cicadas shrilled again, and the steady pok, pok of river current pressing the hollows of the rocks could be heard. There was a great welling depth to the water here where the river went
around in a vertical eddy, slowly carving away the ground beneath itself. It struck Jennifer suddenly as funny and terrifying that she swam there daily.

Jennifer wanted to join Nita and the others in witnessing the rich woman's landing—and professionally, as an anthropologist, she ought to have been there, to see what it would reveal—but she had to take Oswald home, and dry him and feed him. Then she changed clothes, and went out onto the porch.

All kinds of activity was going on across the soccer field at Pak Apuy's house: she could see the people of the village coming from the fields, disappearing inside or huddling before it in larger and larger numbers. The sky was just tinged with gold as twilight approached. In the unusually clear sky—this was a time of rain and cloud, most days of the monsoon season—some high, delicate clouds blushed salmon. The nearby mountains, misty with transpiration, began to flatten into silhouettes.

Jennifer really should go down to the village head's place—it looked like it was turning into a real party. But what would she do with Oswald? This was his time of greatest alertness, so she could not leave him alone. But to walk into a crowd, much less the village head's house carrying him would be an affront, and possibly a threat to those who still regarded him as something supernatural.

Fruit bats—flying foxes—began to trickle skyward from their perches in hill caves and tree limbs. Soon the trickle became a flow, and the effect, though repeated every clear night, was eerie. Silent wings flapping against the thin air of night, the fruit bats filled a portion of the sky with their awkward, unnatural wing-flaps, like birds too excited and primitive to remember grace. Who had the Chinese woman been? She did have the look of someone who knew things, even if not Jennifer.

Jennifer waited in her house, stroking Oswald's ears until he complained, with a small noise, that she was stroking too hard. This was a familiar and unwelcome feeling, this sitting on the porch, neither inside nor outside. It reminded her of her mother. Porch sitting had been an important spectator sport in Gallton, Virginia—she supposed it was in most small towns: the long watching of the sky as it rose in color
and sank in light, the lazy, mumble-mouthed contributions to the unending debate
over types—in other words, gossip. The custom was for people to visit each other,
but her mother never went abroad to other porches—knew her own shame well
enough, and had lived with it long enough, to know that anyone she would want to
talk to would come by themselves. But mostly, no one did—and other than errands
run in the old Chevy Malibu, and the short walk to church and school, her mother
stayed put. It had always seemed oppressive to Jennifer, this half-hiding, half-
parading her mother did, placing Brad and then Jennifer strategically by her, the three
of them looking nothing like a family except in the United Nations sense that “we are
all a family”, a collective unease clinging about them and giving to the two children a
pinched look that was the only and inevitable answer to their mother’s broad body
and drawl like a fat, wet buzz in the ear. Their mother, her hair mouse-brown and
dispirited, her cheeks florid, her jowls white, would slide a weighty arm over Brad’s
shoulders, tousle his flame-red hair. Jennifer would slouch beside, feeling mute and
misshapen, an awkward shadow across the threshold of the porch, a brown shape
from another continent.

Thinking of her mother, Jennifer suddenly remembered the letter she’d left
unread. She shifted Oswald to her hip and went inside to get it. The postmark was
June. Oswald gave the paper a curious lick of the tongue as she tore it open above his
head. A photograph fell out, and she picked it up off the desk and saw that it was the
Polaroid of her father.

She stared at it. It was fading now, this scene from her parent’s life
together—the only one that had survived her mother’s orgy of burning once she
understood that Charlie Kamora had left her for good, had gone back to the
Philippines just a month into the marriage, and six months before Jennifer was born.

The photo showed her mother and father in a sloppy, laughing embrace, his
arms around her waist. She held a lit cigarette up and away from him. The light from
the flash made her forehead shine and cast his face partially into shadow, so that her
profile was superimposed on it as a shape of darkness. He was dark anyway, darker
than Jennifer had ever been: a sailor in the U.S. Navy by profession, slim and handsome in a pink Hawaii-print shirt. They were at a party at one of his friend’s apartments in Norfolk; behind them loomed one of those awful 1960s burnt orange couches with arms like stunted wings. People stood all around, black and Filipino sailors mostly, some watching her mother and her father with amusement, as if a joke had just been told. Nearly everyone held drinks. The tapered white arm of a woman trailed from outside the frame and leaned on an arm of the sofa.

The half of her father’s face that was in the light bore a pockmarked texture, but his teeth were even in his smile. Her mother was stocky even then, but she had not developed jowls and a belly; her hair was dyed blond, and her expression was triumphant. It was impossible to reconcile the mother that Jennifer knew, defeated, pinched, in thrall to the church and all the narrow biases of small-town Virginia, with the woman in the photo. In fact, all of Jennifer’s questions about that contrast had met only evasion: “It was the times,” her mother would say. “In the sixties I was just a naïve little girl, and I was disobedient and willful, and I did something that I thought would show how grown up I was. Well, it ruined me, is what it did.” At least you knew how to be alive then, Jennifer always wanted to say. But she was not in a good position to say anything—she being the visible trace of that failed marriage, and a visible blight on her mother’s prospects, and even held somewhat accountable for the fiasco that produced Brad three years later with no wedlock at all.

It was all a mess, as growing up the only Asian girl in Gallton was a mess, and it had made for good horror stories in college. Geoff in particular laughed at what he called her “Southern gothic” upbringing, and she had learned to ham it up, to talk about the year that Missy Carlton and Elly Smith had decided to torture her in the school cafeteria by laughing loudly and artificially every time she came near them, and continue until she fled in dismay. But one time Missy had just eaten a bunch of scuppernongs and when she laughed she started gagging so violently that part of a grape came out of her nose. Or when her mother (her mother denied this later) brought Jennifer to nursery school and assured the teacher “She’s a real talker, and no
trace of an accent, neither,” as if the clipped syllables of scientists in Saturday afternoon Godzilla movies were somehow inherited. “Okay,” Geoff had said, “So you’ve got something interesting to write in your memoirs about becoming a linguistic anthropologist.”

Now here was the photo again, and she supposed she knew what seeing it meant in terms of the contents of the letter. “Dear Jennie,” it began: “I think about it all the time and I pray for understanding but I honestly don’t know why you’ve gone to your father’s side. Your father did less for you than any passing stranger, yet you forsake me for his mere image. You—” Jennifer turned the letter face down and pressed it to Oswald’s warm back. The bear made a few grunting attempts to squirm his way around and chew it up, but Jennifer held him tightly. She brought him and the letter back to the porch and sat down.

It was just as bad as she thought. She took a deep breath and picked up the letter again. “You know I’d do anything for you but you never ask. Reverend Lawes is ill with walking pneumonia, but he put in a special word for you last Sunday, asking God’s grace for those distant from our eyesight. I brought him some soup, later, and he reminded me of the prodigal son and said that God had surely forgiven me for my sins long before now, and what was left was your story.”

She put it back down, wishing she had Geoff—or anybody who could appreciate the ridiculousness of it—to show this to. Though they had already broken up at the time, it was Geoff that she had gone to when her mother, after learning of Jennifer’s plans to go to Indonesia, had stopped speaking to her for two months.

Several small figures detached themselves from the crowd by Pak Apuy’s and ran up towards her house. It was Lawé and two friends, coming to tell her the news. The ragamuffins: she had never been so glad to see anybody.

Oswald growled when they came up, but she soothed him. “Ibu Jen! Ibu Jen!” Lawé shouted. “Are you coming? A woman gave me a pencil—look!” Jennifer looked, thinking: I should give people more gifts. The problem was room—when she had come, she had used up the full weight allowance on the necessities:
books, the tape recorder, the batteries, medicines, the works. All she’d managed to bring were cartons of clove cigarettes, which she’d had to ration very carefully to people only when it was crucial, for community relations, that she do so.

“Well, I’ve got paper you can write on,” she said. “I’ll have to see for sure, but maybe you can have a whole book.”

“She gave me one! It’s got Hello Kitty on the cover.”

“Oh, well, great.”

The kids—three of them, one skinnier than the next, their stomachs and chests flat and hard, the way kids got when they ran everywhere they had to go—turned from her and leaned against the porch rail, looking out. Beyond them, the soccer field wavered like an apparition in the late afternoon sun—it had been an odd day, with the rains in the morning and patches of clear sky throughout. Jennifer could see the knot of people still standing around the front steps of Pak Apuy’s house, waiting (presumably) for the visitors to come out. “Tell them I’ll be out soon,” she said. “I have to feed the bear a little something first.”

“He’s always hungry, isn’t he?” Lawé asked.

Oswald actually looked anything but hungry at this moment, curled into her, a dense weight of flesh perfectly conformed to her body, lying limply across it.

“He’s a growing boy,” she said—her mother’s words to Brad. “Just like you. I bet you eat a lot.”

“Oh yeah I do!” said Lawé, and flew down the steps, his friends sweeping out after him. They crossed the green space like a ragged arrowhead, and were absorbed into the distant crowd.

Jennifer went inside to look around her apartment, at the bearproofing steps she’d taken (or Oswald had taken by simply destroying what wasn’t bearproofed, thus eliminating whatever it was as a potential problem). She would need to close the door to her bedroom and shut the bear into the main room by tying the front door closed, clearing her desk in case he toppled it. There wasn’t much more to do: the racks of tapes were above his reach, and she’d thrown everything else into her
bedroom or into bags that hung from pegs in the ceiling beams. If he peed on the
floor, or shat, it wasn’t something he hadn’t done before. She wished she could
consult with Pak Dayung—the schoolteacher caught things that she missed. But he
had handed her Oswald and been one of the first to walk downriver to greet the
Chinese woman and her retinue.

Jennifer took a deep breath and determined to try breaking out of the isolation
of her nightly routine. She whispered soothing words to Oswald, and lay him down
on the sleeping blanket, and left him there at the house. She stood outside, looking up
at the porch, several long minutes before she walked away. She heard nothing—
nothing louder than the six o’clock cicadas, shrilling up in a single massive chorus of
night.
CHAPTER THREE

“So who is she?” Jennifer asked Bu Nardo, who was most likely to know, and who sat at the center of the crowd knuckling hard, bony fingers into the ribs of a younger woman. Red welts rose in longitudinal lines across the woman’s back; in Bu Nardo’s conception of her role as nurse pijat, or masseuse, there was nothing of the Swedish way, nothing of comfort. She chased knots of flesh and smashed and abraded them until they gave up. The woman she massaged bent her head so that her hair shielded her face, and looked like she might be biting her palm.

“She’s from Jakarta,” Bu Nardo said, “A government person. That boy with her, the half-breed? That’s her son.”

The half-breed. Jennifer winced a little at the coarseness of the term, wondering if Bu Nardo applied it in the same way talking about her. “Half what?” she asked.

“Half Chinese, of course. The other half’s Dutch. That funny little moustache.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked! It’s one thing to be polite, it’s another to be stupid! In the old days, strangers didn’t dare show up like that, sombong, unannounced, in the middle of the river. Even governmentals. They’d lose their heads if they did.” Bu Nardo’s face showed deadly earnestness, her eyes two fierce onyxes inset deeply within the rumpled fabric of her skin. Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed. “Someone scared of the Dayaks now, though, is scared of their own shadow. That’s all we are, shadows. Those were giants, in the old days. Go in, go in!” Bu Nardo said. “They’ve been talking about you.”

Of course they had. Jennifer climbed the stairs to Pak Apuy’s front door—not real stairs, like the schoolteacher’s house featured, but a tree trunk with notches carved into it that could be quickly drawn up in case of attack. And that also got tremendously slippery in the wet season, since nowhere on it was the
trace of a level surface. Jennifer wore her rubber thongs, and these had a better

grip than her boots did. At the landing upstairs, she had to shoo several of the
young boys from the door, where they watched the proceedings curiously.

Pak Apuy’s house was really two houses jammed together along an
irregular seam. The front house, the one that Jennifer now entered, consisted of
nothing but a largish empty box on wooden legs, a ceremonial and meeting space
which tried in diminutive fashion to be the equivalent of the vast open communal
gallery of the longhouse. The back house, a quarter the size, contained dark,
crammed living spaces for Pak Apuy and several chapters of his extended
family—Bu Nardo being an exception, since she lived alone and had her nurse’s
salary. When in the 1970s Pak Apuy had been charged by the national
government with the task of moving Long Awan residents out of the longhouse
into individual dwelling places, for ostensibly ‘hygienic’ reasons, he had felt
obligated to build his own individual place first, and for several years during
which the people of Long Awan resisted moving from the longhouse, the village
had consisted of the one giant dwelling and the dark, dwarfish footnote of Pak
Apuy. All events of any importance happened in the longhouse, and it was to
correct the ignominy of this situation that Pak Apuy had had the second house, the
large room, appended, to regain a significant role in hosting. Although the two
houses physically leaned against each other, the only connecting passage was a
door from the kitchen of the living quarters to the empty front—a door that
though level with the floor of the front house, stood a half-meter up the wall of
the kitchen.

Jennifer stood in the doorway for a moment, allowing Datu to call out,
“Ayo, masuk.” Then she ducked in to the middle of a scene which bore all the
trappings of a royal audience—except that Pak Apuy, the local sovereign, seemed
in the position of vassal. The Chinese woman sat on a low wooden stool that her
retainers must have brought in; as far as Jennifer was aware there had never been
any chairs in that room. Everyone else sat on the floor—Pak Apuy and Datu and
Pak Dayung and several other of the men from the village, the six rowers, who looked less fierce and strange in this context, and the woman’s son, who sat next to Lawé and seemed engrossed in whatever the boy was whispering in his ear. Up close, it was clear he was in his mid teens—Nita’s age. But what a difference: this boy’s face, olive in hue and pockmarked with acne, looked as world-weary as hers looked innocent. There was something in the lift of his eyebrows, his lidded eyes that suggested knowledge beyond his years. The moustache, on the other hand, which might have made him seem older yet, made him young again by its sheer incongruity.

Before every man and before the Chinese woman were glasses of coffee choked in sugar and lidded against flies, and bowls of shrimp crackers and sweet deep-fried sesame dough balls with mungbean filling. Bu Apuy was half-visible through the door to the kitchen, keeping an eye on the supply of snacks.

Bang Kaget, the policeman, also sat among the others, a cynical grin on his handsome, Javanese face. Jennifer had been frightened of the man when she first arrived; he had thrown her paperwork back in her face and declared his suspicions that she was there to infiltrate the Malaysian border and join with the Penan in Sarawak who were blockading the logging roads under the influence of ‘foreign subversives.’ Since the paperwork had taken her several weeks to put together, and hundreds of dollars of ‘processing’ fees to officials including the governor’s office of East Kalimantan and the provincial police chief in Samarinda, the prospect of needing to fly out and start over nearly made her cry. What saved her was Pak Apuy, with whom she stayed at the time, reining in the policeman. “What more paperwork does she need? She’s my guest. If she wants to stay ten years, that’s my decision and none of yours.” Jennifer had looked fearfully at the policeman, expecting a fiery retort, or some consequences: obviously any talk of her staying ten years involved tremendous breaches of immigration law and the tight control the government kept on researchers. But the policeman said, “Ya, fine, it’s all in order anyway,” and signed off on the
fifteen copies of his chief’s letter. Only later did she learn that Bang Kaget was married to Pak Apuy’s oldest daughter, and that Pak Apuy referred to this representative of Indonesian law and order, even in front of his face, as his kept pet.

Pak Apuy now looked the kept pet, or at least the supplicant. Despite the number of people in the room, this was clearly a meeting between he and the Chinese woman, and he the one with something at stake. Pak Apuy’s status as village head was not only customary but also governmental. He drew a small salary, he officiated over the airplane lifeline to the outside world, hosted visitors, and every five years presided over the local ‘festival of democracy,’ or vote, during which time he received (in return for making sure votes got counted the right way) official visitors and promises of tangible upgrades of service to the village (‘the roads are being planned’ was the favorite refrain). Despite being technically part of the apparatus of government, though, he was still a member of a small and isolated tribe of the pedalaman, a word that literally meant ‘inward realm.’ In an island nation where coastal commerce formed the bases of power and sophistication, ‘inward’ was synonymous enough with primitive.

The normally taciturn man spoke to the Chinese woman in his largest, most official voice; she meanwhile sat with her eyes slightly raised, like someone indulging the yapping of an inferior. The woman looked older than she had on the river, and less strange: the eye shadow seemed toned down, out of the sun and away from the matching canopy, and the additional visibility of her thickset legs and slightly swollen bare feet made her round body seem of everyday dimensions. Her expression was skeptical and slightly bored.

Datu gestured for Jennifer to sit down, and she did along the near wall, near the woman’s son and Lawé.

“…all we know is ladang, dry rice,” Pak Apuy was saying. “Not like in Java, where it’s all sawah. We don’t have book learning, here, much less traditions. At most, there’s a little corner of wet rice by the river, where it’s easy
to irrigate, and even that's lost sometimes in floods. In Java, they're clever with these things; here, we know the forest but not the science..."

Bu Apuy stepped from the kitchen with a fresh glass of coffee for Jennifer, placing it before her with eyes averted, and indicated with a gentle hand gesture that Jennifer was to partake of the snack foods in the nearby bowls. She disappeared back into the kitchen door, managing the huge step down with grace. The whole way out and back she had not straightened, keeping her head ducked lower than the Chinese woman's. Jennifer found all of this astonishing: she hadn't known that the proud, independent Dayaks she'd come to know were so expert in the theatrics of subservience.

"...ask Ibu Jennifer Hawley, who has been here a year, and she will tell you from her research that we do not know hunger, but neither do we know extra."

The Chinese woman said, "I hardly think that this woman is a greater expert than the consultant sent by the Department of Transmigration—"

"—Of course not, I don't mean to imply—"

"...and I'll be asking her to answer many questions as to my research in my own time. For now, I wanted your perspective, as the village head who has been so successful so long at creating a viable community in the far wilderness."

"Thank you, Ibu Consultant."

"You're welcome. You've earned it. There's no need to be excessively humble. Even if such a community as we're talking about comes here, they will need your leadership no less than you will need theirs."

"Thank you, Ibu Consultant."

There was a pause in the conversation and the woman looked straight at Jennifer. Her gaze was astonishingly direct and powerful, seeming to read not just the state of her soul but her bones beneath the flesh. It took Jennifer a moment to realize that the woman spoke English. "Excuse me?"

"My son and I will be staying at your house."
"I, uh…"

"Or more exactly, the schoolteacher’s house. The one that the government owns, and leases—to him."

"Umm…I should probably go clean it up," Jennifer said, blushing like a reprimanded child.

"I’m Sri Ayu."

"I’m Jennifer Hawley."

"I know. We’ll talk later." The woman’s attention snapped back to the Dayak men, who listened respectfully, if uncomprehendingly. Jennifer had dabbled with teaching English in the village, had taught a few words to Datu and Lawé and Nita and some others, but had given up in frustration at the irregular attendance of her students. Whether it was hunting trips, or agricultural work, or festivities, one thing or another meant that no one came to every class, so she could never fully implement any lesson plan. Nor did her students do any homework, or even understand that homework had been assigned. After a while, she had given up the hour of frustration during which she said nothing of import and her students, these erstwhile interesting, confident people were reduced to grinning, tight-lipped clowns. And her moves to teach English in the elementary school seemed to humiliate Pak Dayung, who was of course the regular English teacher, and who, in Jennifer’s presence, would not pronounce even a word of English except “Hello”—which, given that “Hallo” was already an Indonesian word, was not too much of a stretch. Yet passing beneath the window of the schoolroom, she had heard him instructing his students in English: “That’s the past tense,” he said in Indonesian, “which we don’t have.” Or: “Don’t get it wrong, now. Ibu Jen can tell if you get it wrong.”

Jennifer sat against the wall of the front room for another half-hour of listening to Sri Ayu and Pak Apuy talk about the state of the village. The woman violated every protocol of courtesy that Jennifer had ever learned, but no one seemed to mind. “Tell me if anyone’s considering migrating to the coast,” she
commanded peremptorily, and if Pak Apuy was silent—as he was with that question—she lectured him for ten minutes on the costs of being silent. “Don’t play those backwoods games of shyness and indirection. That won’t work with me, and it won’t work with the Department of Transmigration, and it won’t work with the transmigrants when they come. You have to learn to be bolder than that.” Pak Apuy took it all in, and seemed grateful for her advice. Occasionally he’d seem to stop listening and reach up and scratch at one of his missing earlobes, and the woman would stop abruptly and demand: “What. You have an objection. Speak it. Speak now or be prepared to hold your peace forever.”

Jennifer looked on in wonder, and her hands itched for her tape recorder, or at least her journal. At the same time she recognized that what was at stake here, transmigration, was a new threat to the village’s existence—one more to add to the extensive catalogue. Logging, when it reached this remote area, would strip the trees and drive off the animals and render the land infertile. Roads, when they reached here, would bring markets dominated by the coastal Malays, who would rake in profits at the expense of the less savvy Dayaks. Even should this area become a National Park, as the Nature Foundation wished, it would bring ecotourism, limits on hunting, limits on the slash-and-burn agriculture that the Dayaks had practiced sustainably for hundreds of years. In any of those eventualities, the local culture would be changed beyond recognition. But transmigration was worst of all, because it involved the mass transplanting here of Javanese or Madurese peasants. The program was famous for inciting ethnic hatreds between the newcomers and traditional communities nearby, for the rate of failure of the transmigrant communities as they tried to practice Javanese sawah agriculture on lands unsuitable for wet rice. And when those communities failed, the people in them turned criminal, destructive, burning forest indiscriminately to eke out a year or two of soil fertility, or seeping cityward to join the underclass of beggars and petty thieves.
"May I ask," Jennifer interrupted. "May I ask how the Department of Transmigration became interested in so remote a site?"

Bu Sri Ayu glanced at her, eyebrows raised. "It's not common knowledge? Transmigration was invited—by Pak Apuy." Jennifer blinked. It had been utterly secret from her. Had it been from the other villagers? They betrayed no reaction.

Looking at this impressive woman on her stool, who seemed as able to catalogue rice varietals as any farmer here, who seemed to embody in her alien form the very outlines of the government she represented, watching the broad arms moving as the hands conducted conversation, now drawing forth, now stilling the words of the village chief, Jennifer became as silent as the rest. She sipped her coffee and watched out of the corner of her eye as the woman's son pulled a pack of playing cards out of his pocket and slid them around in piles in front of Lawé, apparently mesmerizing the boy through a set of rules and manipulations too complicated for her to follow. After a time she began to worry about Oswald—she hadn’t meant to be gone long. But that was when the meal was served, and quick escape became impossible.

Bu Apuy and several women from her household, and Bu Nardo who had of course insinuated herself into the kitchen, carried out steaming enameled bowls of rice, and further bowls of soup made from pork bones and pumpkin greens. Next to those they placed sautéed string beans and a spicy mash made from green mangoes and jicama and crushed sugar cane. Beside that, more fried rice crackers, and great platters full of smoked pork, and watery fish heads boiled with a spinach-like vegetable. While the women came out, all conversation ceased, and it did not begin again even after Pak Apuy said grace and everyone bent their heads to the words: "Noble Christ, in you we repose our trust and from your bounty we make our humble lives. Thank you for the blessing of this food, and your beneficent goodness."
The silence seeming to indicate that Pak Apuy and Sri Ayu had finished transacting business for now, other voices spoke up. Bang Kaget, the policeman, cleared his throat and said, "The police of the Republic of Indonesia stand ready to ensure that any transmigrant community functions safely as a sister—we can say that, I believe?—a sister of this community of Long Awan. And I, as sole representative, will do my utmost—"

"Bang Kaget, you will no longer be sole representative, should this happen. The new community will need their own security, and you may be called upon to provide it. In that case someone else will take your place here," Sri Ayu said.

He sputtered on for several more sentences, then was quiet. Then Pak Dayung asked, "Can we expect more schooling facilities?"

"Of course. At least a junior high school—"

"Oh, that's wonderful news—"

"When the time comes. A community does not develop quickly, Pak Dayung." Her memory for names was remarkable, Jennifer thought: she could only have heard them once. "I have seen many transmigrant communities: they are young, and have few children in the first years. Then comes the fertile years—all told, it will be a decade before the fruits of those years need a junior high school. Meanwhile, your needs do not change, right?"

"No, Ibu Consultant."

Datu said, "And our customary rights to hunting will be respected?"

"Of course," said Sri Ayu, "Though naturally the clearing of land for the new village, the sawah, and the massive demands for new firewood, not to mention the inevitable clumsiness of the new hunters—they will be clumsy, you understand—"

"...yes..." said Datu, into the pause she left. It was all that could be said into her pauses.
“—will mean that there will be little wildlife left, at least within easy reach.”

Datu, whose skills at diplomacy were less developed than others in the village, did not manage a smile to match the warm, reassuring grin that Sri Ayu sent his direction.

Bu Nardo stood in the doorway, listening in, and Jennifer saw her furiously wave Pak Dayung over to her. He returned to his seat and asked, after a respectful interval, if there would be new clinic facilities.

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Sri Ayu, betraying a certain impatience with the proceedings. “So many questions! I hope you don’t have this many questions when the real planners come, or I as consultant will have to recommend against the whole project. The government, and especially the Minister of Transmigration who is the President’s right hand, do not appreciate wasting their time with people who question things overmuch. From long experience they know that such people usually put up resistance, which though it never succeeds, can slow a project down to a very inconvenient degree. Above all, they want a pliable public. Understand?”

No one spoke, and no one ate, after this tirade. After letting her words reverberate for some time, Sri Ayu answered the question more fully. “There will of course be a new clinic, and every year a special deputation out of the Department of Public Health and Sanitation. This is because in situations where populations mix to a considerable degree, especially when one community is an isolated one such as yourself, and the other contains impoverished people drawn from the worst part of the cities and failed agricultural regions, many new diseases will spread, especially venereal ones. The government is concerned for your safety.”

Bu Nardo’s face hardened visibly—she, being an older woman, and a practitioner of arts that bordered on witchcraft, and not being formally part of this gathering, needed show no diplomacy at all. Jennifer herself could not believe
what she was hearing, the callousness. Again, she longed for her tape recorder. And her bear. Her concern for him had long ago risen to a kind of panic, which she kept suppressed only until the earliest possible moment to excuse herself. But as she did so, bowing her thanks and apologies to Pak Apuy, Sri Ayu spoke again, saying: “My son and I will be staying with Ibu Jennifer Hawley in the government-provided house, so we will excuse ourselves as well.”

This effectively ended the meal for everyone, a fact about which Jennifer felt guilty. The way out was crowded with escorts, so by the time Sri Ayu made her way heavily down the notched ladder, the entire party had reassembled, and walked together across the field to Jennifer’s house, led by Datu and Pak Apuy with lanterns. “What’s your name?” she managed to ask Sri Ayu’s son, trying him in English. “Karl,” he said.

“Do you always travel with your mother?”

He shrugged. “When she wants me to.” He did not seem inclined to say more, so Jennifer pressed forward to be the first to reach her little house. But she stopped, as did everyone, at the sound that came from it, a determined grunting with a high, unnerving whimper. There was also the sound like a maul splitting dry wood. The two lanterns were raised, and in the dim light, everyone could see the ghost-white rope tied loosely to the door handle, and beside the door, the dark paws of the bear reaching through a great rent in the wooden planks, hugging them from behind while the claws scored the wood in an attempt to make the hole still larger. “Oswald!” Jennifer shouted, and the paws increased their motion to a frantic pace, gouging at the wood and tearing great rotten splinters of it away. “Oswald! Stop it!”

The entire party stood frozen, eyes on Jennifer. She alone ran up to the door, untied the rope, and flung open the door. She could barely see inside; but an impression of dark and jumbled shapes lurked in the gloom, and it was clear the bear had found ways to do great amounts of damage. Now he moved on her, fast, faster than she’d imagined he could move, faster than shadow. He was
making a sobbing sound that shaded into a growl. Involuntarily, she took a step back and found herself missing her footing at the same time the bear hit her, and she fell back through empty air to land beside the stairs in the grass. Before she knew what was happening, before the air was properly in her, the bear was frantically nuzzling at the space beneath her chin, mewling and pushing with his muzzle in a way that tickled so badly she started laughing helplessly out loud. When the bear relented, she wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of a hand and opened them to see a lantern glowing from the inside of her house. Ibu Sri emerged and peered down at her, Datu holding the lantern quite close, so that he and the woman looked like half-beings in the harsh light. "I see I underestimated what you meant by cleaning up," the woman said. "This is clearly unacceptable. I'll instruct Pak Dayung in what to do, and I'll be joining you tomorrow night instead. Good night." And the entire party departed, leaving Jennifer and Oswald alone, as they had been so many nights.
Over the next day, as Pak Dayung wielded a hammer and nails and did some fine shaping with the knife he used for his woodcarvings, Jennifer struggled to quell feelings of home-sickness. More strongly than in many months, she ached to be out of the rainforest and anywhere else. Oswald, snoring in the corner, seemed less a humanitarian project than a millstone around her neck. If she could scootch him into the forest and be reasonably sure he’d survive, she’d do it before he woke up. But Pak Dayung was singularly unreassuring on that subject. “Without a mother-teacher,” he said, “It will not be soon.” His even temper and friendly good humor while he worked did much to set her worst fears at ease, however. All night, before he came, she had rehearsed the humiliating fall flat on her back, the inspection by Sri Ayu, the way the lights had moved off across the field leaving not one soul behind to comfort her or make sure she was okay. She was humiliated, and she wanted out. All that kept her from going was that there was no way to go, and nothing finished about her work, so that if she found some way out, there would have been no point in coming. Yet was there point in going on? Had she utterly ruptured her community relations?

But Pak Dayung laughed at what she expressed of her worries, and treated her as usual, and told her not to worry in the slightest about the house. “It’s not me that lives in it,” he said easily, “And as far as renting it out, there’s no one else who’s going to do it, so it might as well be you and the bear. But this outside pen is a better idea, I think, thanks to the Ibu Consultant.” He first built a kind of cairn of river rocks the size of grapefruit, fitting them together in a protective wall against the pillars of the house to close the gap between the bottom and the ground. This rock wall he wove with rattan vine and baling wire so that it couldn’t easily be moved. Then, hauling strong green saplings from the secondary forest, he wove together a stockade-style fence, lashing it firmly into a trapezoid pen with corners at two mature jackfruit trees. It was an astonishing
amount of work for one person to do, and would not normally be done by one person but by an entire circle of friends. Yet Pak Dayung worked alone, forsaking his fields and the school, which remained closed. About this, too, he was sanguine: “Biar aman-nyaman dulu,” he said, admitting that the motto, ‘safe and sound,’ came from Ibu Consultant.

“How long will the pen hold?” Jennifer asked.

Pak Dayung patted the section of it that he was working on. “By the time the bear child can break out of it, it will be time for him to return to the forest anyway.” The schoolteacher worked steadily throughout the day, finishing the fence by mid-afternoon, patching the actual house while Jennifer reluctantly took Oswald for his bath.

The bear showed no signs of remembering the night before, and played with her as usual, crawling into her arms affectionately, still dripping brown water that soaked her shirt and sent chills through her. So her remaining worries seemed overblown, too, and the feeling of needing escape at any cost began to recede—would have receded altogether except for the prospect of Sri Ayu and Son’s imminent and unwanted visit. Jennifer was aware that it was unfair, but she connected her humiliation of last night to the woman’s peremptory command that Jennifer share her house. In that moment it had changed from cozy home to something governmental, ugly, unowned. And if Jennifer was here on sufferance, or illegitimately—as she inarguably was—then Oswald had no place at all, and merely represented Jennifer’s irresponsible tenancy.

It was impossible for her to retain any unfriendly feelings toward the bear. While he slept, yes, or in the dawn of early morning as she had lain there, staring up at the light as it peeled open the seams beneath the roof. But not while Oswald played: not while he bumbled at overturning river rocks, or shook himself so that a spray of water spread downwind from him, a fine silver mist. Not when he sought her out, offering his luxuriously furred side for her to scratch, or when he lumbered over fallen logs as clumsily as a child in bear pajamas. At such times
he reminded her of the life she had saved, and the miracle of her intervention—a clear case of a difference being made, a difference that only she would make.

There were tens of millions of acres of wilderness, a few hundred Dayak communities, an endangered population of bears—and Jennifer alone was in the position to do what she’d done.

Ibu Sri Ayu and Karl, her son, joined Jennifer after their dinner—she had received an invitation but declined, saying that she needed to get the house in order. Instead, she left Pak Dayung to acclimate Oswald to his new pen and she ate at Om Barnabas’s, enjoying the old man’s familiar company. As usual, Om Barnabas showed little involvement in the larger affairs of the village; still, she pressed him on the issue at hand. He was one of the elders, the leader of a community within the community.

“What do you make of transmigration,” she asked. Bu Lejeng had brought out rice and large slices of squash boiled to limpness, and some of the smoked pork from the last hunt. Jennifer ate it with her fingers, scooping with her right hand and bringing it to her lips.

Om Barnabas chewed in silence, his face unreadable. But after a minute—she had learned to leave such silences alone—he said, “I don’t understand it, I think. They cannot be good people that would leave their own land for that of somewhere unknown.”

“By good you mean successful?”

Om Barnabas nodded. “The government cannot teach them to live in this place. And why haven’t they learned to live in their own?”

“You haven’t seen Java, Om. There is great poverty there—greater than here. And overcrowing. You can travel a hundred days across Java and every day you would see houses and roads. The people that leave want to make a better life.”
“I haven’t seen what you talk about,” he said. “But neither have I seen a better life happen than the life that someone is supposed to live. I would not expect it to have a good outcome.”

“But you’d accept it?”

“I’d accept it. After all, we are guests here as well.”

That hadn’t occurred to her; the difference between the nomadic Punan, for whom the entire forest, which was the island of Borneo, formed one long house, and the government-subsidized squatters for whom this was a dark and dreary place to be cleared by pioneer labor, had seemed absolute. But she supposed that from the perspective of this village and the customary rights that surrounded it, both groups were, if not exactly guests, then at least sojourners. But was it inevitable that he feel temporary after fifteen years of residence here?

She wondered if his nomadic background kept him relatively unattached and uninvolved. Punan not only moved by season in search of sago, but traditionally vacated any dwelling place where someone had died. So fearful were they of spirits turning into malevolent ghosts that the dead were never referred to by their own names. Nor were the people close to the dead referred to by their own names: although Jennifer called Om Barnabas by his Christian name, Bu Lejeng referred to him only as a word translated “he who has lost a child.” If there had been a child, Om Barnabas never spoke of it; Jennifer did not know what the name had been, where or when it had been born, or what might have happened to it. Nor did she feel empowered to ask, even from the space of being an objective anthropological researcher—at least, she hadn’t pressed him for that information yet. In any event, although Om Barnabas had lived fifteen years in his current house, and had led the Punan who settled here, he seemed more resigned than reformed—as if he was not so much rooted as roosting. Even now, as she glanced at him, his face was turned toward the square-sawn hole in the wall that served as window, the light capturing every worn line of his face, and the sad, patient wrinkles around his eyes.
Back at the house, Jennifer found Pak Dayung sitting peaceably on the ground in the middle of the pen he'd built, the light fading. His face was dull with dried sweat, and he'd put his shirt back on. Oswald roamed the corners, sniffing and pushing at the stockade. It bent with each push, but it did not seem likely to give way easily. Pak Dayung had not only finished the pen, but given it decoration—at the corner posts, he had done some quick surface carving, and now ghostly dragon faces stared in all four directions, the bodies tapering into vines which knotted and furled and suggested other shapes: hornbills, crocodiles, barking dogs, eyes.


Pak Dayung gave a slight bow.

“Do they mean anything?”

He patted the wood. They watched Oswald a moment. “I think he’s good here,” Pak Dayung said. “I think it’s home.”

“What about rain, Pak? We’ve had two days without it, but there aren’t many days like that.” As soon as Oswald heard her voice, he ran over to the near corner of the stockade; she stepped in through the gate and knelt down and hugged him.

“He’s got the eaves of the house, and I’ll extend those a little tomorrow.”

“And school?”

“The children are at the harvest, anyway. They won’t miss school.” Jennifer looked at him. “But you should be at the harvest, as well.”

Pak Dayung said nothing. “Can I... pay you for this work, Pak Dayung?”

“Oh, no, no... it’s Ibu Consultant’s work, and my own. I should have thought of it myself. I’ve been foolish.”

“No, Pak, I feel I need to pay you.”

“Please don’t.”
“Just a little.’

“It’s up to you.”

Which was her sign. Holding onto the bear, she went into the house, noting the fresh wood patch next to the door. She gave him what she gave Om Barnabas for a day trek in the forest. He resisted, then he took it, Jennifer pressing the envelope into his hard, calloused palm. “I am so grateful,” she said, “Not just for this work you do, but for the house you lend me, and the safety of my life here in Long Awan.” And as she said it, she realized she meant it. Not safety from the bear, which seemed to be Pak Dayung’s interpretation, but the safety of being welcomed into a community. There was something tremendously artificial about this arrangement, where she walked into Pak Dayung’s house—which had no locks, there were no such thing as locks in a Dayak village—to pull from her sack of money just these few bills. Or the few that represented her rent for each month. It was an arrangement that depended on so much goodwill, and honesty. She recalled Om Barnabas’s first introducing her to the tuba tree, the tree from which Punan derived the poison for the blowguns. “Don’t ever touch the tip of a blowgun dart,” he’d warned her, “even if you don’t think it’s been poisoned. Poke yourself with this poison and you will die within an hour.” She had been curious about the symptoms, the process of the poison, and he had told her about the head swelling, the purple burst of blood erupting beneath the surface of the skin, the folding of the ribcage like a collapsed tent. At first she’d been shocked at the graphic quality of his depiction, and then she’d realized: this is what they told children. This kept things safe.

“Has anyone ever actually died of this that you’ve seen, Om?” she asked.

“No,” he replied, “Not that I’ve seen. But a man from the village did die of it, years ago.”

“An accident?”

“No, shame.”

“Over what?”
“He stole something.”

In the rainforest, and especially among nomads, other people represented your entire safety net—your banking system was the trust they had in you, your insurance system was the obligations other people were under to help you out as you’d helped them, and your hospital was their quick thinking and medicinal knowledge. It didn’t make sense to pick fights; it didn’t make sense to be dishonest. Besmirching your own good name by some unethical behavior would haunt you the rest of your days, and possibly kill you. Jennifer knew these were the structural conditions of life here, and she knew that as long as she was here, she was part of the web no less than anyone else. Her cash or her passport afforded her a way out where others had none. But what use would her way out be without a village to provide a landing strip, or honest people to make sure that her cash stayed hers?

Bu Sri Ayu and Karl and two of the rowers arrived at the house just as Pak Dayung left, and even from the back she could see his cheeks bunch wide for a big-toothed grin as he passed them, giving a small mock-salute. Jennifer leaned on her elbows against the new fencing he’d built, feeling like a homely Western girl when a stranger rode up to the ranch. “Come in?” she asked.

Bu Sri Ayu and Karl swept into her house, and the rowers deposited the bags just inside the door before vanishing. “Shut the door, son,” Sri Ayu said, slipping off her shoes and taking up a commanding pose in the center of the room. Karl came for the door but Jennifer was still holding it, and their eyes met for a second. He shrugged and she shut the door. Then the boy slumped into one of the bamboo chairs and rubbed his nose with back of his arm.

“It looks like you’re camping out,” Sri Ayu said, in English. She pushed open the door to the bedroom and glanced in. “Definitely not a packrat.” Then she saw the tapes in their neatly stacked rows on the wall shelves, and ran her finger down the spines. “Your research?” she said.

“Yes,” said Jennifer, icily.
“What is it exactly that you’re looking for? I read your deposition with
the Indonesian Science Institute but it seemed a bit confused.”

The woman had nerve. Jennifer bit her lower lip to keep from blurtling
some reply that might hurt her legal standing. If this woman had access to the
research plans she’d filed with the government, there was no telling what
authority she had. Sri Ayu wouldn’t turn away or give her a moment to think.
Finally, Jennifer said: “Do you need a full explanation before you sit down?”

“No, no, of course not,” the Ibu Consultant said with surprising geniality,
and cast about for a chair. Karl kicked one in her direction, and she sat down.
Jennifer perched at the edge of a little stool she had. Sri Ayu let out a huge sigh,
leaned back, and placed both hands over her belly. “You have no idea what a
relief it is to get out of ‘consultant’ mode. Dealing with the obsequious can get so
wearying.”

Was she putting down her guard, or only pretending to put down her
guard? And was she so clueless as to believe the Dayak—headhunters, for God’s
sake—were obsequious in any way but for show? Jennifer said nothing.

Sri Ayu looked over at Karl. “Get your finger out of your nose, Karl—
relax, but don’t be rude.”

In sullen protest, Karl reached over and grabbed Little Dorrit, one of the
handful of novels that Jennifer had permitted herself to bring a year ago—and had
now read several times over. He turned to page one and from the set of his
shoulders and the fixity of his gaze seemed as determined not to hear any more of
his mother as to read.

“Can he read English that well?” Jennifer said. “That’s not an easy
novel.”

“Yes it is,” said Karl.

“Don’t mind him,” Sri Ayu said. “He finds all of this more taxing than I
do.” Was it Jennifer’s imagination or was a faint “No I don’t” breathed into the
room? No movement of the lips indicated that the boy had spoken, however, and
the mother didn’t seem to take notice. “He does read English rather well, though—it is of course the main language of instruction at the Jakarta International School.”

“Of course,” Jennifer said. “Is his father—?”

“Fluent in English?” she said. “Yes. He’s Dutch, and as you know hardly anybody can be bothered with learning their language, so they have to learn others’. By the way, I’m quite impressed that you’re learning both Punan and Lun Dayeh for your work.”

“I’m not, really,” said Jennifer. “Just the systematics—grammar, word order, things like that. I plan to do most of the transcription in the field, where I can check my transcriptions with the original speakers,” she said, describing her method of collecting stories, prayers, and informal speech on tape, and then getting an Indonesian approximation immediately afterwards for reference. She was well into her explanation before remembering that she was supposed to be wary of telling Bu Sri Ayu too much. The woman was good—they had circled right back around to the subject of Jennifer’s research. For someone seemingly so fond of pronouncements, she had a knack for drawing others out.

“That’s going to take time,” said Sri Ayu, narrowing her eyes. “Months, I’d guess, from the number of tapes. Or do you plan to transcribe just a small sample?”

“Oh no,” said Jennifer, seeing the basis of Sri Ayu’s sly interrogation. As government representative, she would naturally be concerned about Jennifer overstaying her visa illegally, or continuing research beyond what her permits authorized. As yet, Jennifer had not filed any application for extension, because of the plane she’d missed when she adopted Oswald. So Jennifer laid out her plans with the Nature Foundation, making it sound like a sure thing, with sponsorship, money, the works. “And of course it will involve a trip to Singapore for a fresh visa tinggal—”
Sri Ayu dismissed the technicalities with a wave that indicated she knew all about it. “So what did you tell Joko about the nature of your research? He tends to be highly skeptical of Westerners doing cultural research.”

“Joko?”

“At NFI. You’ve talked to him, naturally. Or been in correspondence.”

“No, I—” Was this another trap? “I dealt with Mark Reynolds.”

Sri Ayu pursed her lips. “Only him?”

“Yes, why, is that bad?”

Sri Ayu folded her hands together, bent her head so her forehead touched her knuckles. “Mark is rather promiscuous,” she said.

“...Promiscuous?”

“He has enthusiasms,” Sri Ayu said dryly. “He spends more time working up ideas than working through budgets.” She frowned. “But you have other options, right? The Asia Association, that sponsored you this year? How about them? Bu Endang is such a sweetheart.”

Jennifer felt a leaden weight settle into her stomach. Bu Endang had been out of town during most of the time she had been in Jakarta, and when the chance had finally come to meet her, it had been yet another stuffy embassy event, and she had let Julie persuade her to blow it off in favor of a trip to the country, to volcanic Tangkuban Prahu. No, Jennifer had had her dealings with Ibu Kristi, who had not seemed at all like a sweetheart. Who had effectively warned Jennifer not to come begging at the Asia Association’s door if she needed more money or had miscalculated the use of her time. I’m glad to see you are Asian, Ibu Kristi had said. Certain white people start taking themselves as romantic figures. This is not your entitlement, but a privilege. Waiting behind you stand many, many other scholars whose work is equally deserving of support.

Sri Ayu seemed to regard the matter as closed, sinking further back in her chair, so that she was in an excellent position to study the ceiling. “I’m curious
about the Nature Foundation angle,” she said. “Your research seemed primarily linguistic. What’s going to interest a bunch of environmentalists?”

A few exchanges with this woman and Jennifer felt herself reduced to quivering jelly. She seemed to find the hardest questions, have an eagle eye for the weaknesses of every argument, and to do so with such casualness that it was impossible not to answer. Hopefully, Mark Reynolds would be an easier sell. Perhaps a tendency to “enthusiasms” would not be such a bad thing, if it got her what she needed.

Jennifer began to explain, feeling quite tentative and inarticulate, how her orientation had changed in the year that she’d been here. How she had come to look into the adaptations, especially the linguistic ones, made by the Punan as they became a settled rather than nomadic people. And how she had quickly realized that the entire settlement, Long Awan itself, and all the villages like it through the interior, were themselves coming unsettled. In the face of a range of threats from logging to political powerlessness, whole villages were migrating downriver, abandoning the highlands and their traditional conditions in favor of access to roads, schools, markets, and modern health care. “So the question started to change—become broader—become ‘what can help people stay, hold onto the life they’ve made here.’ After all (and this is where Mark Reynolds and I seem to agree), they have an amazing degree of autonomy up here, and access to resources of the primary rainforest that have already been lost to most inhabitants of Borneo, and a degree of cultural integrity that is unfortunately lost to all but the most isolated tribes.”

Bu Sri Ayu had had her eyes turned up during Jennifer’s entire talk, which was unnerving. Now she lowered them and said, “So you would call this cultural integrity? When they want so badly any piece of the modern world that they would invite transmigration?”

Jennifer admitted that she was surprised by it. And asked Sri Ayu how she could possibly represent a program which most analysts outside the
Indonesian government regarded as a human and environmental catastrophe. “It’s widely said,” Jennifer ventured, “That the whole thing is just a political boondoggle, a sop to certain contractors associated with the Jakarta elite, and a scheme to tie the outer islands more securely to Javanese domination.”

Bu Sri Ayu eyed her sharply, but with amusement. She started to laugh, a slow, deep laugh that shook her entire body. “Oh, it’s all that, is it?”

“I’ve heard,” said Jennifer, defiantly.

“And have you heard it mostly fails, and the transmigrants get even poorer, and die off of disease or run off due to poverty?”

“Yes.”

“And it breeds ethnic hatreds and resentments among the people colonized by the transmigrants?”

“Ye-es.” What was she getting at?

“And that the government cheats everybody involved—only builds half of what it promises the transmigrants, and gives nothing to the local communities?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, you’ve heard right. And now you know how I represent it.”

Sri Ayu closed her eyes, the deep chuckle still rippling through her body. Karl looked up briefly from the book to turn his mouth down at his mother, then went back to reading.

Jennifer puzzled it out. It was true that Sri Ayu’s answers to the villagers’ questions about transmigration had been singularly ill-designed to set their minds at ease about the project. “So you’re working against the Transmigration Ministry?” she said.

“Not at all,” said Sri Ayu. “They hire me to help make their projects more successful—and I do, mainly by doing my part to stop the ones that are manifestly stupid. I take it as my role to represent the government in all its vast arrogance and unconcern, but unlike the government, I answer all questions truthfully. By the time I leave, I can honestly report that local sentiment is strongly against
transmigration, and that people were already growing restive and hostile during my short visit.”

Sri Ayu laughed again, and Jennifer felt a grin rise to her face despite herself. It was brilliant, and brilliantly carried off; her opinion of this woman revolved a hundred and eighty degrees. “Well, I’m glad to have met a consultant like you,” Jennifer said.

Sri Ayu said, “I’m glad whenever there’s someone like you that I can stay with in the field. As I said, it’s exhausting keeping up the front I need to keep up—no human decencies or genuine contact with any of the people around me.”

Was there a whisper of ‘especially me’ from a certain corner of the room? But Karl was still reading.

“That’s why I was furious that your damn bear spoiled last night,” Sri Ayu said. “How is that rascal, anyway?”

Jennifer leapt to her feet. “I haven’t checked him since he’s been in the cage!”

“Go, then,” said Sri Ayu.

Jennifer went. Oswald was fine. By the time she came back inside, wrapped in moonbeams and smelling of bear, Sri Ayu had unrolled a sleeping bag and formed an unlikely lump within it. Karl, on top of his bag, faced toward the wall, and curled ever more tightly around the book.

Over the next day and a half, Bu Sri Ayu’s method as consultant only grew in Jennifer’s estimation. A special focus of it included making Pak Apuy regret that he had ever contacted the Transmigration Ministry, and the longer Ibu Consultant rode him the more plainly his suffering showed. “You can’t expect to keep so many of these dogs around,” Jennifer overheard her pronounce on one tour of the village. “Dogs are offensive to your new neighbors. Moslems can’t even touch them without being defiled.”

“Wah, but they are for hunting, Ibu.”
“Hunting what? In our experience the game is not so plentiful when you triple the number of people living in an area. And remember that they will be hunting too, though not so expertly, and will drive off and kill many animals. So you won’t need the dogs.”

“Ya, Ibu.”

“And I’ve seen signs of illegal gun-making. What are you using for barrels, plumbing pipe? Very ingenious. You’ll want to shut down the gun production before the expanded police supervision gets into place.”

“Ya, Ibu.”

“And they’ll probably be putting more pressure on you to move people out of the longhouse. It’s not considered hygienic, so many people living all together and shitting through holes in the floor. You realize the dogs scarf it all up? The government is embarrassed about this sort of thing, and will insist on it changing.”

“Ya, Ibu.”

It was an incredible list—and this was just a two minute stretch of a days-long conversation. Did Sri Ayu keep all this in her head, or did she carry crib notes? She didn’t let up for a second.

Datu sought Jennifer out before the afternoon was half over. Beneath a lowering sky, he waved her to a spot beside the main bridge, the one that led to the church. He looked ready to commit murder. “Ibu Jen, in your opinion, is Ibu Consultant honest?”

“What do you mean?”

“How was your night?”

“What?”

“I couldn’t stand another night with her. Do you realize that she finds fault with everything?”

Jennifer kept a poker face. “She does seem critical. But I suppose that’s her job, isn’t it? To evaluate a site?”
"I don’t know," he said darkly. "That’s what I don’t think she’s being honest about. Her son said”—here Datu leaned in closer, and spoke in a low voice—"He said that it didn’t matter how bad or inappropriate a site is, that the Transmigration Ministry proceeds anyway."

"You believe the son?"

Datu’s hands clenched and unclenched by his side, the perfect picture of disempowerment. "I don’t know what to believe."

"I think Ibu Consultant is honest," said Jennifer. "I think that much of what she says will come to pass."

Datu received the news stoically, then said in a thick voice: "Then it may not be a problem to leave this place with Nita, because there will be nothing left."

That night Sri Ayu revealed that she’d been through psychoanalysis, in Holland. Karl read a book and Jennifer dandled Oswald in her lap. "I couldn’t afford to pay anything, but the doctor took me on as a research case. It took ten years before he pronounced me cured."

"Of what?" Jennifer asked.

"Of illusion, I think," said Sri Ayu, smiling to herself. "That’s what made me an interesting case to him—what he called the mystifications of tradition were still strong in me. You know, a rigidly patriarchal Chinese family, youngest girl, all that. Somehow even in a free country such as Holland, as a student who could do anything she wanted, I remained utterly repressed. Non-individuated. Everywhere and in all my interactions with everyone, I carried my Daddy. I didn’t date, but if somebody had ordered me to, it would have been just another form of him, and I would have consigned myself to a lifetime of hell. Hell without awareness."

Jennifer scratched Oswald across the shoulders, and the cub mewled with pleasure. He had grown bigger, she noticed, since just yesterday.
“You can imagine what it was like to come back to Indonesia, Dutch husband in tow, and see this country again for the first time with eyes free of illusion. The corruption, the easy incompetence, the way everything goes unstated, the accumulation of frustrations until someone—or a whole community of someones—runs amok. That’s our Malay word, you know that, right? Amok. We pioneered passive-aggressive violence, raised it to an art form. A person who’s amok can be stabbed through the liver with a sword and he will still remain unconscious, doing violence until his body expires.”

“Really.”

“Yes. You’ve noticed how all the ethnic groups in this country are convinced that the others have black magic? The Javanese will say that the Dayak have it, and the Manggarai will say that the Javanese have it, and the Batak will say that the Makassar have it? And it’s all the same thing: their skin cannot be cut by a knife, or pierced by a bullet. Well, all that they mean—although they themselves don’t know what they mean—is this: that any of these groups, if pressed hard enough, will run amok. They’ll swallow bitterness until it fills every pore of their body with impregnable hatred and fear, and then they’ll let loose the feelings on anyone they can reach in their frenzy.”

“But isn’t that natural?” Jennifer asked. “If they are being oppressed.”

“It would be natural if they negotiated, if they resisted by any other means! No one ordains that they have to be so passive in the first place. When I got back to this country and I saw what was happening, saw it clearly, I decided to put myself where I could make a difference, right at the heart of one of the most destructive forces in society. So I consult with the Transmigration.”

Jennifer considered. “You think transmigration’s the worst of it?”

Sri Ayu laughed suddenly, but it was a forced laugh. Karl did not look up.

“No,” she said. “The corruption is the worst of it. Then there’s tyranny and incompetence. But transmigration is the most cynical project, and the one most
likely to lead to catastrophe for the people of the outer islands. And the transmigrants themselves, of course.”

Oswald lumbered over to Karl, sniffed at his leg. He put out a hand, absent-mindedly, and patted the bear on the head before it scooted away in alarm. Karl never looked up from the book; he was nearly done with it.

“So tell me about yourself,” Sri Ayu said. “What brings you here? No one becomes an anthropologist without something.”

“Something?”

“Something. You know what I mean.”

Jennifer did. She meant: something wrong. Something that has made a person marginal, an observer at the edges of groups rather than a body at the center. So Jennifer tried to explain about her mother, her missing father, the way she grew up as one of only two Asian children in Gallton, Virginia. As usual in facing Bu Sri Ayu, she felt inarticulate, her thoughts primitive, her words suspect. The woman listened better than Jennifer was able to talk. “And the worst part was, I had the most terrific crush on Takehitsu—we called him Taku, or, on the team, Taco—and my mother cornered him and made him agree to take me to the prom. For her it was so simple—I’ve got this Asian kid on my hands, here’s this other Asian kid, she likes him, they should be together and then she won’t be so mopey. But Taku’s parents were very Japanese, and they didn’t approve of me at all. First of all, they despised my mother and everyone like her, all the slow-talking white trash that surrounded them, ignoramuses (in their view) who made spectacles of themselves in run-down country churches and didn’t even speak their own language very well. Then they despised me, considered me a bastard child, rude and gawky. And last—though I didn’t realize this until later, until college—they despised Southeast Asians, and especially Filipinos.”

“And the son?”

“Polite, popular, handsome, smart, excellent at everything. He didn’t say no to my mother, he didn’t say no to me, he just let me make an absolute ass of
myself in my low-rent white dress at the junior prom. Stayed cool, made
everything a joke, and didn't touch me or look at me or dance with me. Then a
gang of his baseball buddies came and lifted him away on their shoulders and
made him dance while I sat in a puddle of red punch on a cafeteria bench. The
only time he looked happy was when he dropped me off. Oh, and when he
danced with this other girl who used to be my friend."

Ibu Sri Ayu was smiling, in a way that somehow shed a more
compassionate light on the whole incident, which had rankled in Jennifer and
which she had never opened up before to tell anybody, not even Geoff her
"husband." Geoff. What could she say about Geoff?

But Sri Ayu yawned and said: "I think it's bedtime for us older folks. I
hope you don't mind if I make one observation, Jennifer."

"Can anyone stop you from making observations?" Jennifer said. At this
Karl looked up and gave a thin smile.

"Well, let me make a couple then. First, this boy, wherever he is, is either
still perfect or he has gone through hell casting off his parents. One or the other.
Not both. Understand?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Second, you might consider psychoanalysis. I don't say that lightly, or as
an insult. But you have a tremendous amount to say, and the right listener is
going to do wonders for you. Anthropology may or may not be the right thing to
be doing—if you spend your time listening to others only, you may hide yourself
even from yourself. You're smart, and that's going to be a problem."

Jennifer gathered Oswald to her, in the crush of mixed emotions—
wounded pride, yes—but also frustration that Bu Sri Ayu herself was done
listening. Was even at that moment unrolling her sleeping bag, and sitting heavily
upon it. Jennifer squeezed Oswald, and thought: I've just been told that I need
professional help. And realized she'd suspected as much all along. Sri Ayu
turned to her and said: "Get it while you're young. It saves a lot of grief."
Jennifer didn’t know exactly what her face registered of the turmoil within her, the way she felt slapped and nurtured at exactly the same time. But even as Oswald started to protest and squirm, and tears came to her eyes, she noticed Karl staring right at her, his eyes wide open in fascination, like a vampire, sucking in all that he saw.
CHAPTER FIVE

In the weeks after Sri Ayu departed, the village began its long windup towards Christmas and the end of the year, and Jennifer managed to reconnect with the calm and productive routines she'd established over her year here. With Oswald growing visibly towards maturity and release, and spending apparently happy hours in the back pen, one morning Jennifer was suddenly able to refocus on her research, taking the tape recorder down from the shelf. Tiny red spider mites crawled from the holes in front of the speaker by the hundreds, and she nearly dropped it. But she got it outside and shook it off under the sunlight, and tested the buttons, and everything seemed to work despite the occupation.

With Bu Sri Ayu's sobering assessment in mind, Jennifer began preparing more directly for her anticipated January trip to Jakarta for her presentation to NFl and meeting with Mark Reynolds. She spent no more time recording but waded into her large backlog of transcribing. With villagers stopping in every once in a while to peer in the window to listen to the strange phenomena of their neighbors' voices where their neighbors were not, Jennifer sat cross-legged on a woven rattan mat and finally felt brave enough to play some of her earliest tapes. She popped in one labeled “Om Barnabas 6, March 13, Field.” Funny how she'd assumed—had followed Ashwright's assumption of her that one year would be enough, had not bothered to consider there might be a second March, and the marking of the year might be necessary. It would be premature to label it now, too despite her assurances from Mark Reynolds she wanted the money in hand before she took substantial steps.

She rewound the tape to its beginning, then fast-forwarded through the clicks and false starts and a long conversational hiatus filled with the distorted sounds of insect whine, so high that it seemed like a glitch in the machine. Then she found the voices and listened in:
“What shall we do today, uncle?”

“Bale willing, we hunt.”

“Wild boar?”

“Ya.

“And anything else?”

“Today’s hunting prayer, what is it?”

And he intoned it, with an unselfconsciousness that had seemed to her, in those days nine months before, like magic. But now, her eyes opened by Bu Sri Ayu, she wasn’t so sure. Listening to the tape it was clear how clumsy an interviewer she had been: forcing him to articulate things for her own purposes, asking questions based on her own assumptions, her own interpretations of ritual. “What is today’s hunting prayer” deserved no more sincere an answer than her mother’s constant queries of Jennifer when she was a child: “What did you pray for, in your heart?” “World peace, mother, and greater faith.” When all along the only prayer in her heart had been for her father to come and find her and recognize her mother’s horribleness, and take Jennifer away. Until she was eleven, she had even felt the need to fake, in her own more self-conscious and restrained way, her mother’s seizures of holy spirit. She had flung up her hands and bruised her heel on the floor and nearly cracked her back on the pew, all without any sense of there being anything like a real God. Yet how did she respond to the villagers when they asked her? “I am a Christian.” No qualifications whatsoever. Why had she assumed Om Barnabas incapable of such guile, when everything about him, even the very fact of his living among an alien tribe, pointed to a carefulness of conduct and speech that was anything but unselfconscious?

Jennifer worked through the transcription, word by word, of Om Barnabas’s prayer, and then noted next to her phonetic rendering of the Punan language her translation of his Indonesian translation:
Where is my blowpipe, my quiver for holding darts?
O Bale Salabet, spirit of speed,
Send good omen on my right.
Let it be simple to fulfill my wish
That I get bezoar stones from inside the leaf monkey.
Let it be simple to fulfill my wish
That I also get gaharu
And fragrant damar.
Bale Salabet, spirit of speed,
Send good omen on my right.
Let it be simple to fulfill my wish:
Give me what I want so that I hold it in my hand.
There is where I am going, that way.
I want to meet there wild boar,
Leaf monkey with bezoar stones,
Porcupine with bezoar stones.

After the prayer there was a click that represented Jennifer, the earlier Jennifer, turning off the recording. But now the later Jennifer was most interested not in this many-times rehearsed prayer so much as the relaxed talk that followed—but that was gone. Unrecorded, it didn’t exist. Dr. Ashwright had advised her on this in an a letter, saying “Get used to the fact that the best moments rarely get recorded—it’s like a camera at family gatherings. The charm gets missed, and all you end up with is Uncle Tony’s reddened face just before he coughs up a bad prawn.”

Jennifer heard the click so many times as she replayed the end of the prayer, transcribing it, that it surprised her when she went beyond it and heard her own voice narrating. She had forgotten that she did this in the early days, made oral field notes after the recording. It had seemed to make sense because then she didn’t have to carry a journal as well as the tape recorder, thus cutting down on the weight of her backpack.
But some point soon after this—maybe this was even the last time—she had stopped because her supply of blank tapes was dwindling too rapidly. She heard:

"I'm having one of those movie moments. The visual, just now, of Om Barnabas's head tilting back, the way his eyes were closed, the tufts of white hair at his temples. His hands fiddled with his tinder box as he chanted, that tinder box of hammered silver that he told me he bought in Kuching, more than 500 miles away, as a young man on his first wandering.

"And behind him, the river going by, all the little spots of sun and foam and ripple and...I don't know. The movement of the trees. There's no wind, or at least none that I can feel down on the forest floor, but still the trees move. It reminds me of that Zen story, the two monks where one says the wind is moving the trees, and the other says, no, it is your mind moving. I think Geoff told me that one—that damn nerd, source of all my Eastern wisdom. How embarrassing. God, my feet itch. They never tell you this stuff in ethnographies, that you'll be sitting there trying to listen to someone's arcane ritual and you'll have fungus between your toes and no medicine for it, and mold in your fingernails, and infected scratches all over your body, and it's like being tortured by a thousand screaming monkeys. Now...focus. What do you see? I see Om Barnabas before me; he's rolling a fresh wad of tobacco to stuff in his lips. They don't believe in white teeth here: red from betel, brown from tobacco, gray from dead roots—all of it's better than white, which is animal-like. And old people like Om Barnabas filed their teeth flat in the same way they stretched their ears long. Nothing can be reversed.

"The fire from this morning is smoldering, the smoke white and insubstantial and staying low to the ground. The river itself, still in shadows, rises and falls with a slight sucking noise, and there's a clatter of thousands of wet crabs in and out of holes in the muddy bank."
Jennifer, listening to herself on tape, cringed at the number of umms and ahhs, and at the flat, nasal sound of her voice (was that the tape recorder?), but she was pleased by the words, and the observations. They seemed utterly banal to her now, which is exactly why it was good that she’d recorded them when she did—as Dr. Ashwright had advised, the newness wears off. By the time you’ve become comfortable in a culture and in a place, you can no longer remember just what it was about it that first struck you.

At the same time, she wondered in a way that she hadn’t, what Om Barnabas thought of what she was doing then, looking him over and talking in a language he didn’t understand into a recording device, mentioning every once in a while his name. Clearly she was commenting on him. Why had he never asked about what she said?

Jennifer rolled forward, taking her weight off the numb spots beneath her sit bones, and bent her legs to the right. It was already early afternoon and she was exhausted, sweat trickling between her breasts. She took Oswald for his bath, and hers, and decided to go on a walk alone. The bear protested when she put him back in the pen, but on Sri Ayu’s advice she was trying to get him less used to human company. When she came back around front, children back from the fields waved at her from their soccer game. Lawé shouted, “You didn’t play me! Play my voice!” She smiled and waved back. It was December 16; tonight would be a near-full moon; and it had been a long time since she’d been to winter.

Jennifer would be the first to concede her lack of wood lore. Despite her several trips into the rainforest, she was no more oriented to it than she was to life on the moon. She would not survive long, if left alone; nor, if she were brought into it and left, would she be able to find her way back to the village. But she was proud of her one accomplishment: her tour of the seasons. Out of fits of homesickness, and impatience with the long sameness of days through the hot season in June and July, she had found at the margins of life here some simulacrum of life in America’s temperate Atlantic states. The key, she found,
was the forest. In its depths, where the trees closed shoulders and locked arms, they defined a space that was pure Borneo: dark, humid, bristling in thorns and scattered, invisible drips, like the human heart, a mystery. But at the margins, where the degree of enclosure was not as great, the forests were open to negotiation, reinterpretation. And there were fewer leeches.

Spring was a journey on the footheels of water, starting from the hillside source above her home, where trickles squeezed from among the rocks. Startled into the open air, the water ran together into the beginnings of a creek, curling around the knuckled tree roots and overpiling rotting leaf dams, making gravity into a kind of play.

This creek she followed downhill, along the tender shoots of new grasses and wild legumes with fleshy golden flowers. Where the water dropped suddenly into a pool, flashing even in the understory shadows, she peered into the clear shallows and saw life spontaneously generated: worm-thin black mosquito larvae clouding the still waters with rhythmic, pulsing life, forming a confused and shifting punctuation formed of question marks and exclamation points and gentle parentheses—never a full stop. Water striders patterned the surface with dimples, and water boatmen blundered through on oars, and spiders legged out above on their silk like flawless acrobats. She squatted, staring, feeling like a pilgrim to something wise and profound, when a sudden footfall made her stand up, slightly abashed, and nod and say hello to villagers trooping past on their way to one of the bathing spots. The kids flew down the hill as fast as skiers, their bare feet leaving long, sliding trails in the mud, their sarongs snapping behind them like tattered flags.

The creek stepped downhill and into the river just below where the river itself curved against a high red bank that had been dissolving for decades—at least decades—without substantially changing. Proof was in the terracing, done generations before, that transformed the crescent of land tucked between river and creek into three wide, descending steps, boundaried by narrow muddy canals.
scored into the ground and mounded on both sides by earthen dikes. This terracing had been done generations before: it defined Long Awan, all Long Awans, past, present, and future. Such an investment of labor, moving the earth itself, by hand and back, on days when hands and backs were already taxed by burning and clearing and hunting and harvesting, would not be repeated easily, and so it was not easily abandoned. When Long Awan moved, it pivoted around these broad shallow bowls carved into earth, and when Long Awan ate, it ate from these same bowls. Because now was the harvest season, the fields were full of great teams of men and women in woven pandanus hats that cast circular shadows across the work, and fluttered in red and yellow ribbons above.

In letters she composed in her head to people she'd never met, who approached her life with a gently skeptical curiosity, Jennifer explained that though someone might think that at the equator every day was summer, the truth was that a sunny day here was nothing like the simple warm winds and grass and winking fireflies of her native Virginia. For one thing, the heat was too hot, like an insult that hung around your neck until you hung from it, listless, your tongue protruding and black. The seared edges of plant life out in the open were too sharp, the thorns stuck out too far from the plants, they did not prick your thumb but pierced your palms like lances. For another, the bug life was too steady, too sure—not the wild fling with life that is the temperate clime's insect trajectory, all explosion and quick decay, but a steady, relentless push into every cranny in the world. Beetles the size of mice trundled the paths next to her feet; ants the size of beetles climbed plant stems and bent them over.

These fields, during late, rainless afternoons, were the only place for what she thought of as summer, a hearty, open land, and an equally open sky above it, with hundreds of dragonflies sparkling in flight. The river nearby and the water in the fields cooled things down, and Jennifer rested for a while on the polished knee of a curved banyan tree root just at the edge of the soccer field. She balanced there on that buttress, in the tree’s shade, listening to the bumblebees’
easy grumbling.

Nita caught Jennifer staring, and pulled her feet up from the muck, ran up to her in her tattered green shirt and a red ribbon tied carelessly into her black ponytail, yelling something that Jennifer didn’t understand until the girl reached her and said it again, teasingly, her calves dripping black loamy mud, her bare feet wide on the dike. “Head ghost!” she said.

“What’s a head ghost?” asked Jennifer.

“Wah! They stare like you do, and go like this.” Nita’s lower lip curled under her top one, an odd and unsettling expression like a baby caught mid-suckle.

“What does it mean when they go like this?” Jennifer tried to imitate the motion, realizing a second late that it might be a very bad idea to try to look like a ghost. But Nita laughed at her.

“No, like this.” The girl’s lower lip sucked at the air, making a small whistling noise. Jennifer tried it. “Better,” said Nita. “Head ghosts do that because they don’t have lives of their own anymore. They stand and suck like that, from a distance or usually up close, and they take your life out of you. People don’t even know it’s gone, they don’t see who took it, then—” she made the sucking noise again, rolled her eyes up in her head, and staggered backward—“you die.”

Nita had used the Indonesian term, hantu kepala, so Jennifer asked her the native Lengilo term. “And you think I’m that—a liangga?” Jennifer asked.

Nita laughed again. “No, no, or I wouldn’t talk to you ever again! I wouldn’t look at you! We’d have to kill you.” This last was in a tone no less easy or joking than the others.

“How do you kill a head ghost?” She was only mildly curious, but still—it would be good to know, especially now that she had professionally started believing in ghosts, transcribing three stories this week.
The girl stepped back and shook her head. “You can’t. You just hope they won’t take you.”

If only she wouldn’t back away when she said things like this, the hair at the base of Jennifer’s neck wouldn’t stand up. But this girl took this very, very seriously. Her eyes were round and she stood in front of Jennifer nearly trembling with the importance of getting this right. “The one thing you can do is get someone with power to put a poison pouch over your heart, so that when the head ghost sucks at you, it turns his own blood.”

“And then what?”
“He runs away.”
“Is it always a he?”
The girl shook her head.
“So I could be one?”
The girl nodded, the smallest hint of a grin on her face.

Jennifer curled her bottom lip under and started sucking. Nita shrieked and ran, turning to look behind her and, when she saw Jennifer take a few clumsy steps in pursuit, shrieked harder. The other kids and a few adults looked up from where they worked the fields, all dark eyes focused for a moment on her. Jennifer waved and walked on. Other days she might join in the work, but it was understood she could not do so often—nor was she good enough at it that the small children didn’t easily outpace her in cutting off the heads of the rice plants, tossing them into a dugout canoe that floated behind in the flooded fields.

As she walked towards winter, she thought about ghosts. Winter was at the site of Old Long Awan, an abandoned, earlier site of the village half an hour’s walk upriver by a clear, well-trodden path. A bridge crossed the Payung river there, a claptrap affair of rattan vines and two iron cables that had been donated by missionaries to improve local infrastructure—the entire infrastructure of Long Awan, both old and new, being a handful of such bridges. The iron cables stretched from rock anchors in the earth up to pylons that were shorn tree trunks,
and stretched across the river in a taut arc that supported, by hundreds of snaking rattan vines, a footpath six inches wide composed of hand-hewn boards. Few used the bridge anymore; the main path upriver from new Long Awan kept to the far shore. The rattan was in disrepair, hanging snarled and curled like the hair of some unkempt beast, and the cable was rusted stiff, with pieces of it flaking off blood red whenever anyone walked on the footboards. Jennifer herself did not need to cross it, but sat at one end, feeling its empty reaches as a way into an unknown season.

The old village had been abandoned for reasons that were unclear to Jennifer. Pak Apuy, whose parents had been born in the old village, claimed that a hail of stones had descended and crushed the people and roofs, so they left. A less metaphysical theory might notice that when Long Awan had been upstream it had been two or three times as large, and might further notice that when so many families left, it no longer made sense to walk as far out to the fields, or maintain as large a physical presence: remains of four longhouses, each of a size that might hold three hundred people, stood among the weeds—rotted wood pilings, discarded roof shakes. But Jennifer was sensitive to the absence of any native concurrence with this simple explanation, so the question remained unsettled in her mind. The work involved in moving a village was tremendous: each ironwood plank from the flooring of the old longhouses was at least forty feet long and weighed enough that it would take four or five people to carry it. And most of the construction of the new Long Awan, the one she knew, was from this scavenged wood.

When she reached the bridge, dusk was just starting to fall, which was exactly the right timing. Only after sunset on large-moon nights did this landscape transform. She sat there as the sun went down, and she watched the stars appear, the ribbon of the Milky Way mapping itself across the open sky above the ribbon of the river and the old village next to it. A chill rolled down the valley, mountain air from the higher peaks a dozen miles away following the river
across the plateau and through the forest, tendrils of delicious cold reaching between the tree trunks and swirling up the bank to where she sat, goosebumps rising on her skin. There was something so pure in the cold; and the six o'clock cicada with its high-pitched whirr announcing the loss of light could almost be the electric hum of streetlights suddenly warming to a glow. Jennifer stuck out her tongue and sucked the cool air between her teeth and into her mouth, shivering. No one else would ever know what she found here: they did not know what to look for, what its name was, or its character. They could see the moonlight on the cascading waters below and see it shimmer, but they could not cross their eyes and make it snow crusted over with sparkling ice.

She unrolled her sarong, a black handspun from Flores with stars and flowers woven into it, from around her waist and brought it up around her neck. After a while, into the delicious aloneness, she sang. A Christmas carol, though she could not remember ever having learned the words. “Said the night wind to the little lamb, do you see what I see?” That was all she knew, and she didn’t know if even that was right. She sang it over and over, making up words to the rest of the tune: “A light, a light, shining on the earth, turning up above the sea.” She sang, and no one heard, and she shivered, and no one noticed, and it was a luxury as great as sitting by an open fire on a night where the wind howls around the corners of living spaces.

Staying in an agricultural village meant that, with this one exception, there were no private areas. Jennifer had more than once sought out a corner of her house where she thought no lines of sight from the outside existed, only to be confronted later with an observation of what she’d been doing. “Bu Jen was sick last night, a stomachache?” Yes, I was doubled over underneath the window, holding my face over a candle because the heat felt good; it distracted me from the pain. How did you know? “Bu Jen fell asleep reading last night!”

Outdoors was no better. One hundred and fifty people spread over many miles of agricultural and hunting grounds would seem to be a thin population, but
she could rely on any peculiarity she exhibited—fascination with some termite mounds, or bending the leaves of a tobacco plant to smell the bitter juice—being observed and commented on, even if she was not aware of being watched. Farmers worked fields that tilted with the hillsides all the way up to near-vertical; and even though they seemed to have their backs turned—not just turned, but bent almost double to the ground as they swung chrome machetes at the burnt remnants of the trees that they were clearing—they were watching all that happened in the valley. There were unpredictable moments of aloneness, too, when she would walk out of her house into the busiest pathways at the center of the village and absolutely no one was there. Once she went to see Nenek Sunal, the old grandmother of a certain clan, a woman who had been bedridden for months (rather, mat-ridden, since there were no beds), and Jennifer had walked into the house to find no one tending her. So she had stayed, and chatted with the old woman and served her tea, and hours had passed during which she felt she could not leave. “Where is everyone?” she asked Nenek Sunal, but the question was not one, which the old woman seemed to have anticipated—and with Nenek Sunal, the only questions she answered were the ones she anticipated. It wasn’t even certain that she could hear, though she did seem to perk up just before the children rushed in, little Mai throwing herself at the grandmother’s feet and addressing her by a name which would be hers only in bereavement.

“No, no, child, it is you who will have to carry on without me,” said Nenek Sunal, remarkably lucid all of a sudden. But this conversation must take place between them on a daily basis. Jennifer had begged out of the room, glad to leave behind its odors of old betel and old age, and had reemerged into fading daylight—the whole day gone—and a suddenly repopulated village: the young men were playing rago at the net that Pak Saman had brought back from Malaysia, kicking the woven rattan ball back and forth; the women bore on their bent backs enormous bundles of herbs and sticks for fires; the old men stood around forming pockets of air and filling them with conversation. The effect was
eerie, and Jennifer felt more than ever that she should write Michel Foucault (but was he dead?) and let him know that Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon was not so much a forward-looking invention as a nostalgic glance back at rural society.

“The neighbors are always watching you, or they are not, and you have no way of knowing,” she imagined writing, “and it’s far more efficient even than Bentham’s tower of blank windows because absolutely no one even need be employed exclusively for surveillance; the villagers go about their productive lives and keep tabs on me and each other without needing to pause in their other work for even a second. My behavior has been perfectly exemplary since I got here, in the sense that it’s the behavior that I most want other people to observe, since at any moment they might (they will) be observing.”

She had not known originally why no one came by this spot, but discovered it accidentally in a conversation with Datu about spirit hauntings.

“There’s a ghost up by the old village,” he had said, when she asked if he personally had seen, rather than merely intuit or feel, ghosts. “Everybody’s seen that one.”

“Really? Where?”

“He comes by the old bridge, the east end, exactly as day fades into night.” Datu said this without the slightest trace of elevation to his voice; he was as matter-of-fact as he would be describing a spider, say, or an acquaintance.

“When, though?”

“Every night.”

“And what does he look like?”

“He has long arms, that drag almost to the ground even when he is standing up. He’s bald, too.”

“Bald?” She checked to make sure the tape recorder was still whirring. She hadn’t gotten information this specific before.

“Gundul. Completely bald, though of course most skulls get that way if they aren’t properly smoked.”
"He’s a skull, then, not a regular face?"

"Well, of course. He was a warrior whose head was taken but whose spirit was never properly appeased. He’s got a face, but no one would look at that. Wah, sakit."

Sakit could mean either it was painful, or would make you sick. "What kind of sakit?"

"The point is, don’t look."

"But what happens if you do?"

"No one ever has."

"Then how do you know he’s bald?"

"Well, you can see that from behind, can’t you?"

"You saw him from behind?"

"Well, he saw my behind, because I ran away. I was only a kid." Datu roared with laughter.

Jennifer had not revealed that she often spent the hour of sunset at one end of the same bridge as the ghost did—more or less in his company, she reflected—because her own unbelief in the supernatural had always seemed to her a major obstacle in her relations with other people; in her work now, for instance, but also with her mother, whose religiosity—her faith in the carved hazelwood Jesus across from the davenport—kept her (she said, and demonstrated at times with crazy movements of her fists, with or without her own hair clutched within) from flying apart altogether, and had led her, in the full confidence of shared values, to the post-war romance with Jennifer’s father, who had appeared to be a devout Catholic. Jennifer didn’t know why she never needed recourse to non-worldly explanations, or even if it was a deficiency or sufficiency in herself. But she had learned to hide it diplomatically; had learned to keep her mouth shut except to ask questions, and to keep her eyes and senses open for some hint of what it was that left her alone but seemed to possess those around her, in her mother’s case to
shake her very bones and pop her bra straps from her shoulders like so much exploding confetti.

But tonight, Jennifer looked; looked and tried to feel what extra presence might be there, with the cold wind of the mountains chilling her clothes so that when she moved even slightly the warm pockets of air were lost and her skin felt like it were pressed up against something abrasive, and stiff, and the temperature of a body in the morgue. She reasoned that if she were sensing something that wasn’t there, namely winter—if she were hearing in the jungle’s overlapping leaves and seething insect life the drift of ice, then surely a ghost could be entirely present for someone who knew how to read it into the landscape. She heard owls, and other times she heard something stepping through the woods behind her with that peculiarly noisy hesitancy that could only be deer. Nothing was beyond the imaginable range of crawling and hopping and sliding life that was the normal habitance of the forest. So gradually she forgot about the whole subject, and let her thoughts drift in the only aloneness available to her, one established and maintained by a presence invisible and unknowable. She could not have said what it was that she thought about. Oswald, perhaps. His sleeping form, the angle at which his ears inclined to the forward, the exact pitch and density of the fur she loved to scratch at the base of his neck. His bright, deep eyes taking in the world when she let him out for a romp around her house or by the bathing spot in the river. His voice which was not a voice but an infinitely graded series of snorts and grunts and whines, and yet which somehow communicated questions, disgruntled commentary, affection. She thought about him, and she wished he were with her, to share in this place. For the first time she felt, like a river pouring through her, the urge to have children. To create your own world fresh by sharing. To tell someone: this is the season that can never happen here. This is the feeling that I miss, and no one else will ever miss with me. But you: you are young, and if you could learn, then maybe it would be together.
But just as she thought this, she saw with a distinctness not to be blinked or reasoned away, the gray form of a human shape, a shadow against shadows, walking over the bridge towards her. It came on silently, and had no distinguishable face beneath a hood like that of a sweatshirt. She froze, and did not move or breathe, as it climbed down from the cables of the bridge with a slight huffing of breath. Apparently it did not see her, or if it saw her, it did not care. Its footsteps pressed the ground silently, and it disappeared into the trees going in the direction she’d come from: Long Awan.
CHAPTER SIX

Morning did not happen the next day; the fog that had rolled in overnight stood like a thick seal on the windows. Jennifer rolled over in her sleeping bag, propping herself up on her elbows and stretching herself luxuriously against the pocket of her own warmth. She had made the decision to leave Oswald in the pen all night, and she could not believe how well she slept. Even her dream had been about sleep, a rapturous long afternoon nap on her old bed at home. There had been reassuring noises of her mother in the house, one of those good days of housework. When she woke up, she was going to go help scrub the sink in lemon-yellow gloves and sparkling soap, each bubble of which caught rainbows.

She got up and threw open the wooden shutters to her front-room. Light did not so much stream in as insinuate itself, seep in through the tendrils of early morning fog. In the spaces between things air glowed thick with water and light; where houses stood near, they loomed as dark shadows, absences. Two young boys skipped past, naked, half-visible in the fog, giggling and holding hands on the way to the river. The joy in their voices made her smile. Oswald snorted and moaned outside, just enough to let her know he was still asleep, still there, and okay.

She turned back into the room, standing for a moment while the light-blindness faded, and then in the gloomy corner where her tapes were gathered, she squatted and chose.

This one recorded Pak Pe’Upu, one of the few Kenyah people in the village, who it turned out had been related to several of Bu Sri Ayu’s rowers: they had stayed in the longhouse with him. On the tape he spoke: “This is the story of Legum Telin, who saved the Kenyah people from a flood and gathered the first honey. I am not entitled to tell this story, but the old people who could tell it are now dead or not here, and Ibu Jen wants me to try telling it to this machine.”

“Just give it your best try.”
Silence on the tape for precious minutes, her supply of batteries tending inevitably toward depletion. Finally she heard her own voice say, “I said the wrong thing. Forgive me.”

“No, it is I who am afraid of saying the wrong thing.”

“But you told me this story a few months ago.”

“I didn’t tell you this story. I told you about this story.”

It was a difference she knew she needed to have some insight into, needed to appreciate. This story was a Tekena, that is to say, an epic, the telling of which formally required many days of gathered clans chanting responsively as audience to the recital of a story as elaborately memorized as the Iliad had to be for Homer. But it was a Kenyah story, and there were few Kenyah people here, so the story of Legum Telein never would be told the way it ought to be told. Not in Long Awan, anyway. It would only ever be ‘told about.’

She dug in the desk drawer through stacks of notebooks and pulled out her original proposal, the one she needed to revise for NFI. There were black spots of mildew creeping in from its edges, and a smell like an old laundry room.

Theoretical basis for project, read the first section. Relevance to field of study. Proposed method of research. Background of researcher. It had all seemed so certain, this game of abstraction, back in graduate school. “I want to find how stories of the past challenge and reconfigure the present, negotiating greater scope for agency in the future.” “Women’s stories represent the ideal nexus of domestic and larger cultural concerns, yet their voices are silenced in traditional ethnography of Southeast Asian tribal cultures.”

Now she had become one of the silencers. Because, ultimately, when a community faces the kinds of threats Long Awan did, Bu Lejeng’s worries about other women looking down on her for being Punan were important, worth analyzing, and a little bit like fiddling while Rome burned. When the logging roads reached these backwater communities, it would all burn, literally. Just last year in the clear-cut areas closer to the coast, forest fires had spread to an
unimaginable degree. Smoke had blanketed the skies for thousands of miles around, shutting down airports in three countries because the planes couldn’t navigate through the murk. Jennifer had driven part of the route of the fire along the road from Balikpapan to Samarinda, had seen the twisted and blackened forms of snags on hillsides otherwise still bare and charred a year later.

She threw the proposal back into the drawer and closed it. It was useless. With NFI, it would be a matter of starting over, reconfiguring her research, examining stories not for some abstract theoretical thing, but useful clues as to customary use of the forest. This was what she had glossed over when talking to Bu Sri Ayu, what she had pushed to the back of her mind: she had come unmoored from her plans and though she felt the new direction better—or at least more important—she by no means had anything like a coherent dissertation. Whether her data, her first year’s work, would prove useful at all remained to be seen.

The first glimmering that her ghost of the night before was real came in the afternoon, when she took Oswald for his bath. The bear was especially subdued, yet at the same time less affectionate, less responsive to her invitations to play. It was encouraging, she thought: these are the signs that he is outgrowing being a cub, is starting to become the wild thing that at heart he must be, a bear rampant in an endless forest, and all of it home. He was larger now, she noticed. When he arched his back, stretching against a willow-looking tree, he was long enough to come up to her rib cage. His claws had gone from a translucent gray to hard black, and if he had been as playfully affectionate as he used to be she might have been at serious risk of gouging. By the river he busied himself overturning rocks, snorting and trumpeting his pleasure as brown muck swirled up in clouds that eddied and were swept away. His muzzle was no longer as flat; out of the crumpled pug puppy look there had emerged something like a genuine snout, and teeth to match.
Pak Dayung came along; he had done so with greater regularity—even when Nita wasn’t there—since Ibu Consultant’s visit and Jennifer assumed he’d received orders. Pak Dayung himself would not say. While Oswald gamboled in the shallows, Pak Dayung squatted above, on a rock too big to move, smoking a clove cigarette. Jennifer had given him one of her last cases of Djarum, figuring that if he was under orders then she’d better pay him something. At this point—perhaps only a few weeks from her own departure to Jakarta—she was willing to give up trade goods and unwilling to sacrifice cash. The capital was expensive. She would blow through more money in a morning there than she did in a month of Long Awan. And the cigarettes and the packets of crystalline MSG and the hard candies that she’d brought in bulk as gift goods would be easily and cheaply replaced on her trip back in, so she could give up the careful hoarding that she’d been doing for the past months. If there was one thing that she found most stressful living in this village, it was the impossibility of ever knowing when and how much to give people for their help. It would have been easy to give away all the cigarettes in her first weeks here…but then what? There was no easy way to get more, except by paying the local price for them, which was ten times what it was on the coast. Not an efficient way to allocate research dollars. So she had come up to Long Awan in pieces—the first flight, with her on it, had included her batteries and recorder and clothes and survival gear and two boxes of cigarettes and one of hard candies. The second, a month later, had completed her supplies.

Oswald splashed up onto the bank, leaving slick footprints in the rich red mud. “Hiya. He is close, Bu Jen. Another month, at most. If he’ll go.”

She let the if linger there, pondering it. What were the other options? Keep a full-size bear? If he wouldn’t go, then what? She didn’t want to think about it. The image of his mother, stripped of her skin and with her blood lying black on the ground, had never ceased to haunt her; she could not look at him without that image, like a Kirlian photograph, hovering about him. But he would
go; already, he ventured farther, stayed away longer, before he looped back to nuzzle her.

Pak Dayung lifted the cigarette from his mouth and blew smoke. “Obat kuat,” he said. Strength medicine.

“Don’t tell me a young man like yourself needs to be medicated to be strong,” she said. She carefully checked a dead tree limb for fire ants or snakes, then snapped it off and tossed it into the river. Oswald heard the splash even among his own watery commotion, and froze and looked. She laughed and the bear looked at her with a look that was almost a reproach.

“I’m not young anymore, Bu Jen,” Pak Dayung said. “I’ve been a teacher twenty years already. I could retire, but no one would replace me.

She was surprised. “How old are you, then?”

“Forty,” he said. “Something like that.”

“So you started teaching at twenty?”

“Had to. No one else to do it.”

“What kind of studying did you do?”

“High school. Two years of college in Samarinda. It was more than anyone else had.”

“How did you get it?”

“Wah, those are the old days, but somehow my father was smart. He sent me and a brother to school, no matter how heavy the burden on him. Four times my father made merantau, worked in the lumber camps in Malaysia, never drinking, never smoking”—here he blew a wry smoke ring—“never knew any pleasure. Took all his money home, and sent us to school. Six years, we boarded in Samarinda.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“Yes,” he said. “I have three brothers, but he is the only one still alive.”

“Where does he live?”
Pak Dayung flipped the cigarette butt into the river and rubbed his hand over his eyes. “They say, in Jakarta.”

“They say?”

“I haven’t seen him since college. He hasn’t seen me. No money to travel.”

The two of them fell silent. She glanced upriver to see where Oswald had gone off to. The rain that had fallen earlier was still falling. It did not reach the earth, though, gathered under the gray clouds like skirts, evaporating in a hazy line above the treetops. The river ran without particular urgency, the dirt-rich swell of flood either already passed or not yet here. She could not at first see the bear, so well did his black coat match the shadowless rocks of the river. But then she caught movement, and saw that he dug into the pith of a fallen snag, whether for food or fun she couldn’t tell. His sides shook with the powerful raking movements of his forepaws, and his hindquarters reared up from the water, dripping. She watched, and took heart in how oblivious he seemed to her. She looked back at Pak Dayung to point it out to him. But then she saw that behind Pak Dayung, on the opposite bank, a man stood. He was wearing a blue hooded sweatshirt and white shorts; his legs were slim and exquisitely muscled. The hood was pulled back, revealing eyes that focused all their dark curiosity on her, set in a face that was handsome not for any one feature, but for a balance that was struck between the firm curve of his jaw and the slight flare of his nostrils. He was barefoot, and seemed as immovable as if he had always been there. But when she turned to ask Pak Dayung who it was, she already knew what would happen once she broke eye contact. Pak Dayung turned, but the man was gone.

“Are there any strangers in the village,” she asked the schoolteacher on the way back to her house. “Anyone new?” It was inconceivable that a man could show up here, where there was no privacy, and go unnoticed.

“No one,” Pak Dayung said. “It had to be someone you know, but perhaps have forgotten.”
“Or it’s a ghost,” she said, laughing. “But I don’t believe in those.”

Pak Dayung said nothing, sitting very still.

“Anyway, I don’t have a past here, so how could I have forgotten anybody?”

The next morning the sun sprang from the earth as straight and bright as a rocket, lighting the sky orange and purple. She could not see it except by its reflection off the clouds; for a year now she had seen no sunrise fully, glimpsing only what signs tress and mountains didn’t obscure.

She carried eggs and wild greens from the longhouse, by an arrangement that gave her the majority of the food that she cooked herself, over her little clay woodstove—supermi, ramen noodles, boiled with egg and vegetables in the water, and a dash of sweet soy sauce to bring out the flavor. But she paused by the bridged to catch that fleeting color of flame, and happened to look across at the church. In the bruised light of night’s recession the building seemed as grayed and yawning as Appalachia in one of the old WPA photos, the boards arching away from each other like bent cards. In front three men stood and talked: the pastor, whose head inclined forward in listening posture; Pak Dayung, whom she could not read, and the stranger, who held forth. The ghost’s hands moved forward, swept the air; the ghost’s words seemed to move the pastor’s head from side to side. Dayung stood impassively facing. The eggs were heavy in her hand, three of them, resting liquid behind closed pores, cool and dense. The light increased quickly, the sun torching the haze of clouds, bleaching them a white too bright to look at.

Jennifer stood and stared, as bumptious as a local, as curious about the newcomer as the villagers had been curious about her when she first hiked in to the village. He wore the same clothes as before. Around his calves he’d fastened the black bands of a Punan man. She caught her breath: would she have the good fortune of witnessing a Punan make the transition from nomadic to settled? It
could make her study, to be participant in the man’s acculturation, to have available the direct observations impossible with someone like Om Barnabas, already a long-time resident of the village.

Her eyes rested on his legs a while; they were pleasing legs, firm and muscled and golden. When she looked up he was pointing right at her, his arm extended. Dayung and the pastor stared at her as if she was something they’d never seen in their lives. The stranger let his arm drop, and spoke some more, showing by his posture a total unconcern for Jennifer’s having observed herself being observed. Then he straightened his chest and head into a tight, upright posture and took a couple of waddling steps in a circle. All three of them laughed. It was her own walk that he mocked. She fought the chill coming over her heart, and the heat rising to her cheeks, and she whirled on her heel to go. One egg dropped, and she let it lie where it fell.

There is a stink to a bear. Though she washed Oswald nearly every day, it remained: some musk, an oil intrinsic to the species. It seemed to have grown worse once he was living outside, and once he began to eat more substantial food—rice, her leftovers, the backyard anthills he broke into, and especially—with a bestial abandon that made her wonder if she truly loved him, carrion.

That afternoon he dragged would drag her dozens of yards out of their way to the carcass of something overlooked, a snake with its skull half-crushed. He rolled in it, and licked it, and mewed in his unslaked appetite. She pulled back, grimly, but Oswald was stronger than her now, small as he was—maybe only forty pounds, his back barely above her knee when he stood on all fours. She remembered, though, from a physical anthropology class that a chimpanzee is, for the same mass, eight times stronger than a human, and a bear was probably built tougher than that.

As he wallowed in the carrion, she could only turn her head away and try not to smell, and try not to scold, but simply lead him back to the river when he was done.
She wished Pak Dayung had come with her, but she had not seen him since this morning.

Would it be time, soon, to release Oswald? Without apparent effort he could pull apart a fallen log that she would have difficulty sawing with a hand saw. And lately he could drag her anywhere he wanted her to go. But he never wanted to go anywhere but where she was. Even the claw marks in the walls of his pen were concentrated most heavily not on the outer wall, escape, but on the inner wall that was shared with her house. The bear wanted in.

Increasingly, though, she appreciated him out. The stink played a role, and then her refound independence of schedule. It was hard not to notice that he was getting more bestial, as well. As a fresh cub he had seemed to learn with astonishing ease, had seemed to see her with curiosity and openness. It was from the first few weeks that his tricks dated: the way he'd rear back on his hind legs and beg, or clumsily wheel in a circle as she shouted “Turn around! Turn around!” Now his muzzle had grown long and course, and his eyes had sunk back in his head, and a veil had descended over them so that he seemed to regard her from far down an evolutionary ladder—still with admiration, but with little hope of connection. He seemed, above all, scared to lose her, and his doggish way of following, of not listening, made him bestial. “Oswald,” she said, scratching behind his ears, but she knew her voice held less delight than it had. She sounded like her mother. What is it about small things that is lost when they grow big?

After dinner, Lawé burst in on her just as she had finally mustered the nerve to compose her formal proposal to NFI. She had dredged her original proposal up once more just to remind herself of the academic language. Once she had spoken it fluently—written it, really, since it was no more a spoken language than Latin had been when it served the same purpose: a code among the cognoscenti, a way of talking above and around ordinary people more mired in the daily ebb and flow of events. In the world of proposals and dissertations and
peer-reviewed presses, one removed oneself from such things, dealt with theories
that recreated the world in quiet remove, modeled it into a thing of the human
mind. Perhaps she had postponed the NFI proposal so long because she no longer
felt herself capable of such distance.

Lawé dispelled it immediately, in any event. Annoyed, she looked up
from her desk as he approached. No one ever knocked. “Ibu!” Lawé said.
“Nenek Sunal is feverish, and her family is asking for your advice.”

“Can I come later? I’m in the middle of something now.”

“Wah, touching her is like touching a stove,” Lawé said. The boy looked
left and right at the empty room. Suddenly Jennifer wanted to laugh. Middle of
something? Lawé’s attitude said it all: middle of what? Jennifer said, “Let me
get some medicines.” She stepped out of the house and let the door close on
whatever it was that had happened there.

The sound permeated the longhouse, but it wasn’t until Jennifer stood by
the bed that she understood what she was hearing: the shuddering, whistling
sound of human lungs pumped hard and hot as bellows. Nenek Sunal seemed not
to be conscious, but her eyes, without ever opening, blinked hundreds of times a
minute. Her face was red as an apple, which looked utterly unnatural beneath her
shock of peppered hair. She was swaddled in blankets, and several of the
grandchildren sat beside her or leaned against her legs, despondent. “Get that
blanket off her,” Jennifer said. “If she’s hot we need to cool her down.”

Mai, bless her heart, jumped up at once and tore the sheets from her
grandmother. The girl was eight years old but seemed older because in
everything she did she seemed to hold the example of Nita before her, to imitate
her consciously and unconsciously in the truest display of idolization Jennifer had
ever seen.

Nenek Sunal’s arms, once no longer held to her body by the sheet, fell
stiffly out from her sides, moving in one piece and making dull smacking sounds
against the wooden floor as if rigor mortis had already set in. Her breath roared in and out of her, her ribs straining. A bronchial rattle announced nearly unmovable quantities of phlegm in her air passages. Jennifer knelt down and touched the woman’s arm. It was hard and dry, more like wood than flesh. And the temperature was very, very wrong.

Jennifer fished in her bag of pills for aspirin and antibiotics. “Get some water,” she said to Mai, but Nenek Sunal’s son, Pak Bari, had just come in and he turned on his heel to obey. “Some cloths, too—soak them,” she shouted after him. When he came back she applied the rags as compresses, on the woman’s forehead and neck and shoulders. They came away hot after just a few minutes. Meanwhile, she tried to get some water in through her lips, but the teeth were set and the jaw muscles bulged, dancing. “How long has it been since she drank something?” she asked Pak Bari, who knelt beside her.

“You’re yesterday,” he said.

She sat back on her heels. She’d never seen anyone in this kind of state before—she had a few first aid tricks and an arsenal of prescription drugs from the travel nurse at the university, a copy of Where There Are No Doctors that she’d read and nearly memorized in long, phobic sessions while in Jakarta—but nothing now occurred to her. If Nenek Sunal wouldn’t drink water, she surely wouldn’t take pills.

“Where’s Bu Nardo?” she asked.

“Gone!” shouted Mai, but her father shushed her.

“She’s visiting relatives in Long Nilun,” Pak Bari said. “Someone’s been sent to get her, but it will be tomorrow before she’s back.”

“Your mother needs an I.V., I think,” said Jennifer. “Although I don’t know much about it.”

“You know more than I,” Pak Bari said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Don’t thank me yet, I haven’t done anything.” Jennifer had a sudden thought: she took some aspirin and ground it with the back of a teaspoon lying
next to the woman, mixing in plenty of water to create a kind of paste. This she pressed against Nenek Sunal’s closed lips, prying slightly with the edge of the spoon for a soft spot in her clenched muscles.

“Not that side,” Pak Bari said, just as Jennifer was making progress. “She can’t swallow on that side.”

She thought she managed to get a little of the mixture in anyway. It came out immediately in the continuous ooze of drool coming from the woman’s mouth and soaking the bedsheets. But as far as Jennifer knew, aspirin could be absorbed by the mouth as well as the gut.

Nenek Sunal’s breathing changed, became less athletic, deeper, more ragged. She began to moan with every breath, the sound resonating through her body as through a rotten log, dull and dispersed. But it quickly rose to a piercing shriek which seemed to speak agony at the cellular level. The sound drove Jennifer back, step by step, to the doorway, where she looked on and cringed.

“How long has she been like this?” she asked Pak Bari. He shook his head grimly. Then they both stood and cringed for a while.

“What’s she sick with, actually?” Jennifer asked. The moans were subsiding, but now the woman’s body twisted an impossible couple inches upward at the waist, stiff as a board, and she seemed to gag on her tongue. The sinews of her neck stood out like rocket fins. Nenek Sunal had been sick in such a chronic way, and for such a long time before Jennifer even got there, that it had never occurred to her to ask the cause of the woman’s decline. She had assumed it was old age.

“From childbirth, from my youngest sister,” Pak Bari said. “She has been sick. Setengah-mati,” he said. Half dead. “Her left half cannot move.”

“How long has she been like this?”

“Twelve years.”
So Nenek Sunal was perhaps fifty. The slurred speech, the pallor, the gray hair and sunken face, and most of all the fact of her being bedridden had made her seem far older.

"Which one is your sister? What’s her name?" There were a throng of children and teenagers and women in the doorway. All of their bedding, their mats and sheets and the humped dragging forms of empty mosquito netting, had been pushed indiscriminately to the walls.

Pak Bari waved the question away. "She’s no longer with us."

Jennifer did what she could, sponging cool water against the woman’s brow, where it seemed to bead up and slide off: the pillow grew more moist, as the strings of the woman’s spittle mixed with the water, but her skin remained dry as clay. Minutes passed, and the woman stopped moaning and resumed the breathing, loud as water through turbine. "That’s better?" Pak Bari said. Jennifer nodded, hesitantly. What did she know? She poured more of the aspirin mush into the woman’s mouth, watched it deflected by a tongue grown large.

There was a commotion behind her, in the longhouse, and people began to pull back from the door. "Bapak," Mai said. "Someone’s here." The man excused himself. Jennifer, now left alone with this burning husk of a woman, shuddered as she contemplated this fate: twelve years stroke victim, bedridden, unable to see a doctor or get rehab. Your daughter dying—of what?—as you lay, helpless, dependent, your every morsel of food brought to you, your every bowel movement brought away. Woven inextricably into a community woven inextricably to isolation. A woven child carrier hung on the wall, the rattan straps darkened and stretched by the sweat and grease of generations. On the back of it, woven in intricate patterns of tiny beads, bone and ebony and coral, dragons coiled and mirrored each other, their eyes wide and dark, their mouths astonished, pixellated, open. What must it be to belong to gods such as these?

Jennifer’s best guess was that a secondary lung infection had taken advantage of Nenek Sunal’s weakened condition—twelve years of bedrest, her
heart must have swelled like bread in water. The antibiotics would help, but she couldn’t take them. Again, the IV was needed. Every way her thoughts turned, the answer was the same: they needed to fly her out, get her to a hospital. “Pak Bari!” she called. He stepped back into the room, closely shadowed by another man, whose face Jennifer could not see at first. Then she recognized him, from his walk as much as from anything else—from the slight bowleggedness, the careful planting of steps.

It was the ghost. But this was not the moment to introduce herself.

“Pak, she needs to get to the coast, to the hospital. The radio’s working now. We can get a missionary plane here in the morning; they make emergency flights. I’ll help cover the costs, and make it my flight out as well.”

“Wah,” Pak Bari said, “Thank you, Ibu Jen—”

“She’s been there,” the stranger said flatly, in English.

“What?” Jennifer was startled into answering in English as well.

His lips worked, as if he were thinking through the words, and then he appeared to give it up, and leaned close to her, so close that she could see the four individual oil lamp flames in the whites of his eyes. He spoke low, and urgently, in Indonesian: “Doctors usually take histories, don’t they, before they begin prescribing? Nenek Sunal has been to the hospital. She stayed six months and they did nothing for her. There’s no point going back, it will just bankrupt the family further. Don’t give them false hopes.”

Jennifer just stared. The stranger turned back to Pak Bari, spoke some words in Kenyah that she didn’t understand. Then he said, in Indonesian and loudly enough for even those out in the gallery to understand: “It’s best to let Pak Dayung know.” A wail went up from the women and children outside, as if the judgment of an avenging angel had been heard. Pak Bari buried his head in his hands.

“This isn’t the same thing as her paralysis,” Jennifer said to the stranger. “It’s different. It’s an opportunistic infection, and it can be stopped.”
“You’re sure of that, then? All your extensive medical training—how many years was it? What are your qualifications for practicing on us?”

“What do you mean by ‘us’? Who are you?”

“Or are you ‘the American Superpower’—a term he pronounced in English—“and you don’t need any other training than your nationality? Or does it even matter, since you’re practicing on poor ignorant natives?”

Jennifer stood, feeling her fists clench. “What are you accusing me of? They asked me to come help.”

“They don’t know any better.”

“But you do.”

“More than you, certainly. I’ve read her file.”

“She has a file?”

He nodded. “Does that surprise you, Ibu Jen, that an Indonesian hospital would be so advanced as to keep records? Or that I can follow them?” He spoke her name with a surprising degree of familiarity.

“Who are you?”

“Can you read it? Do you understand medicine? I ask you again.”

“You’re going to kill her,” Jennifer said. “She’s got to get out of here.”

She felt herself close to tears. She blinked them back and glanced over at Pak Bari, at Mai who clung to his legs, at the other people watching this confrontation. Her heart pounded, and it was hard to think straight. “There’s nothing for her here.”

“Think carefully what you mean when you say that,” he said. “Everything is here for her. Even her death.”

“If you have your way.”

“If you think this is my way, then you understand very, very little.” He turned from her and spoke to Pak Bari, the two of them departing together. During the fight Nenek Sunal’s breathing had somehow receded from consciousness, but now it rattle back to the room and filled it. The sound sawed
the air back and forth, and though Jennifer stood against it, then slid to the
longhouse wall and sat against that, eventually she was driven forth and went
home alone. In the middle of the night Oswald’s roar woke her up, and Lawé’s
light feet brought the news: Nenek Sunal was dead.

Everyone knew the stranger. Among the funeral-goers next day, not a one
seemed to so much as glance at him with curiosity. By contrast, many people
seemed uneasy at Jennifer’s presence in church. They gave her the kind of wide
courteous berth that she had once taken as typical Long Awan behavior until it
gradually ceased several months into her stay, after time and incident had served
to humanize her in the eyes of the village: her incompetence on the trail, for
example, and her popularity with the children. Measured in sheer inches of bench
to either side, this day’s service put her back right at the beginning, with families
nodding at her from a great distance of wood away. Pak Bari went out of his way
to bend to her at the waist, taking her hand between his. Bu Nardo, back from her
relatives’ village by means of an all-night hike, thanked her profusely for standing
in. But until Om Barnabas came, no one sat near her.

“Nak Jen,” he said, settling in beside her in a brown polyester pantsuit that
she had never seen him in. Many of the village men wore their Sunday clothes,
long pants and wide-striped shirts that were a rustic reminder of the American
1970s. Jennifer had never asked, but she assumed that such clothes came through
missionary donations, since they perfectly reflected what people elsewhere might
empty from their closets. Either that or Dayaks knew where to buy cheaply in
Malaysia that which the rest of the world had cast off.

“Om,” she replied.

“They say you helped her.”

“You see the outcome of that help. It wasn’t anything.”

“Your heart, child.”
She had no reply to that. She kept one eye on the stranger, who remained standing at the rear of the church talking again with Pak Dayung and the pastor. Ghost, stranger—he was none of that to the villagers, and she had no good name for him. His words from the night before still stung—had wrapped themselves up with the dragon breathing and the thronging children and that hot, dry, terrible flesh into a scene that she could not sort out. Seeing him now with Pak Dayung again made her recall Pak Dayung’s odd manner by the river—odd only because it was so unconcerned—and the stranger/ghost’s imperative last night: *let Pak Dayung know*. Why Pak Dayung first of all?

No one had died during the year that Jennifer had been in Long Awan. No babies had been lost, none of the endemic malaria had turned fatal, none of the handmade plumbing pipe shotguns had exploded in anyone’s hands, none of the old or young had succumbed to the constant assault of infection, parasite, and accident. Statistically, this was odd: lifespans here were not long, and even in a village of one hundred and fifty, there had been five births. There could not be many years like this, or the population would be exploding. On the other hand, the population could well be exploding without her knowing it—the constant pull of young men and women to the logging camps of Malaysia and to the coastal cities of Indonesia might be draining away the natural increase. Certainly the nurse strongly encouraged women to have large families. Bu Nardo had explained once to Jennifer in the presence of Pak Apuy, who nodded along. “They hate non-Muslims, and they think we’re a primitive embarrassment to the nation. That’s why they tell *us* two children.”

“But that’s what they tell themselves, too.”

“Ya, but the reasons are different. Look around us here—are we like the cities, where every space has someone squatting in it? We have forest, and the *ladang* is wide, and parents need children to work the land. We need children to be strong. Who else will we teach our ways to?”
Jennifer had tried to explain the difference between low-investment strategies of child rearing, where children were fodder for agricultural labor, and high-investment, where children represented an investment of long years of schooling toward higher-income jobs and healthier lifestyles. "You Westerners," Bu Nardo had laughed, interrupting her. "You can think about the future so rationally."

Now, in the church, Bu Nardo sat at erect attention in a sheer, cream-colored chemise with embossed flowers over her black, formal bra. Next to her sat Nita and Pak Apuy and Datu, with Bu Apuy on the other side, as far away from Bu Nardo as politely possible—the woman had once confessed herself terrified of her in-law to Jennifer: "She's a witch," Bu Apuy had said. "Everyone is used to her, but I don't come from this village."

"What do you mean by witch?"

"I sent Datu once to help her with her cucumber plants and he said he heard a strange noise as he approached her field hut. When he looked inside she was naked and had the head of a living fish between her teeth."

"What did he do?"

"He ran away, of course!"

Jennifer gave the tale no credence, thinking it was just the kind of fun that Datu would be likely to have at his poor superstitious mother's expense, but later she had walked with Pak Apuy through the flooded rice-fields and he had pointed out to her the dark chevron of a black fish and its shadow at the root of the rice plants. "That's the miracle fish," he said. "They brought it from Africa. It's evil."

"How so?"

"A man once tried to bite its head and it went down his throat and stuck there," he said, showing with his fingers how the sharp gills had expanded and lodged like barbs. "He died."
Jennifer had forgotten how church provided so many opportunities to see people interact. She knew so much more than she had last time she’d been in here. It had been some time—even when she’d picked up Oswald from beside it, it had been a long time since she’d been here, and it had been two months since then. What would her mother say? Probably, thought Jennifer, smiling to herself, she’d say that there was no point going to a heathen church anyway. Her mother managed to combine passionate belief in the necessity of missionary work with a total disbelief in the possibility that savages could ever become real Christians.

A coughing and shuffling, widespread through the crowd, marked some felt transition, and Jennifer noticed that the trinity of Pak Dayung, the pastor, and the stranger had broken up. This was her moment to find out who he was. She leaned towards Om Barnabas to inquire, but had not formed the words yet when she realized that the stranger was heading straight for her, or at least to the empty space to her side. Unlike the other male congregants, he wore clothes that would pass for stylish elsewhere: black jeans, new enough (or little-used enough) that they retained creases down the middle, and a black collarless shirt, unbuttoned at the top. The stranger sat just on the other side of Om Barnabas, saying something to the old man in a low voice that made him nod and give a wry grin. The stranger did not look at Jennifer, though she felt at some level that he was aware of her.

“In the name of the holy God,” intoned the pastor, “I welcome you and call on you to witness the passing of a beloved mother, grandmother, and daughter of this village.” He stood at the front, at a crude lectern distinguished from most other Long Awan constructions by its thick coat of surf-blue paint. It was the color scheme of the church—the walls within and without being garish variations of underwater, from teal to aquamarine. Even the bass—not really a bass, but she didn’t know what to call it: the church’s homemade instrument for musical accompaniment, a box longer and thinner than Nenek Sunal’s coffin, with two thick, crosswrapped rubber strings running its length and a small soundhole at
its center—had the same color lathered on it. No one was now at the bass—most weeks, in fact, it wasn’t played, which bothered Jennifer because she loved the sound of it—the great hollow thump, two notes of indeterminate value, one low, the other lower. It was the sapê, the traditional instrument of the Dayak, enlarged and deepened by an act of religious imagination—an imagination conspicuous by its absence elsewhere within the church service.

The pastor ran things dryly, not forgetting to mention Jennifer: “And let us not forget the kindness showed this woman in the extremity of her suffering by the passing stranger, for it is by mysterious means that God provides....” Jennifer only knew that it was she to whom the pastor referred, and not to the other whom she thought of as the passing stranger, by the pastor’s explicit seeking of her eye contact as he spoke the words. She withheld a sigh. If people were determined to remember her as a hero in this, she couldn’t dissuade them, although at the same time nothing would convince her that she had done more than waste time.

So who was the other passing stranger? Om Barnabas beside her breathed evenly in his striped shirt, his eyes on the pastor, apparently unperturbed by the presence of the unknown. His arm rested palm upwards on his thigh, and the sinews and veins of his forearms disappeared beneath the wide stiff white cuff. She wanted to take his hand and wring it until he did what he was supposed to do, and introduce her. But she had not touched him before, and probably never would.

The service ran its appointed course, the spirit of it so dull and sincere and dutifully Christian that it was only by her reading that Jennifer might have guessed things had been different. Ethnographies from earlier eras depicted drunkenness and revelries of dancing, the elaborate ritual invocations to birds, and the sending of the body downriver shrouded in its own sacrificial canoe. All of that was now replaced by the intoning of psalms translated into wooden Indonesian phrases, by a congregation that had disciplined itself to the stuffiest forms of repressed behavior. All eyes remained dry, even those of Pak Bari and
The pastor praised Nenek Sunal for her devotion to her children and to her husband and to Christ, and then it was over. As everyone rose, four men stepped forward to lift the coffin and take it to the cemetery atop a nearby hill. One of them was the stranger. Jennifer saw her chance and eagerly took it.

"Om," she whispered. "That new man in the village, who is he?"

"I don't understand."

It was universal, then. If Om Barnabas, to whom she was closer and had communicated more than to any other villager, would not answer, then she was consigned to mystery. "He sat next to you in church."

Om Barnabas looked about in evident confusion.

"He's holding up the dead woman's coffin."

Om Barnabas stared as if through an opaque curtain.

"At her right hand. Behind." It was getting ridiculous, but she had to press on. The coffin and its bearers began to pass through the door.

"That one?" Om Barnabas turned to her with an incredulous expression, his hand gesturing toward what was, indeed, at last, the stranger, as he vanished into the brightness outside.

"Yes!" Jennifer almost shouted in relief.

"He is my son. That is Adan."

At the lunch afterwards, she wound up sitting next to him. Adan. Om Barnabas's son. Perhaps he had been told by his father of Jennifer's confusion and dismay, and had come to make amends. If so, he was notably silent about his intentions. They occupied a corner near the southern door of the longhouse. The entire gallery was ringed by men sitting cross-legged on the floor or with their legs bent before them, snacks and meats liberally spread around in bowls. Conversation broke out actively everywhere except that corner—so as a result she made herself a little sick on the lard-fried cassava and sago lumps before her. All through the burial, as the spade-fulls of dirt had hit the coffin, as tears had finally
sprung from the eyes of Pak Bari when his sister showed up with her whole family, having walked from a neighboring village, Jennifer had stared at Adan and tried to understand where he could have come from. He did not particularly look like Om Barnabas, but that could be an effect of age. He did not at all look like Bu Lejeng—his features were so much more defined than hers, his eyelids as round as hers were narrow triangles.

But the real question was how she had missed the very fact of his existence. To that she had no answer, other than by deliberate concealment on Om Barnabas’s part—which was no answer either, since she could not imagine why he would conceal a son from her. The dirt had sounded a hollow note, and at the end, Pak Dayung, now revealed as the village carver of grave emblems, planted a painted wooden post in the ground, a plain cross-shaped marker the head of which was carved into facing dragons. “Surya Nalang Adsustrani,” it read, revealing to Jennifer for the first time the woman’s full name. It was the kind of thing that everyone else might have known—surely did know, as surely as they knew that this silent presence beside her was Adan, Om Barnabas’s son.

She slid the nearest bowl of snacks away from her, the grit of the floor making the porcelain bowl vibrate unpleasantly. “That’s enough of that,” she said. “These things make you fat.”

Adan looked at her—she supposed that had been her point, in speaking her thought out loud—and said: “Perhaps the cooking is not as good as what you’re used to?”

“You mean my own? I’m no cook at all.”

“I mean where you come from. America.”

“America has some of the worst food in the world,” she said. “And the most fattening. In fact, we have this same food, we call it cracklins.”

“So our special foods are like your worst.” He offered this observation with studied nonchalance—the way a poker player might up an ante just to see a reaction. She tried to reply in the same spirit.
“Are you determined to find the insult in everything I’m saying?”
“If you hide an insult in everything you’re saying, why shouldn’t I find it?”
“If only the person I’m talking to would hide his insults better.”
He turned away, sharply. “I do not insult.”
“Isn’t that for me to determine?”
He didn’t answer. Their skirmish had turned a few heads; Nita, who had stepped barefoot from the kitchen to replenish the bowls of food, came over and, bowing politely, gave the bowl that Jennifer had pushed away a little half-push, as if to straighten it or, merely by touching it, dispel a certain energy. Her eyes met first Jennifer’s, then Adan’s, before she silently withdrew, her sarong swishing at her heels.
“What’s your opinion of us?” Adan asked.
“Of who?”
“Of us. The wild men of Borneo.”
“Just the men?”
He made a gesture of impatience. “The whole race.”
“It’s not a race. There are hundreds of different languages and peoples on this island.” She took on the tone of a schoolmarm, and she knew it.
“This village.”
“Dayaks? Kenyah, Kayan, Lengilo, Kelabit—all those ethnic groups?”
“Yes.”
“The Punan?”
“Yes.”
“The Javanese? Pak Kaget?”
“No.”
“He is part of this village.”
Adan looked in her direction again. “You have studied us very thoroughly, I think.”
She was silent. They had attracted attention again, and many of the men listened as he repeated his question, with more force:

“So what is your opinion?”

“I think,” she said, speaking very clearly, and keeping her gaze politely low, modestly to the side, “I think you are no wild men at all, but the most polite and sensitive and intelligent people anyone could hope to meet anywhere.”

“But we're primitive.”

“In your material conditions, you don’t have access to much technology, true. But if what you mean is unsophisticated, no.”

“That’s why you study us. Because we’re primitive.”

“No. Before I studied you, I studied Greeks, Romans, Americans—”

“Then why do you study us? Why do you record our voices on tapes, and stare at us at funerals, and get into our houses and eat our food? What are you after?”

She was unprepared for the intensity behind his question, and maybe for the question itself. As had been the case with Bu Sri Ayu, when she sought to put her purpose into words, she found that the old ones, the ones that framed her proposal to be here in the first place, did not ring true. Her eyes turned to the ceiling as she thought, and she saw that balanced on the crossed beams above the center of the room bulged the curved forms of Chinese porcelain jars. They looked like they would fall over at the slightest provocation. “I’m after many things,” she said quietly, “It’s research. I want to understand how communities form, how change affects people, how language reflects—”

“And why come to such a primitive place to do it? We are not like other people, are we? Not like people you actually know, your friends and family from back home. Why study us?”

They were good questions. She saw this even through the rising embarrassment and tension. She hadn’t expected this kind of interrogation, wasn’t sure how to take it. By rights she could deflect him, politely decline to
answer, give a vague, evasive reply. She could also undermine him for his impolite behavior, could show that she knew and had mastered the norms that he violated in attacking her so directly with questions. But that would shut down the dialogue, and she realized that she wanted, more than anything, dialogue. All the questions voiced within her own heart and mind, all the doubts that lay like secret curses over her actions, had been her own private burden. Now he demanded that they come out, and she discovered that she was not only willing—no matter the consequence—but eager.

“Okay,” she said. “It’s because you are simple, in a way—because you’re small, not primitive: one hundred fifty people in the village. A scientist who wants to observe something closely often uses a small glass for—”

“I know what a microscope is,” he said.

“So this is microcosmic,” she said. “That’s one reason. What happens here is not the same as, but it is similar to, what happens in rainforest villages in developing countries all through the tropics, in dozens of countries and hundreds of states. And in a larger sense, the processes of social change are universal—”

“But why here.”

“Well, I wanted to go to Southeast Asia because my father is Filipino—”

“So why not there?”

“I had funding to go to Indonesia through my advisor. You might look at Americans and think we’re all rich, but I grew up poor, and I don’t have money to do whatever I want.”

He waved her explanation away. “Fine. So why here. Indonesia—just the island of Borneo, as you said—has hundreds of ethnic groups.”

“My advisor—”

“If he selected this place, he had his reasons. If you did, you had yours.

What were they?”

Jennifer glanced over at Om Barnabas, whose back bent against the wall as he chewed a fried banana, attentive but unperturbed. Again, she couldn’t
connect the son to the father. She had grown so used to the old man’s mildness, his refusal to entertain even the most obvious conflicts in the village, his Indonesia attitude of *pasrah*, of let it be. The Punan diplomacy, as well—pronounced even in Bu Lejeng who by temperament was a gossip and an infighter, yet carefully hid any sharpness and was utterly compliant to the very women she would later savage as *sombong*.

The women were crowded in the doorway to the kitchen—Bu Apuy, Nita, Bu Lejeng invisible at the back of the crowd but undoubtedly there. The girls crowded about their knees, so that the group spilled forward in a kind of meniscus of curiosity into the men’s space, which was now empty of all conversation except hers and Adan’s.

“Why did your father choose this village?” she asked Adan, though glancing again at Om Barnabas to give him a chance to answer for himself. Even as she asked it, though, she kicked herself, because it could well put him in a bad position to answer.

But Adan did not shy away from the question. He leaned forward and said, low and intense: “Now *that* is more like a good researcher. Answer a question with a question. But I’ll answer.” He looked around the room deliberately, meeting for a long time Pak Apuy’s gaze. “My father chose this village, I’m guessing—for I do not speak for him—because this is a broken village, one which has lost many people, and which represents a mix of many people. In short, it was the one most likely to welcome him.”

He turned to Jennifer and raised his eyebrows. “I could say the same thing,” Jennifer said. “It is a village that welcomes outsiders.”

Adan nodded. Then, speaking loudly and with his handsome mouth hardened around the syllables, he said: “Also because it is as temporary as a permanent village can be. *As Ibu Jen* knows, it will not last long.”

Jennifer, stunned, tried to form words to disagree, but other men were half on their feet, shouting him down. The energy in the room turned electric, angry,
sour. Something in Om Barnabas’s face seemed to close and turn blank, like a
door securely locked. Datu said: “Your father may believe what he likes, but my
father has saved this village from many threats and he and I will do so forever.”

Oh, Datu, Jennifer thought, knowing his conflict over Nita. His flat
features were flushed and he looked ready to behead someone. Pak Apuy, who
had remained seated, raised a hand and waved Datu back down. “Certainly there
are threats,” the village head said. “It will never be again the way it was in the old
days, but we must learn what we can and make careful decisions. Adan here has
been traveling in many places, and perhaps he knows things he can tell us.” He
turned to Adan and for the first time Jennifer saw how in his quiet way Pak
Apuy’s personal authority was tremendous. The men settled back down and
within moments the funeral scene looked as placid as it had before. “Tell us,
Adan, what you mean.”

“First let me ask Ibu Jen,” he said. She braced against his question. Adan
had put her at the center of the village’s debate over itself. And she still hadn’t
transcribed more than a handful of tapes, had analyzed even fewer. “Could you
have come here if we had not given permission?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if we had been hostile, if we had refused to talk, if Pak Apuy had
not intervened and Pak Kaget had insisted on the proper paperwork, all of that.
Would you have come here, or gone elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere,” she said.

“Then it wasn’t a foregone conclusion.”

“No. As Pak Apuy knows, I scouted several villages in the area.”

“That is what I am saying,” Adan said. “Long Awan is doomed not
because of fate but because we turn a face toward the world that says ‘welcome.’
And the world that comes in will not be kind to us, but will take us from our beds
and slaughter us and erase us from the maps. Maybe we’ll get lucky sometimes,
and the outsiders will have no vice worse than keeping a bear, but what about the
conservationists? They will come in and want to keep every bear. Then they will take away our hunting, and forbid our clearing new land.”

Jennifer winced: he’d made his point clear enough. That would be me. I am the world that has come in. Adan’s behavior now made sense: his stalking at the edge of her life, talking to the people in it, never addressing her directly until now, when with rhetorical skill he could position her as the platform for a speech to the village.

Now the room took on a different kind of listening, a silence within which the voice of this one man, the son of an outsider, made time and history halt and take notice of his words. “All of us know the differences between Malaysia and Indonesia in regard to the Dayaks,” Adan said. “We see it when we work the logging camps. There they give jobs, they give health clinics and schools and electricity. In Indonesia: nothing. Even when the logging comes, it gives only diseases to the children, who scratch until their flesh turns pink and blood comes out.”

There were nods of assent.

“And this transmigration,” he said. “In Malaysia, even without transmigration, they give agricultural experts and they give money for fertilizer and pesticide and they give roads to go to markets. In Indonesia: nothing. And when they send a ‘consultant,’ she is arrogant and dictates our lives. Is it not a mistake to invite such a person?”

Many heads turned to look at Pak Apuy, who listened impassively. “In Temanggung, near Palangkaraya, they had some transmigrants from Madura that moved to their town from out in the forest. They couldn’t make it as farmers, because they didn’t know how to let things grow back. So they ruined the land, then they got rich and fat selling government rice to the Dayaks whose land they destroyed.”

Adan paused, taking a long breath, his right hand, which had been pressed flat against the ground, now raised, palm down. “And in Long Sungai, not far from here, twenty or thirty men came and they flashed lots of money about, brought volleyball
nets for the young people, gave away radios. Then the village gave them permission to
look for *gaharu*, the perfume wood, and they cleaned it out of that area, so the people
of Long Sungai had no more source of income when these men vanished, just a handful
of toys that broke and rotted and washed from their hands.”

This seemed to hit the men hard, *gaharu* being one of the few means of earning
cash without trekking across the border and selling their bodies in labor camps. Pak
Apuy said, “Go on.”

“In another village, on the Mahakam, the Madurese built a mosque in the center
of town, right next to the village head’s house. At first the people didn’t know—
because they weren’t used to Moslems—that this would be different from a church.
But they put up a loudspeaker, and they aimed it straight at the village head’s bedroom,
and they began to play their call to prayer at all times of the day, starting at four-thirty
in the morning. And every day it got louder.”

There were murmurs of sympathy from many of the men present, who had spent
time in the coastal cities. “It’s like a demented rooster,” said Tiras, a farmer whose
luck was famously bad, and whom Jennifer had never known to speak in public.

“Yes,” said Adan. “For three days the village head and his family did nothing,
but tried to talk to the Madurese, and say: ‘this is not polite, this is not respecting us.’
But they smiled like Madurese and said ‘okay, okay’ and nothing changed. Then on the
morning after the third day the village head was awoken again at four o’clock, and he
came out of his house with his mandau and he destroyed the loudspeaker system and
cut the cables and smashed the microphone. But that is all. He hurt no one of the
Moslems. And he said nothing, though later the lying Madurese said that he called
them ‘Moslem dogs.’”

“They are Moslem dogs,” said Tiras, hotly. “When I was in Tarakan one
cheated me at the market and—“

“Whatever they are,” said Adan, and Jennifer was once again amazed at his skill
as he told this; it was as if Tiras had never spoken, as if the passions being raised bore
no connection to Adan, the speaker. “They lied. The village head was accused, falsely,
and for protecting his family from the intrusions of the Madurese, he was removed from his office. The governor—who is a Banjar, which is also a Moslem people—said that he had broken the law by insulting an officially approved religion."

"I'll insult them!" said Tiras. "They are sons of bitches."

Adan looked up from the table for the first time in his long speech, met Pak Apuy’s eyes again. "And they put in a new village head."

"Madurese?" Datu guessed. He had resisted being drawn in—it was his role to be the leader, and after all this story was one which criticized his own father’s leadership. Jennifer had noticed Datu looking from face to face with impatience at first—but now he was as intent on the story as the rest of them.

"No," Adan said. "One of us.” He looked around his mesmerized audience, at the confused, wounded, provoked faces. "One of us who does not eat pig."

"Moslem!” hissed Tiras.

"This village may need many things; there are many things we wish that it would have. But what it does not need is a further threat over its head. We should try to control our own fate. If we do not seek what we want, who will seek it for us? Ibu Jen.” He turned to face her. "Is there anything I have said that is not true?"

Jennifer wished she had recorded this performance. She felt its power, its subtext: a new leader was coming of age. The control, the restraint, the storytelling, the inevitable conclusion. Already she could imagine the cassettes of Adan talking, spreading from the center of her bookshelves, outward. If he would record for her.

"I can’t say about—about the villages you talked about—"

"In your opinion, is it wise to welcome any and all outsiders, to subject ourselves to their intentions?"

"You’re asking me?"

He nodded. She glanced at Pak Apuy and remembered Bu Sri Ayu’s words: authority is performance. Pak Apuy performed the role of King; she may as well be an honest advisor:

"No."
Something like a sigh came up and swept the room. All the rest of lunch was commentary, a thousand heated discussions, none of them in Indonesian. She could not follow. Nor did Adan have more words for her, or she dare to start another conversation with him. So she sat in silence, the languages she’d come to study playing about her head actively, while she sat in silence, and began to worry about Oswald. Again it had been a long time since she had let him out of the pen.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Nita had come to her house for three days in a row to use the typewriter and her paper, neatly typing invitations for every family in the village to attend a Christmas meal and dance at the longhouse. Everyone already knew about the party—it was closer to ritual than event. And nearly everyone invited lived in the longhouse, and would need to go to great lengths to avoid the festivities. Still the girl sat for two hours in the afternoons, poking at the machine with her index fingers that curved gracefully backwards, typing the same thing over and over. She did not noticeably speed up during that time. When she made a mistake she corrected it with tape; when she made more than one she crumpled the paper and started over.

Her concentration was total, her head bent and wavy black hair hanging forward in a veil around her face. Jennifer, running the tape machine to transcribe some more of Om Barnabas’s prayers, reflected that if she could only muster Nita’s clear sense of purpose and indefatigable patience she’d have a dissertation by now. Frequently she got up to check on Oswald, who slept, but struggled awake when she approached, and sat back on his haunches looking dopey and sweet, giving her hand a lick before settling heavily back to slumber with an endearing whimper, collecting dust in his coat that she’d wash out later.

On the third day, Nita turned to Jennifer as she came from visiting Oswald. A stack of invitations, neatly folded, stood next to the typewriter, and Nita had carefully returned the carriage to center. In the middle of the jungle, pecking out letters for mostly illiterate neighbors, she established herself the consummate secretary. Jennifer could see her in the executive suite of some business—the real force behind some sexist CEO, the bastard sitting fat and vain in a leather chair while Nita moved the company along by invisible strings of affection and control.

“All done?” Jennifer asked.

Nita nodded. “What happens between boys and girls where you’re from?”
Jennifer laughed, and then covered her mouth. “Sorry. I was just surprised by
the question.”

Nita shrugged. Her eyes never left Jennifer’s face.

“You’re asking about dating?”

“About sex before marriage.”

For the second time, Jennifer was surprised into a laugh. Nita seemed
unembarrassed. Okay, not only a power secretary, Jennifer thought. One of the Dayak
maidens who locked the door against would-be visitors until they’d answered the
question *ana palang*?

“Why are you asking?” Jennifer sat on the back of her bamboo throne, hearing
the tone in her own voice that said: concerned mother. She folded her arms across her
chest. “Datu?”


Now Nita laughed, nervously.

“Well, the first thing to keep in mind is it doesn’t matter what happens
anywhere else, or to anyone else. You have to keep your own priorities, be your own
best friend. What makes sense to you.”

Nita nodded.

“You also have to seriously think about what pregnancy can mean. I know Datu
wants to stay here, and you don’t. I’ve thought about this, actually, so I’m glad you
asked. You’ve got to think about that—is your future here, is your future with him,
before you make any decisions about the present. Really, you have to, even though it’s
hard—the feelings can be very strong.”

Now Nita was staring at the floor. Jennifer said, “Am I on the right track here?”

Nita giggled nervously again. “You’re what, sixteen, right? You’re not on your
own yet, really. How does your father feel? Is there a Christian element to this?”

Nita said, still looking away, “Bu Jen, I didn’t mean for you to think about me
so much.”

“But I care about you.”
Nita picked up the stack of invitations and riffled through them nervously.

“Yes, thanks Bu Jen, but I don’t deserve you to think about me so much.”

“No, really, it’s no problem. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Nita flashed her a smile.

“Now what about Datu?”

“I’m very ashamed to ask you this—”

“You can ask me anything.”

“Someone said—he thought—that you are not really married. And he said that Americans, even Christian Americans, are not virgins.” Now Nita bent her head into her hands and her shoulders shook. Jennifer didn’t move; had no idea why the girl would be crying. “Nita? Nita?” But when she looked up, Jennifer realized it had been laughter, though tears streamed down the girl’s face.

“You’re embarrassed?”

Nita nodded.

Jennifer answered carefully. “Well, I’m not a virgin, of course, because I am married.”

Nita pressed her hands to her cheeks. “You must forgive me for asking.”

“Of course.”

“It’s just that Adan said you’d probably think we were too primitive to tell the truth to.”

“You mean Datu.”

“Not Datu. Adan.”

A quick thrill of something like annoyance went through Jennifer. “That’s ridiculous.”

“We are primitive.”

“No, you’re traditional. There’s a difference.”

“If we who still…squat…in the river aren’t primitive, who is?”

“No one is primitive, really. It’s just they are thought that way by others. Any culture is just adapted to whatever the conditions of their own history.”
Nita looked blank; Jennifer wasn’t sure if she knew Indonesian well enough for this conversation—if either of them knew it well enough.

“For instance. Someone might look at a mandau and think: kuno, ancient. Right? And look at an airplane and say: canggih, the latest thing. Right?”

“Yes.”

“But the fact is that the mandau was made maybe last year, from the chrome bumper of a car in Miri. And the airplane might be twenty-five years old. So which is newer?”

“The airplane.”

“But a car is just as complex as an airplane, and it had to be built and destroyed just to make this mandau. And remember: that happened last year—not in response to some ancient need, but because someone needed to clear a ladang right now.” To the continuing blank look, Jennifer said, “Everyone alive now is contemporary.”

Nita said, “Then what is the word primitive for?”

Jennifer laughed. “Who turned you into such a debater.”

The girl blushed. “I don’t know.”

But Jennifer did. It had to be Adan. Of course the worldly, intelligent Adan, Adan who seemed to have nothing but disdain for Jennifer, and who would strike this poor impressionable girl like a meteor. Her feelings about Datu revolved once again. The poor guy. If Adan wanted her, Nita would be gone in a heartbeat. And if Nita wanted Adan—?

“But he’s not your tribe, is he?” Jennifer said.

Nita furrowed her brow. “What?”

Jennifer hadn’t meant to speak her thought aloud. But she completed it. “Adan. He’s not of your tribe. He’s Punan.” Jennifer shook her head, and laughed at herself.

“Now that’s primitive thinking.”

“What?”

“Me. My thinking. So.” She regarded Nita. “I’m the last person you should ask about these things.”
Nita got up to leave. “That’s what Adan said.” She handed Jennifer an invitation, neatly typed.

Adan was everywhere. He began shadowing her daily excursions to the river, standing at the spot where she’d noticed him the first time. Pak Dayung was out hunting for meat for Christmas—most of the men of the village were gone—and Nita was also busy gathering, so Jennifer was alone with the bear. She kept turning and staring at Adan over the course of the several days before Christmas, letting him know she knew he was there. He didn’t react. Oswald seemed agitated by Jennifer’s preoccupation, swinging his head around to look in the direction that she did, emitting a low grumble, almost a purr. Finally, Jennifer tied the bear to a tree and stalked over to a point on the river across from where Adan squatted.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Just out walking,” Adan said.

“You’re not moving much.”

“I saw a bear. I’m stalking it.” He grinned.

“Is that all you’re stalking? Is it your habit to watch women bathe?”

He narrowed his eyes and looked away.

“It’s not safe, you and the bear bathing together,” he said.

“You’re right,” she said. “Who knows what a grown woman might do to a young bear.”

“I meant—”

“How could you even imagine what dangers lie in wait for this bear? You probably haven’t taken a mandi among women since you grew too big for your mother to hold.”

“But—”

“You wanted to join us, out of curiosity? Is that why you skulk in the shadows?”
His eyes had gone glassy and his ears burned bright red. She enjoyed seeing him on the defensive for once. With the cold look of control gone from his face he was quite attractive—she could see the boy he had been. Her words had put a different energy to this encounter than he had meant to bring, and she could see how uncomfortable it made him. She pressed on—because the advantage was too exquisite to pass up. “Why don’t you join us, rather than watch on the sidelines? I can scrub your back rather than Oswald’s, is that what you want? To be the young bear yourself?”

Now he looked nowhere but at his own feet, picking at a stray burr that had attached itself to his shorts. “Don’t worry,” she said, unable to resist a final dig. “I am a married woman.”

He didn’t look up at her, or answer. She gazed at the top of his head for a long time, his short crown of thick, straight hair, the flat planes of his downturned cheeks. Then she walked back to continue bathing Oswald.

After a while, she looked back, and he was gone.

The transcription process had sprawled from her desk onto the walls and floor: she had notes, outlines, flow charts pinned to many surfaces. She had initially guessed at two hours per sixty minute tape, but with the number of times she had to rewind even on the Indonesian parts, and then with the painstaking nature of transcribing speech in languages she didn’t know, phonetically, with the aid of inadequate glossaries, she averaged closer to ten hours per tape. And even with the handful of tapes she had finished, the subjects ranged haphazardly: with every motif and prayer and story the focus of her research grew wider, until it was so vague she wasn’t sure anymore what it was. Truthfully, the process had grown beyond her ability to manage it: rather than producing insight, as she had planned, the tapes confused things that had seemed perfectly clear in memory and experience. Malaysia, for instance. Positioned right next to a border that she dared not cross, she had formed a strong impression that the Dayaks who did cross found a relative paradise on the other side: roads, infrastructure,
and easy money in the logging camps. But here was Om Barnabas mentioning as a casual aside that the forests had been so decimated in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, that "no good journeys are left"—a good journey to a Punan involving travel through the shadows of the forest, with game and sago palms and plentiful water. And here was Pak Apuy lamenting that the young people who went to Malaysia came back with less money, and with corrupted morals, and stories of Dayak villages that had been sources of labor in their own destruction. Why hadn't she noticed this before?

And those were the useful things, useful at least to NFI's desire to incorporate Long Awan into a national park. Other speeches cut other directions: Om Barnabas's explanation of why he'd settled down clearly involved the expectation that soon there would be schools, roads, business opportunities. "I wanted any children of mine to live not like animals who are trapped in smaller and smaller sections of forest, but like men who can go out into the world." Why had she not asked more about those children? Datu, in his brief taped session, spoke of a fabled hero who got rich killing monkeys for their bezoar stones, a gallbladder tumor that Chinese used in medicine. In his story of how his father became kepala desa there featured his wealth due to falling in with a group of young men who had the region's first chainsaw and thus were able to fell hundreds of trees looking for the fungal rot gaharu, a source of a Middle Eastern perfume. Every prayer by Om Barnabas featured the wish that things come more easily, that increase happen. Suddenly it seemed far less spiritual or exotic, and more like the sentiments of someone who would love a more regular livelihood, a more secure existence, the option of selling out for cash: in short, development of the sort that NFI would find incompatible with its goals.

In trying to come up with a coherent narrative and proposal for Mark Reynolds, Jennifer increasingly came up with just the opposite: a portrait which was anything but clear, and which, if it pointed anywhere, pointed in the opposite direction she intended. Though she had only meant to record a unique oral history, she had recorded—at least in part—the desire for a future that was considerably less unique, a future that in fact was a lot like the rest of the world seemed to want.
In the course of all this research, and especially in light of the size of the
remaining work (every time she forgot to reset the tape counter to ‘OOO’ it meant
another forty-five minutes of reviewing a tape; every time she got stumped on a
passage it meant a one to six hour interruption as she revisited the person who’d
recorded it, played it back for them, then sat through lunch and sometimes dinner
before it was polite to excuse herself), she had rigorously excluded Oswald from the
house—there was so much that he could mess up and mess with and destroy that was
irreplaceable.

Two nights before Christmas Oswald declared independence. Jennifer walked
out to greet and play with him before going to bed, and found his pen empty. Panic
gripped her; had he run away? She had neglecting him; it had been more than a week
since she had kept him company much into the night. She hadn’t felt like she could
afford to. “Oswald?” she called, softly, because she hoped he was near. But there was
no answer, just the wind through the nearby scrub, and the background hum of crickets
and frogs. It was a cloudy night, warm and close. Something that might have been a
snake moved suddenly through the grass near her feet but by the time she switched on
the flashlight it was gone. “Oswald?” she called again, more loudly, playing the light
over his pen. No food remained, just the sagging husks of pineapples, and coconuts
splintered into crescents. So he had eaten, at least. Her light caught the side of her
house, the wood scored and scored again by Oswald’s sickle-shaped claws. Beneath
she saw fresh red soil and the moist undersides of overturned rocks. She stepped into
the pen and approached to see that the bear had dug underneath Pak Dayung’s piled
rocks and caused their collapse. She shone the flashlight beneath her own house, the
cobwebs spreading the light ineffectually. A spider, the yellow and black kind with the
front legs as long as her fingers, moved almost grudgingly to a safe corner of his web.
It was a fresh web, a geometric perfection, and she realized this was the path that
Oswald must have taken. She called again.

Suddenly there was an assault on the wood behind her, the wall of the pen. A
scrabbling and bleating. She swore and scrambled upright, clipping her forehead on the
bottom corner of her house and dropping the flashlight, which rolled to illuminate her feet. One hand pressed to her head—it would be a nasty bump by morning, maybe even a black eye since she had hit herself just at the eyebrow—she grabbed the flashlight and turned to face it on Oswald. He paced back and forth, rising to press against the pen walls, testing, wanting in. Wanting wherever she was. “Easy, Oswald. Easy easy little bear,” she said. As he passed through the light she saw his eyes glint, his hairless palms flash pale as he rose and pushed.

She ran to the gate, but tripped on a maze of sticks that he liked to pile in a sort of rudimentary nest-building and landed on hands and knees, the flashlight rolling away again. A sharp pain stabbed through her right wrist, and her flashlight, when she picked it up, had to be extricated from a soft—meaning recent—pile of his droppings. Her fall seemed to have driven the bear crazy. He crashed against the wall of the pen again and again, leaving tufts of fur pinched in the cracks. “Oswald! Take it easy!” But her panicky shout had the opposite effect on the bear, who reared up and dug his nails in and pulled at the staves, grunting like a herd of pigs. Jesus, she thought. She scrambled again for the gate, and opened it and stepped out. The bear barreled into her, and it was only at the cost of several scrapes along her chest and arms that she calmed him, his head nestling into her lap.

Her wrist did not appear broken, but it hurt enough that it would be hopeless to try to move rocks and repair where he had gotten out. And covered in dirt and smelling of bear shit and with long red unclean welts, she dared not seek help. Pak Dayung, like most of the men, was not in the village anyway. So she attached a rope to his collar and led him around to the front, where she tied the rope to the door handle.

Once she had cleaned herself up a bit, using drinking water from a rain barrel, she opened the front door to check on the bear. He lay awake but calm, curled in a small circle that could not be reconciled with the size he had seemed as he loomed outside the cage. “Little bear,” she said. “I hope you show that much fight in the jungle.”
All through the night she got up to check on him, and he was in some pose at the end of the rope: curled, stretched, or sitting upright almost as if he watched the clouds for a sign of the moon. In the morning he was docile enough that she led him, without protest, back to the pen. Pak Dayung and the other men came back midday, and the teacher silently repaired the rock formation. Silently, that is, before he turned to her, and said: “Next time he goes? You know what you should do, right?”

Jennifer shook her head. “Come get you? But you weren’t around.”

Pak Dayung nodded to himself, as if this was to be expected, as if he knew all about this.


“Let him go.” The man spoke with the most exquisitely painful slowness.

“Excuse me, Nak Jen, if I’m in the back getting things ready,” said Bu Lejeng on the morning of Christmas Eve.

“Please don’t worry about me. I’ve got my research to look at,” said Jennifer. The old woman was gone even before Jennifer reached for the blue canvas notebook. She winced and lifted with her left hand. It would be awhile before writing came comfortably again. Gingerly, she removed the metal cap from her tea glass and watched the gust of steam rise and vanish. She ate sugared crackers from the tin that was always left on the table.

Her research this morning consisted of taking the measure of her resolve. Her visa expired in February, two short months away. Even assuming the most streamlined possible renewal process, it would take slightly more than one month to get her funding, her letters, and her sponsorships in order. If she went overtime, she’d end up having to leave the country to reapply for a visa; if she went badly overtime, she’d have to go twice, coming back once as tourist and then finally as a researcher again. As long as she got her research project renewed, which was largely a matter of sponsorship, it was a relatively simple matter: duck into Singapore for a few days, re-enter with the official letters of the Nature Foundation.
An extra year of research now seemed mandatory. She could kick herself for her complacent attitude—not only had she not figured on two years of research originally, but even last month with Bu Sri Ayu’s warning she had taken no effective steps to broaden her possible sources of sponsorship. It was basically NFI or nothing. There was something so restful about her little cocoon of a house, and so separate about this little rainforest village, and her focus had become so vague, that it was hard to muster the necessary front to write a good proposal. Not only that, but there was no way to save a copy, and letters got lost more often than not, or took months to reach their destinations. Anyway, the point now was that she should leave as soon as possible to maximize her time in Jakarta before money and visa ran out.

On the other hand, the thought of leaving now—of leaving Oswald—made no sense either. She did not kid herself: no one else would take care of him. Perhaps he’d wander off, perhaps he’d be killed. Certainly he’d be killed if he hung around the village frightening people. If someone didn’t take the time to release him far off in the wilderness. Who could she trust to do that? For some reason the story of Snow White came to mind: Bring me the heart as proof, said the queen in her cruel vanity. And the huntsman, trusted, had lied to her, had brought her the heart of a pig. Jennifer would have to go along with the bear, however many days’ trek it would be into the forest.

“You should be careful staying in a Dayak house,” said a voice as a head appeared in the window right beside her. She gasped and sat upright. The head grinned at her. “Don’t get too relaxed. They say that Dayaks eat people.”

She breathed. “Adan.”

“Honored Ibu.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“I find it funny.” His head turned and bobbed past at the level of the windowsill, reappearing atop his body as the door swung open.

“Do you believe me?” he said, sitting down across from her and crossing a leg over his knee in a way that struck her for its simultaneous familiarity—the gesture an American man might make habitually—and strangeness, because no one here sat like
that. The wideness of the posture, the way the soles of the feet appeared, made it disrespectful and coarse. “That Dayaks eat people?”

“Of course not.”

“Hmm.” He dropped his leg, his thonged foot hitting the floorboards with a resounding smack. Then he reached forward. “Excuse me,” he said, with a slight smirk. “I’m going to help myself.” He pried open a corner of the cracker tin and lifted five or six crackers in one hand, feeding one into his mouth with the other.

“Excuse me,” she said, even more annoyed and, worse, confused. He was behaving with extraordinary and deliberate rudeness—if she’d been Indonesian—but doing only that which an American might naturally do without offending. So how was she to take it? Was she losing face by letting him walk all over her, or would she be an obvious hypocrite if she insisted that he was offending her sensibilities—when they weren’t even hers? He kept putting her in impossible positions. “I’ve got to get going. My research.” She stood. He raised one palm, swallowing the cracker hastily. She wanted to see him choke on it. So much for her favorite thinking spot.


“No,” she said.

“What, then?”

“I’m sure your father has told you.”

“Interview me, then.”

“About what?”

“Cannibalism.”

“Dayaks don’t eat people.”

“Aha! No! But people eat Dayaks!”

She stood in the doorway, one hand on the jamb. “What do you mean?”

“We are a people whose land is our food. They take our land, so they take what keeps us alive. They eat us with the teeth of their chainsaws and they trample our bodies with the treads of their tractors. It’s too bad,” he said.
“Too bad?” she said.

“Too bad that the one person here who has resources to get the attention of the outside world is only interested in old stories.”

He grinned fiercely at her, and she turned and left. It was only once she was outside that she remembered, to her mortification, that she had meant to help Bu Lejeng with cooking. Jennifer wavered, standing in the green grass before Om Barnabas’s house. The hunting before Christmas had brought back so many pigs that smoke from the roasting poured from every seam in the longhouse and the whole village was awash in haze: the women and men both cut the flesh into strips and smoked it, or boiled it over wood fires, or dropped the fat into large blackened woks to be rendered into oil or simply fried to cracklings.

Finally she decided to brave the embarrassment, and she went back in. But Adan was no longer there, somehow. He appeared and disappeared so suddenly, and she still had no idea really where he had come from. A ghost, she had called him originally, and now, many interactions later, he still almost seemed one. She set her journal down in the front room and went back into the kitchen.

Adan was there, very much in the flesh, making her earlier musing seem silly. He paused in his act of wrestling a headless pig out of a rattan backpack to grin at her and mouth the word “research.” She sighed as she took up a knife and squatted alongside Ibu Barnabas, flensing and filleting with her awkward left hand and trying not to wince when Om Barnabas or Adan cracked the rib cages away from the spine like bloody, hollow wings, and spread them out on a wooden stump and brought a machete down on them to split the bones and release the marrow.

But the pressure of his judgment, all the little cracks he’d had at her expense, ate at her, and she hacked at the flesh angrily. She wanted to partake of the holiday mood, the steadiness of work, the calm, easy bond between Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng. Her mind, though, churned with defenses to Adan’s implied attacks. Finally she spoke in a loud voice: “Bu Lejeng.”
“Ya, child.”
“I haven’t told you about my research recently.”
The woman glanced up from her work, startled.
“I mean, how it’s changed. Thanks to your help, and Om Barnabas, and others.”

Bu Lejeng looked back down at the bloody meat and bones, then over at Om Barnabas, who stood looking at Jennifer, machete idle in his right hand. She looked back. “I don’t understand about all of that. You don’t have to talk to me about all of that,” Bu Lejeng said. “What you do is too complex for a simple old woman like me.”

“Still,” said Jennifer, “Let me explain.” And she gave, for what seemed like half an hour, the most complicated speech she’d ever given in Indonesian, presenting her original research plan, and how it had changed in contact with the villagers—both because she saw the threats the village faced, and because she had been so deeply moved by the individuals here, their courage and humanity. She clarified that now she would be analyzing her data—and collecting new data—that had to do with communal land rights, subsistence strategies, what it took to keep the forest a livable home for its inhabitants. “My hope is that this research, combined with others’, will help convince the government or at least some world bodies that watch the government, to do more for the Punan and Dayak—or at least, to do less against them.”

The whole time she spoke, she looked only at Bu Lejeng, though at the same time she was highly conscious that Adan and Om Barnabas had not resumed work, and were listening. Om Barnabas, fine—the main audience here was Adan. If he wanted to despise her once he knew the whole picture, then there was nothing she could do about it. But if he wanted to style himself defender of the village, or its savior, let him take her into account. Let him support her, correct her if necessary—but understand her.
Poor Bu Lejeng. She had stopped listening after the first five words, and she had to snap her gaze back from the infinite distance to return to scraping pig hide. “Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” Jennifer asked.

“For explaining all of the... explanations... that you just explained.”

Jennifer looked over at Adan, who seemed to grin despite himself.

“Anytime,” said Jennifer.

Now the village had only to move up and over the lip of Christmas, the high ritual, to reach the deep, deep trough of the festival season. The services went as services did: the pastor was earnest and long-winded. The kids put on a brief skit of the nativity, complete with laminated props (delivered by MAF some years back) that could not have meant much to a people for whom the concept of desert, manger, and shepherd were impossibly distant. Lawé, who played one of the three wise men, grinned like a maniac when, instead of frankincense, he offered a gnarled section of gaharu. Then he pulled a poster of the President of Indonesia over his head, somehow communicating that behind that opaque disguise he was grinning even more madly.

At noon the next day, directly after morning services, the festival season began. It was exactly as Jennifer remembered it from a year ago, when she had first shown up and could not tell if eating twelve meals a day might be normal here. By two o’clock she felt as bloated as any of the fatted pigs. She had hardly sat down to eat with one family when the invitation came from the next, delivered by children suddenly shy with the responsibility of the bit of paper, or memorized formalities. By three o’clock, having squatted on longhouse floors and sat in living rooms all over the village, she could only make the weakest, most symbolic gesture towards eating. Pig, pig everywhere, smoked, fried, boiled, scorched, singed, anything but seasoned. “Finish it, there’s more,” her hosts urged, and she smiled and pretended she didn’t understand. Nor did she eat the village specialty,
fermented pig brains, remembering all too well the gastro-intestinal consequences from last year. Bear, too, she stayed away from.

At four o’clock there was a break—for naps, maybe, or to separate by at least an hour lunch and dinner. She staggered home only to find Nita, grim-faced, at the typewriter. “Oh God,” Jennifer said. “More invitations?”

Nita nodded.

Jennifer groaned, sagging into a chair and wondering if vomiting might not be a good idea.

“Ibu Jen is very popular,” said Nita.

“Just tell my admirers I’m indisposed for a couple hours,” said Jennifer. “I think I need to lie down.”

Nita giggled, and Jennifer staggered back to her bedroom. Forget the mandi today, forget Oswald, forget everything but the physical fact of being caretaker of a stomach ready to burst.

When she woke it was just getting dark, and she felt like she could probably stand again, though slowly, with spots swimming before her eyes. The air in her bedroom, thick and dark, reverberated with some foreign noise, a faraway shrieking that, in her dream, had been the pool in Gallton, Virginia, the lifeguards chasing the boys chasing the girls with wickedly tight rattails. The push and pull of the line by the candy stand, kids digging wet dollar bills from the seams of their swimsuits. As she’d woken up, Jimmy Fischer had positioned himself above her, the diving board sagging as he stepped on it. She had been unable to get out of the way, and he’d leaped, his belly rolling over his waistline and his chins tripling as he tucked and came down in a world-drowning cannonball.

KA-BOOM. That sound again, straight from dream to reality. Followed by a riotous cheer. Now Jennifer came out to the porch, where she found Nita staring out at the mob of children smoking and roaring across the distant field. They were toiling upslope from the riverbank towards the row of houses that included Jennifer’s. The
torches, weak in the still-young twilight, spread oily smoke to the edges of the gathering and beyond. Occasionally someone touched a torch to one of the long green bamboo cannons, and another enormous boom thundered forth. “They’ll give themselves splinters,” Nita said in disgust. But she did not tear her eyes away.

“As I remember, you were with them last year,” Jennifer said, teasingly.

“Well, I’ve changed,” Nita said. True enough: her hips had grown wider, her breasts larger, her voice had taken on a huskier tone.

The revelers brought the festival to each house, crowding the porches, one by one in order.

There was a boom box blaring disco music and the kids hopped up and down and spun about and called ayo, ayo come on, dance! And from each house, the young people came forth to swell the crowd larger.

“You know you’ll go,” said Jennifer.

“Will you?” Nita responded, challengingly.

The kids now cavorted before them, whirling and clapping. “Ayo, Ibu Jen! Ayo, dance!” Lawé came to the fore and offered a clumsy imitation of Jennifer’s dance from last year, laughing too hard to be coordinated but shaking his booty all the same. Mai tried imitating Lawé imitating Jennifer, and the effect was touching and ludicrous as they bumped and fell over each other, arms still pumping up and down, fingers extended. A whoop went up from the crowd, and someone poured a capful of gasoline down one of the bamboo tubes and another one lit it. Smoke and fire and noise shot forth to the sky.

“Ayo! Ayo! Nita, Nita, don’t just sit there! Come down!” Nita raised her palm and shook her head no, no, but the crowd’s cheer was a louder yes, and soon Nita, rolling her eyes at Jennifer but with a girlish exuberance in her steps, joined the dancers. “Bu Jen, Bu Jen! Ayo!” A boy bent down on one knee and strummed a plank of wood as if it were a guitar, wailing along with the boom box. Two others pushed him over and scrambled for his place to serenade her. Jennifer couldn’t help but laugh, and then Lawé and Mai swarmed the porch and grabbed...
her arms and pulled her out among the rest. “You guys are carrying on like it’s Christmas,” she said.

Mai responded seriously, “It is Christmas, didn’t you know?” All the children laughed and Lawé swatted her playfully on the arm.

Not all of the kids were kids; they had drawn from the houses some younger married couples, and a handful of young men, Datu among them. These had stood back, letting the kids have their fun, but now Datu stepped forward and waved people back into a circle around Jennifer and Nita. He held something like a flashlight in one hand, and this he lifted up and held over his head. It sprang to life, some kind of battery-powered disco ball, which spun and broke light into colors and scattered it in puzzle shapes across the faces, the bodies, the houses nearby. A collective gasp went up from the crowd: this was something new, brought back perhaps by Datu from Malaysia, and hidden until just this moment. “Dance!” Datu roared, and people did, but they remained in their circle and watched Nita and Jennifer. Nita grabbed Jennifer’s hand and they began to dance together, the crowd roaring approval.

Objectively speaking, Nita was by far the better dancer—graceful, light of foot, and effortlessly sensual in that restrained way of girls raised traditionally, in Asia. But though Jennifer was no dancer—had, in fact, hidden in the janitor’s closet out of shyness during a junior high school dance, and volunteered as a candy striper the nights of her proms, and having found in Geoff a partner as awkward and reticent as she was, avoided nearly all dance occasions in collage—she had the advantage of having watched hours of MTV, and been around friends who did know the latest moves, so that almost against her will, and despite her shyness, had picked up at least the ability to fake something like a modern, funky dance style. Basically, she threw her arms and legs and hips into motion and aimed for a frenzy so busy with movement that it could be plausibly taken for being on the beat, no matter what the beat was. So it was Jennifer who generated most of the applause and cheers. It was this that Lawé and Mai had been
attempting to imitate, more power to them. Now Lawé shouted: “Ibu Jen is the
best!”

Jennifer, lost in the twirl of her own limbs, didn’t notice at first when
Adan entered the circle and began dancing with them, having scooped up Mai for
his partner. While the little girl jounced back and forth with a determined
expression, Adan began to move like someone used to moving. He had that same
quality as Nita, an eroticism all the greater for being perfectly contained in his
(Jennifer had to admit) near-perfect body. Jennifer fell still and stood back and
watched with the rest as Adan twirled and strutted and moved, transforming this
clear twilight and ancient scrub ground into something glamorous and
contemporary. Datu’s light no longer seemed quite as gimmicky, quite as much a
toy, as Adan inhabited its fractured lights and played them against the beat. He
quoted disco, and hip-hop, and ska. When Mai faltered, and didn’t know what
else to do to be with him, he reached down and scooped her up and flung her
round so that she shrieked with delight and surprise, passing her over one
shoulder and around his waist before setting her, astonished, back on her feet.
People broke out in wild applause and raucous cheers. Jennifer clapped along,
and Datu gave her a smile that might have been wry or might have been pained.
“Jennifer isn’t number one anymore,” he said.

The group traveled on to the next house, and then the longhouse. “It
seems you spent some time at the disco,” Jennifer said to Adan when she found
herself right next to him. “Where were you, anyway, on your rantau”—rantau
being the term for the one to two year period that Dayak young men spend away
from the village, usually in logging camps, amassing cash and experience before
coming back to start a family. Jennifer had been thinking about it, and that was
the only explanation for where Adan had been. Nothing she could surmise,
though, explained why he had been so systematically not mentioned.

“Many, many places,” he said. “But when I went to the disco, it was
Jayapura.”
“That’s quite a walk you made.” Jayapura was on the other end of the great chain of islands that was the Indonesian archipelago. Capital of Irian Jaya (Western New Guinea), it was more than a thousand miles away.

He was silent.

“So... what were you doing in Jayapura?”

“Research,” he said, and looked at her with what might have been irony, or triumph, or just an extraordinarily wolfish grin.

She was about to ask what kind when she suddenly remembered his derisive stance toward her own research. What had he called it? Ursinification. “Oh no,” she said, turning to run back to her house. “Oswald. I’ve forgotten Oswald.”

He grabbed her elbow and spun her back to face him. Faces around them glanced in their direction, startled.

“Don’t go,” he said. “Every time I’ve seen you you’re running off to take care of that bear.”

Was that true? She couldn’t remember; if it was a pattern, she hadn’t noticed it. “But he hasn’t been out at all today. And all this noise. He’ll be frantic.”

Adan let her elbow go, but held her with his gaze. “Jennifer,” he said, addressing her in the way that no one here did, by her full name, no honorific. “Can I call you Jennifer?”

“I don’t know.”

“If the bear runs off, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“He’ll die?”

“Then you’ve given him a few more months of life than he would have had otherwise. That’s enough. You undertook to help him. Did you really want to be his jail keeper when he no longer wants the help?”

Talking to Adan was like wandering through a particularly unflattering house of mirrors. She remained standing in place, and he too, as the rest of the
crowd flowed past, dancing in front of Pak Apuy’s house. “I haven’t said goodbye,” she said, finally. “I have to say goodbye.”

He seemed taken aback by this, and stared at her as if sizing her up anew. Suddenly, he took her and hugged her, a quick brotherly arm around the shoulder. Again it was an utterly familiar gesture—enough so that there was a quick, sharp pang in her throat as she thought of Brad—but utterly out of place here, where even husbands and wives didn’t do such things in public. Quite possibly it was an insult. It definitely left her speechless.

“I liked what you said earlier,” he said. “About your work. Though I think it was naïve”—There was no trace of derision in his face or tone; quite the opposite. “You touch me.”

“No, I think you touched me,” she said, in as cold as voice as she could muster—a lukewarm. He grinned again, and maybe he didn’t get it. “And it’s not appropriate. Not in public. You know that, right?” Here she was, giving cultural lessons to a native.

His grin only broadened. “Then it’s okay in private?”

What to make of this man? She hit him on the arm. He pretended to be hurt. Then they hurried to rejoin the children. Jennifer scooped Mai up from the crowd and lifted her up to sit on her shoulders, the child shrieking and clamping surprisingly strong legs around Jennifer’s ears so that for a few seconds she couldn’t hear anything. Somehow with the sounds gone, the torches and the half-dressed children and the tumult of the crowd looked like something different, something from a movie about a place impossibly far away. But here she was. “Come on,” she said, her own voice boxy and flat, the sound traveling through the bones of her head. “You said we’d dance!” She grabbed the girl’s legs to keep her on—and to keep them from squeezing her head any harder—and whirled.

There were shrieks and laughter, and two loud explosions from the bamboo noisemakers. Other boys and girls tried to clamber up Jennifer and pull Mai down, to take her place, but she defended her perch against all comers, her
trim legs, as dense and hard as wood digging into Jennifer’s shoulder muscles. Suddenly Jennifer leaned backwards to make the girl fall, holding her knees so that she wore the girl upside down across her back like a cape. Mai was laughing hysterically, but she pulled herself back up. Bringing her mouth to Jennifer’s ear she said in a wet stage whisper, “Ibu Jen, will you stay here forever?”

Tears flooded Jennifer’s eyes, and she choked up too much to reply. She reached up her hands and gave Mai an awkward hug from below, nearly toppling the poor girl.

“I really really want to,” Jennifer said. “But—” She had been about to explain about the permits, how it was not really up to her. Instead she just repeated herself: “I really really want to.” As this festival moment lifted to the surface energies that in everyday moments remained dormant, or muddied, she realized that she’d built something this year. The rhythms of village life were in her, and much as she might resist the impositions, the banalities, the way that none of her innermost thoughts, the things that came from her own country, training, culture, context, had room for expression here, this was the richest community she’d ever known, the most satisfyingly rooted, the closes thing to home. She allowed herself to imagine watching Mai growing into a young woman, and she liked the thought of being there.

Men already lined the meeting hall of Pak Apuy’s house, sitting against all four walls, smoking and talking and poking idly at basins of deep-fried snacks, their muscled and hard-knotted legs bent in front of them, their bare, calloused feet with nails tough as rhinoceros horn. There was light from a dozen oil lamps pegged to the beams that traversed the space beneath the high, sloped roof.

The center of the room was empty, and the young people, so exuberant just outside, grew subdued as they passed before their fathers and grandfathers, snaking back to the kitchen. The young men found spaces on the floor to sit, completing the human border to the room. Nita, Mai, and all the young girls went
back through the narrow doorway into the kitchens, where the women could be heard laughing and talking. Jennifer wavered, being the one person other than the very young boys who had a choice about which world she’d join. She saw Adan settle into a corner spot next to his father. She wanted to ask him more about his research, if it had been more than a tease. What was a Dayak doing in Jayapura? Any reason would have to be a good one. On the other hand, Datu seemed to be watching her intensely, and if he had noticed what happened outside (how could he not notice), then she’d be inviting some unwanted conclusions if she sat down next to Adan.

Bu Nardo saved her, waving her over to the kitchen doorway. The nurse led her over to a mat where she squatted in front of a mound of coked rice and long strips of banana leaf. Jennifer squatted next to her, and the two of them pressed the rice into sticky lumps and wove it into diamond-shaped packages.

“Nak Jen is quicker than last year,” the woman observed.

“Not from practice,” Jennifer said. “Maybe I’m not so drunk this time.”

Bu Nardo cackled. “That’s why I called you in here sooner.”

They worked in good-natured company for a while. “You didn’t want to go back to visit your family?” Jennifer asked. Since Nenek Sunal’s passing, Bu Nardo had remained in the village, though she had planned to be gone the whole holiday season.

“Too much trouble,” she said. “Those paths aren’t meant for an old woman’s bones.”

Jennifer had never been able to guess how old Bu Nardo was; in the cities, in developed countries, women could be middle-aged, could be middle class. Here they were achingly ripe for a brief moment. Married, four or five children passed through them, the sun etched the days of their work into their faces, and teeth wore down and were corrupted and spit, anointed by a fingertip of clove oil. The mothers in Long Awan could pass for grandmothers in the streets of Washington; the grandmothers would be curiosities, half-mummified relics from
another era—at age 60. If a woman had children, Jennifer could usually infer her age, but Bu Nardo had never married; furthermore, in daylight she powdered her face with some white-yellow substance that was meant to keep her pale.

Jennifer was acutely aware of her own limbs, how even at her new weight she remained soft and padded, sleeker and more fully fleshed than women her age. Her face still bore traces of baby fat, the residue, she supposed of a milk-fed American diet, milk and canned corn and breaded fish sticks limp and steaming from the microwave. So perhaps her mother hadn’t been wrong to force Jennifer to drink all that milk and eat all that cheese, though the predictable result—which she didn’t fully understand until college, until she talked with other Asian students—was hours of feeling bloated and passing enough gas to feel like a menace to society, or at least to her place in it.

“You know what I wish,” Bu Nardo said suddenly, interrupting Jennifer’s thoughts. They both still pleated lontong, the rice bundles, Bu Nardo’s tray nearly full and Jennifer’s containing four malformed examples. “They have these minibuses in Samarinda that I rode during nurse training. They come around and you just pick the color you want and they take you right where you’re going. And if you don’t get in they yell at you.” She cackled at the memory, which must have gone back ten or twenty years. “And they’re naughty, the conductors. They pinch you before you sit down.”

Just then Nita came through the gallery, followed by several of the smaller girls. She had changed, while the mothers were cooking, into a traditional costume, a short black tunic which reached just past the knees, and almost sleeveless. At her wrists were black bands with hornbill feathers affixed, so that a flick of the wrist was a flitting like that of a small bird. Around her ankles bells jangled, and her feet were bare. Several of the smaller girls wore versions of the same outfit. “Too early,” Bu Nardo said. “You’ll get messy.” Nita bowed her head in acknowledgment, and stood waiting.
“You look lovely,” Jennifer said, and Nita’s gaze fell further. Then she looked up at Jennifer, mischievously, from beneath hair glossy with some kind of treatment.

“Why don’t you wear a costume?” There was general acclaim for her suggestion.

“Oh, no,” said Jennifer. “I can’t do that kind of dance.”

“Sure you can,” Nita said. “It’s just imitating the birds. Look.” And she bent and wheeled, arms moving in sinuous waves, eyes and head oriented to some distant horizon. If Nita had looked graceful doing disco, here she really shone: stepping lightly, lightly, as if all the beauty and mystery of soaring flight had come into this smoky kitchen with her.

With all the mothers and the daughters and the old women with three teeth left standing like red (from betel chewing) pedestals urging her, Jennifer could not resist, so she was swept from the kitchen into the back rooms where several more women were changing. They ganged around her and made her up for flight, equipping her with the tunic, the headband, the feathers, the bells. Nita applied make-up to her face, smoothing it on with a practiced hand, so that there was a lift to the corner of her eyes. When she looked in the mirror—the only mirror of its size in Long Awan—she saw that she had become Dayak. Bigger than she ought to be, yes, and with a nose that was slightly too *mancung*, and more awkward of frame, but not (until she moved, at least) grossly out of place. She gave a couple practice twirls, arms out to the sides wobbling like a glider approaching a landing strip. Nita covered her mouth with her hands but the giggles escaped anyway.

“No, no, you’ll be fine,” Nita said, to Jennifer’s accusing look.

Then came the time to dance. Others had cleared away most of the dishes from the meeting hall. Jennifer and the women poured into the room, sitting. Jennifer noticed people looking at her, and fought against the urge to see if Adan
was paying attention. All dolled up like this, such a look might be easily misconstrued.

Pak Apuy, sitting on the floor, leaned over a great sapé, a carved wooden musical instrument that was a cross between a sitar and a bouzouki. He, too, wore a traditional outfit, a black vest woven with silver threads. Beside him, a wide two-headed drum of water buffalo hide and jackfruit wood stood leaned against the wall. As the women sat down, some with husbands and some with children and some all together at one end of the room. Pak Apuy struck up a twangy, loud, repeated strumming of the two strings, which were nothing more than individual strands of a motorcycle brake cable, stretched above several moveable frets. The effect, however was resonant and hypnotic, the rhythm a lively cut-time that was clearly meant for dance.

Amid claps and cheers, several of the women got up individually and danced the hornbill, sighting along graceful extended arms, each one serious or smiling by turn, seductive, shy, or—Bu Apuy in particular—expressive of utter self-confident fullness. A caste system was at work here; the ones dancing were the village’s leaders, their ‘good’ people, and especially, those that came from Kenyah or Lun Dayeh backgrounds, since those tribes had retained the strongest links to tradition. There would be no Punan dancers tonight—their music was different, their lifestyle different. And the Lengilo—who had been on the verge of being enslaved by the Lun Dayeh when the Dutch finally got around to colonizing the interior of Borneo and put a stop to headhunting—would not be dancing, either.

Jennifer looked around. Even the children’s attention was rapt, and the faces reflected pride. Adan was watching the dancing, not her. Then Nita pushed her from behind, stood and dragged her into the dance space. “You have to go with me!” Jennifer whispered, but too loudly, since everybody broke into laughter. Nita stuck with her, though, striking a pose, hips at an angle, one leg forward and bent, arms straight out to the sides, feathers aflutter. Jennifer gamely
copied. Then Pak Apuy played a deeper, slower, richer music, and the two of them danced: Nita by turns coy, valiant, soaring, Jennifer just trying to hang on to a shred of dignity. Jennifer was aware of her breasts bobbing against the fine black fabric, wished that she had a bra that had not been worn to nothing against the river rocks. She was aware of her large feet, of the way her arms did not quite straighten, of how ill at ease she must seem. On top of all her other awarenesses, she was aware of not looking in Adan’s direction to see the judgment that must surely be on his face. Nita’s head floated naturally above soft, rounded shoulders; Jennifer strained to keep Nita in her view at all times so she could keep following. Then Adan shouted—she could see that it was Adan out of the corner of her eye—“Nita wait first!” Now Nita bowed out, motioning Jennifer to keep going. She froze. She looked around.

Everyone wore smiles; at least those people who ever smiled were smiling. Adan was not; his expression was a dare, his mouth twisted slightly to the side. Jennifer closed her eyes a moment. The music never faltered, and she allowed herself to feel its tug, its patterning of time in a world where there was always leisure to watch the birds and wonder what news they brought. She began to move, to trust her place here. No matter what happened in the rest of her life, she had this picture of herself: at the heart of the heart of the forest, she danced among a people who welcomed her. There was no scrapbook in Galiton, Virginia big enough to hold this picture. She could feel the junior prom being progressively erased as she began to climb, lifting her shoulders, straining for the sky. She could feel Geoff, the wall that he had represented, crumble and fall behind as she glided. She could feel the room revolve, and the spaces around it whistle. She had never known what it was to be inside music like this.

At the end, Nita rejoined her, and the two of them sat. There was no applause: this was not the tradition here. But Bu Nardo pinched her upper arm and grinned, and Datu slid a pint glass of borak, rice wine, her direction. She gave a weak, grateful smile and drank it all down. Laughter erupted around her as
molten fire filled her belly. Adan—she looked his way now, full-on met his gaze—raised two hands like a champion.

The night took on blurry edges. The men danced; variations on the hornbill dance that involved acrobatic leaps while holding *mandau*, decorated machetes used for taking heads. They stamped their feet and the meeting hall shook, cried out fiercely to instill fear in imaginary enemies. Adan danced, to her surprise. He danced well, though he didn’t have special clothes for it, his balance and liveness and strength showed in his steady, twirling glide down to the floor, which he struck with his hands before climbing back up, slowly, in perfect command, the muscles in his legs defined and shining. He seemed to be watching her. Jennifer’s cup was never allowed to go empty, nor did she stop drinking from it. Last year she had gotten drunk by accident, not realizing the potency of the wine; this year she was getting drunk because the people around her seemed to want her to. Peer pressure: reason enough. Surely she was grateful to be a peer.

Then the party really got going. Someone struck up the drum, and people banged on glasses and plates, and the wine really flowed. From out of the kitchen burst men with bamboo poles balanced on their shoulders, roast pigs hanging trussed by their feet from the middle. Two brass resonators chimed in, high note over low, low note tolling. Straining, shirtless, sweating, Datu and the other men tromped through the crowd of shrieking children, pigs swaying between, the music hypnotic. Jennifer swayed with the music, too, wondering if she was slipping into a trance—she felt strange, floating, disembodied from the neck down. Someone thrust to her lips a warm, quivering slice of pig fat—just the pure blubber off the shoulder, a delicacy for special occasions—and, her field of vision filled by the singed black stubble on the skin to which the fat was still attached, she took a bite.

More laughter, and suddenly she needed to get out. She edged around all the dancers, the oil lamps, the squirming shadows of children, the smoky alcoholic mess of a village all packed into this one overhot room, and nearly fell
down the log ladder trying to reach the ground. She felt a hand on her shoulder, steadying her. Adan’s face swam just above her like a dark moon. She couldn’t talk even to say thank you until she had nearly tumbled to the ground and edged around a corner and—hopefully out of sight but her state of mind was not conducive to carefulness—puked.

She seemed unable to give accurate instructions to her limbs, and she staggered back around to the ladder, where Adan waited, a sympathetic expression on his face. She slumped against him, and they both sank down to sit against the ladder. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she said, not sure whether she said it in Indonesian or English.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he said. “You drank a little, I guess.”
“A little! They won’t let you—I mean you won’t let you—I mean you won’t let me stop…. drinking!”

He chuckled from somewhere deep inside, reminding her of Bu Sri Ayu. “I thought you hated me?” she said.
“Hated you!” He sounded genuinely shocked.
“You’re always insulting me.”
There was a long pause. He reached out and put a hand on hers.
“Like that,” she said.
“An insult? That?”
“You wouldn’t do that with a Dayak girl, would you? You do it to show me I’m not like others, I don’t deserve the same respect.”
“Jennifer, I—”
“Don’t lie to me!” She swayed to her feet, blinked back down at him. Had she yelled? Would she bring the longhouse down on them?
“Look, calm down. I had no idea you’d take it this way.”
She glared.
“I’ve been around Americans, you see. I thought—I wanted to—I didn’t want you to think I was like the others, clueless about where you come from.”
“How would you know where I come from?”

“My research. Remember? I assisted a NAMRU team—three men, two women—for two years.”

“NAMRU?”

“The U.S. Navy Medical Research Unit,” he said. “We were looking into all kinds of things. Malaria, dengue fever, filariasis…” And then he was telling her all kinds of things. How they had designed a dysentery questionnaire for the people of lowland Irian Jaya, Western New Guinea, where the first question, ‘if your stool is loose now, when was the last time it was firm,’ elicited blank stares of puzzlement. “You see, they’d never seen anything but diarrhea, they had no idea any other condition existed!”

Why am I listening to this, Jennifer wondered, suddenly woozy. She put out her hands to Adan and he helped her back to sitting. She leaned against his shoulder. He seemed to be sitting in an oddly tense manner; his shoulder was like a rock. She shifted against it, trying to find a comfortable place for her head. Then she realized why he was tense. “It’s okay,” she said. “You can treat me like an American.”

All in one smooth movement, a single gesture of unfolding, he spread an arm like a wing around her shoulder, and he pressed her to him, his lips seeking hers. She could feel every nerve jangling all the way down to her toes, her body suddenly restored to her as she kissed him back. The cold night air had swirled down from the mountaintops and pooled around them, giving her goosebumps as her mouth sought his warmth and greedily devoured it until it spread throughout her.

They broke off, and she put her hand to her mouth. “Oh gross,” she said, “I was just sick.”

He leaned forward and pushed her hand out of the way and kissed her again. After a second, she dissolved against him. “What bothers me,” he said when they were both breathing again, “is that you’re married.”
Just then there was a clattering of feet on the verandah above them, and they scrambled to their feet, Adan supporting her. A whole family of parents, grandparents, and what seemed like twenty children worked their way down the ladder pole. Jennifer hung her head, and Adan mimed a drinking motion in response to what must have been their quizzical looks. What a spectacle I’m making of myself, Jennifer thought. But like all her thoughts tonight, it seemed to drift in some ether without import or consequence.

When she awoke she was lying in her own bed, alone except for a handsome headache. It was later; how late she didn’t know. But the bear was restless outside, and if he had been making enough noise to rouse her from her stupor, he must have been body slamming the wall of the house.

It took a little while to sit up, and even longer to raise herself up to sit on her desk chair with her head between her knees, wondering who had brought her home. The bear, meanwhile, continued whatever destruction he had started, an infernal racket. By the time she stood and drank cool water and went outside, though, she felt like she could function. In fact, she felt strangely lucid.

It was that rarest of Borneo nights, a clear sky with a sliver of bright moon. A planet—she guessed Venus—rode the moon’s back on its arc across the firmament. Oswald had torn the river rocks from their cairns and was, indeed, heaving himself against the house, scoring its side with furrows. Pak Dayung did not have an answer for this: what if the bear grew big enough to break out but still wanted in? Tell me that, she thought.

As usual, though, Oswald grew docile and affectionate when she opened the gate. She shook his scruff with her fingers, and he leaned into her. Sitting on his haunches, his head now reached her waist. “Come on, Ozzie, let’s go for a walk,” she said, attaching the leash. She had meant to do this after the party, but apparently for her the party had ended early, with her unconscious. There was much she needed to think about, now that she could think.
Heaven was a starry night where the eyes can open outwards forever. She wanted infinite distances, a cold clarity. She squatted in her hiking boots and khakis on the close-grazed grass of the village soccer field, her head upturned, looking (to a heavenly eye, as she imagined it, a great night bird) like a hungry chick. She squeezed her knees to her chest, and she wished she could just open her mouth and be filled. Oswald wandered nearby, sniffing at the grass, or at the insects in the grass.

On a night like this, cold, wet air, a slight breeze rustling the matted rooftops and distant trees, the calls of frogs and rustle of crickets in the grass, she felt like she was close to home. Whatever home might mean. She spun the scene the way she always imagined it, in ripples of geography that got wider and wider. She was in a huddled village of one longhouse and six crude, government-made shells. She could picture, as she sat feeling the goose bumps raise themselves on her arms within their sleeves, the smoldering embers of thirty kitchens, families curled together against the cold on woven mats drawn close around the hearth.

Widening her consciousness further, she followed the river that edged the village, from its sources at the roots of the great ironwoods on the mountainsides, down the steep slopes in ice-cold cascades past the villages, strung along it all through the high plateau, each a half-day or day’s walk from the other, seen from the air a string of emeralds on a necklace, the grass-green soccer fields at the heart of each. It was easy to picture, from the time she had flown over in the small missionary plane, and from the maps she’d studied in picking a field site.

She held the entire plateau cupped in her imagination, its rocky crags to the north, the deep wrinkles of the hills above Long Awan and the gradual opening of the land before it gave way, just three days’ hike to the east, to the lowlands—gave way in a great cliff hundreds of miles long and a thousand meters tall, a cliff from which this river and a dozen others just as big hurled themselves and crashed below, the experience making them humbler, tamer, mostly navigable. She had seen the cliffs, had dipped among the never-ending rainbows,
watched the cliff swallows before their tiny limestone caves dart and scatter at the shadow of the small plane's wings. But now it would all be bathed in moonlight, stark black-and-white, moon-colored rock rising sheer from unbroken forest, the waterfalls stark and even in their fury appearing nearly motionless, as if caught in a strobe. The swallows themselves would be in fitful sleep, but waking for any and no reason in bursts of nervous energy, leaping from the heights and coming back to rest, startling their neighbors until their neighbors in similar edgy flight startled them, in hidden pockets of the rock face, secreting the sticky saliva of their nests.

Then, moving more quickly now, the broad coastal plains with their corrupting, excruciating heat, the broad muddy swath of the rivers swollen with settlement and commerce, log rafts half a mile long shepherded down past eroding banks and unhealthy children wading amongst clouds of flies, sheens of oil climbing the riverbank with every high water, crocodiles and motorized longboats sliding through.

Then the cities of the coast, the fiefdoms of the Malays, packaging the resources of the forests, the rivers, and shipping it all to Jakarta and Surabaya and the world, the plywood factories and the Bugis cargo ships and the Atlantic Richfield and Royal Dutch Shell refineries and sleazy markets for blinking, endangered cuscus and imprisoned parrots tearing their exotic plumage from their own shoulders with their iron-hard beaks.

As she sat and clear-eyed watched the stars in Long Awan she journeyed beneath them in widening circles of geography until she took in the island of Borneo, the half-deserted swamp islands alongside it where semi-feral fishermen staked houses and watched the overloaded ferries wallow past bearing human traffic to and from teeming Java. She pictured the shallow coral seas, and the side knife-cut trench to the east that separated Borneo and Sulawesi, Asia proper and Australasia. She pictured Jakarta itself, a pulsing spear of vapor lights and skyscrapers aimed at this same moon, then the lands of Bali, Australia, Singapore.
winking at the bottom of the Malaysian peninsula, the great belly of Southern China and the curved satellite of Japan’s islands. If in this unfolding map she was at the center, her Virginia origins were at the absolute edges, an almost inconceivable distance away, America on the other side of the world enjoying, as she sank into dark night, its morning coffee. “I’ll have a cup of Java,” someone was saying as they hurried from the commuter rail station in Chicago’s loop, never picturing the unscrolled expanse of the Pacific, the unnamable steppes of Central Asia, the ancient trade routes between Pontianak, Tamil Nadu, and Madagascar through which Java flowed. She pictured it all, every teeming land of humanity, and all the green and the blue and the spreading stains of smoke, and she knew herself small upon it, but her imagination stood above it like St. Exupery’s Little Prince on his asteroid, with the baobab tree astride.

“How--?” she heard, expelled sharp and loud as if right in her ear, even as a dark shape uncurled and snapped beside her, dragging her across the ridges of dirt where the grass was scarred with plane landings.

“Mother!” a human voice screamed even as the bear’s panting and grunt swelled into a growl that became a sudden whisper of air that became the night-piercing sound of cloth—and the flesh within it—tearing.

“Oswald!” she called, scrambling to her feet and pulling against the leach, which stretched between her and the dark hunched shape. “Leave off!”

She fumbled with a flashlight and turned it on the bear, disorienting it. The leash grew slack, then jerked as the bear began to pace, four-footed, between her and the man who had surprised them in the dark. Her flashlight shone full on the unsteady figure of Adan, whose right leg bore three ugly furrows, which bubbled blood. He stared straight into her flashlight, but his eyes were wide and dark, and as she watched in speechless horror, he crumpled to the ground.
PART TWO: PLACES TO STAY

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jennifer was still reeling from the transition: waking in the middle of the night to motorcycle noise, the two stroke engines like a particularly aggressive flatulence, she could not make sense of the walls around her, the powdery whitewash over cement. The night heat, sweat gluing her hair to her eyelids, turning her sheets sticky. The air pollution: when she blew her nose the mucous came out streaked in black.

She waited, mute as a widow, for the bemo that roamed the city core, the blue ones that would take her to the hospital, and she piled into the mini-bus past the elbows and knees of a dozen other cramped passengers, passing her money to the driver. She drew eyes; she was larger than most women they had seen. People asked if she was an actress, a model. She also drew hands, which groped toward her in ways that seemed not conscious, and which she rebuffed and removed with just as little involvement as the owners of them. The paradox of the crowded vans was that the large person did not oppress the smaller; the smaller ones kept coming in, old grandmothers barely four feet tall slipping beneath her arms, resting for a moment on her knees as they pressed in against her.

Then the hospital, the front of it like a battlement, a low building set off by an iron fence and an army of food vendors; the bakpao, white and round as eggs, warmed by hissing steam, caged in glass; the sate in little lines of fat ordered by skewer; the fried rice and the noodles in blackened steel woks, chicken claws hanging ready beside.

There was no reception desk, no order inside, just crowds of people clutching small papers outside of small windows; some had chairs, but many stood, waiting for the pharmacists to grind powders and decant potions. An old woman whose hair appeared to have been shocked entirely from the left side, so that it exploded in gray
from her right, harangued passersby with her complaints; she had been there every day that Jennifer had gone.

Jennifer cut through the hallways to the courtyard, where the bushes grew into animal forms; elephants and dogs stood in perfect attendance; deer stood mid-startle, bursting into fresh green leaves. Among their roots living cats prowled, cats that over generations had grown adept at hunting not only the mice and cockroaches, but the spare bits of human flesh loosed from the surgery tables. The pale and wasted forms of people from the tubercular ward often drifted among the topiary, surrounded by clouds of their own coughing.

She walked the rows of the private rooms, from each of which emanated the high whine of television sets; the inhabitants were older people, and the volume on some shows was turned up so high she could hear the dialogue as she went past: “Rama, your eternal name will rescue me from Rahwana’s lustful advances.” “But Carla, your husband is my best friend!” “The President says that education remains the priority.” Surprising how much better her comprehension had gotten, living without English.

Then she reached the room, always silent, where Adan lay, and when she knocked, and pushed through the swinging doors, and saw his face, round against the pillow, it was as if she saw again, and smelled, and heard, the bridge in the forest where she’d first seen him. How a teeming mass of jungle could seem more orderly than a featureless hospital room, she did not know, but there was a rightness there that was missing here, and only his face held its traces. His eyes were always dark and still, alert, aware of her presence, it seemed, even when she had forgotten it, and seemed to herself a tremulous and floating thing, the merest body, her mind gone to distractions and worry.

“Hello, Jennifer,” he said.

“Hello, Jennifer,” she said. They both smiled at the joke, which even after many repetitions never wore thin. Nor did it ever cease to startle her a little seeing the neatly typed name on the card by the door: Jennifer Hawley. The subterfuge of
checking Adan in as herself had occurred to her in the worrisome days after the attack, as the wounds grew visibly infected, and his fever higher, and his bouts of consciousness weaker and less frequent. In the little room in Om Barnabas’s house, she had held his hand and apologized, whispering the words to his unconscious forehead. It was a mistake to have thought she could save the bear’s life, that an act of salvation would cost nothing.

His breathing grew to fill the room, and the flesh bulged red from the yellowing fissures when she and Bu Nardo changed the bandages. She had squeezed her little tubes of Neosporin into the gaps and seen them disappear to no effect; she had dosed him with the doxycycline meant for her own emergencies. She felt the chills of foreboding at the return of a condition like Nenek Sunal’s. *That’s where I first met him.* She grew superstitious, haunted by shadows. And she counted the money in her house and in her bank book. This many hundreds of thousands to charter an emergency MAF flight; this many for the hospital; this many for his trip back, and her trip to Jakarta, and losmen, and bribes for her paperwork…it didn’t add up. She couldn’t afford it. She pushed the grim equations out of her mind, prayed for the best. But each day things grew worse: not only Adan, but the villagers, who asked the same questions over and over, testing her answers against their silent and implacable judgments. *Just say it,* she implored them with her eyes, her turned back. *Just say it: I am responsible.* But no one did; even Pak Dayung, who knew most intimately that she had not been able to let go of the bear, her project, until it was too late, murmured something empathetic and indistinct. In fact, she later learned that it had been he who rebuilt the pen stronger and stuck the bear back in it the night of the attack. Jennifer had not gone out to see the bear until the moment she packed to leave, and then she had just hugged him, tears in her eyes, while he bellowed his confusion.

Finally she had hit on the idea of Adan’s using her health insurance, and going by her name. With that one desperate thought, she had proceeded fixedly from ground to air to ground again. The hospital, as she’d gambled, had accepted his strange name and lack of ID card: he was from the *pedalaman,* after all, the innermost realm of the
forest. A Punan, what sort of name could you expect? Something as strange as “Jennifer Hawley,” why not? So Jennifer Hawley rested in the hospital, and the doctors pulled blood from both arms and inserted other fluids through IV drips, and told the other Jennifer Hawley to wait patiently outside until the patient felt better.

“How is Jennifer Hawley today?” Adan asked. He had lost enough weight that his cheeks looked sunken, and his color yellow.

“The doctors say Jennifer Hawley will need much more rest. But he is on the mend, and they are not so worried about brain infection.”

“And the other?”

“The other Jennifer Hawley is still stricken with remorse.”

“Then teach me English, and atone.” So she did; thus they spent their hours, until the last two in the late afternoon when she folded the International Herald Tribune onto the metal tray beside his bed and climbed onto the sheets with her head against his shoulder, her body curved carefully away from the insertion points of his tubing. There they lay staring at the ceiling, or out the window at the gentle white heads of clouds hurrying inland to gather in the mountains and darken into rain. And they talked, when he had the energy.

“Jennifer Hawley,” he said, “Did you really think that I was dead twice now?”

“I did,” she said. “On the plane I could not hear you breathing above the noise of the propellers. You slumped against the seatbelt in the copilot seat and I could only see your head, listing sideways in front of me.”

“And the other time?”

“—was before you were born...or at least, born to me. It was Bu Lejeng’s fault: she always called Om Barnabas he who has lost a child. So I thought you long gone.”

“Silly Jennifer Hawley,” he said. “Did you live among us all this time and never understand death names?”

“I am silly,” she said, liking to think herself so. Liking the warm dark shadow along his neck, from chin to collarbone, where her own head rested.
"I will explain them to you sometime," he said. "When I have more energy. Can you wait?"
"Of course," she said.
"Meanwhile, you must call me nangi jinan."
"Nangi jinan."
"Thank you," he said, and drifted off. When the hospital staff discovered her there, they shooed her into the street.

Many people were shooing her into the streets. At the first guesthouse she had stopped at, mid-evening after having checked Adan into the hospital, the desk clerk stared at her and said coldly, "We don’t allow cewek to stay alone here among the men."
"That’s ridiculous. I’ve stayed in losmen before."
"Yes, I’m sure you have," he said, "But this is not that kind of place."
Her jaw dropped as she understood his implication, his use of cewek, the familiar and slightly derogatory word for girl. "Where do you think I’m from?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Wherever you say."
"If I said America?"
"Not a chance."
She showed her passport. He studied it carefully, looked back and forth from her face to the picture. "I’ve lost weight," she said.
"How did you get this?" he asked.
"What do you mean? I wrote to Washington, DC like anybody does. Any American."

He laid it on the counter and stared at her some more. It began to make her nervous: if he thought her a prostitute, what did this stare signify? "No," he said. "Even if I believed you, the manager would see you coming in and out and be angry. Find somewhere else."
She had found another place, the *Losmen Fajar*, which was clean and bright (as
befit its name, which meant Inn of the Dawn), making sure to speak only English and to
have passport in hand when she checked in. That seemed to do the trick. She dumped
her backpack on the floor of her room on the second floor, and in private, smiled.
Imagine having the problem of being unable to prove you weren’t Indonesian? Her
accent and body language must have really improved during this year in the rainforest.
It caused her problems, though: after dark she earned dirty looks from both the vendors
and customers at noodle stands, and then the problem with the *bemos*, the vans. She
had had no idea that prostitution, or at least the wariness against it, pervaded so
thoroughly the everyday institutions, the restaurants and hotels. I’d be in a marvelous
position to do an ethnography, she thought, but dismissed it. Her role was no longer to
observe only, but to help. The mere act of reporting on something interesting, no
matter how exotic it seemed to her, was not going to satisfy.

That she could pass for Indonesian in the city made some sense. The range of
different types was immense. She had forgotten. Samarinda, a port city, attracted men
from all over the islands: dark, bearded traders from the eastern isles of Timor and
Flores, pale Chinese, slim dangerous Makassar sailors. And the women wore *jilbab*
veils or covered their entire bodies in black or strolled free as tourists in jeans and T-
shirts, fat, thin, tall and short, holding hands sometimes in great phalanxes that took up
the sidewalk and part of the street. The traffic spilling over itself consisted of bicycles,
motorcycles, scooters, private cars with nervous drivers, taxis and *bemos* leapfrogging
from curb to center, swerving and speeding and cutting off all the others in the haste of
picking up and dropping off paying customers wherever they waved.

In all of this chaos, plus the chaos that spilled from markets in milling crowds
and fruitsellers’ baskets and tented street stalls, Jennifer passed for a native, but unlike
a native, walked alone, deep in thought. “Any fax yet?” she asked the man at the
*Wartel*, the Telephone and Postal office down the street from her hotel. He held up a
hand with the finger and thumb curled into a great round ‘O’ and grinned at her,
maddeningly. She checked back several times daily; he had gotten used to her.
Sometimes she hadn't even pushed her way inside the smoked glass storefront before he saw her, and the hand rose to give that same sign of emptiness.

She rented time on some computers in a shack run by students from the local university, composing a second fax. She tried to sound polite, not desperate, while still showing the urgency of her situation.

"I wrote in haste last time, and may not have communicated as well as I might the limited time frame I have available..." While she wrote, the students gathered six deep at the computer next to hers, which had been newly equipped with internet access, programming viruses. "Not that way, tolol!" one of them shouted. "It has to be self-executable!" A couple times she got up to go outside and buy some iced coconut juice, and when she came back they quickly shut down several windows of pornography. "Ma 'af Ibu," they apologized, pinning it on one inoffensive looking boy among them. "Ade here is a lowlife." Ade, meanwhile, slapping and pinching the others' legs while smiling at her apologetically.

Back at the Wartel she sent the new fax, defiantly thrusting it at the clerk with the signing hands. He only grinned more, as if already enjoying the joke that this would prove as useless as the first. She said, "I'd like to make a call." He waved her towards a booth, one of a dozen along an entire wall, each its own smoked glass and chrome enclosure. She sat in a plastic chair and eyed the telephone. After a moment the numbers on it, spidery red LEDs, blinked and zeroed.

She dialed the international code for America, then the toll-free number for collect calls.

She closed her eyes. As the moment drew closer, she could hear her mother's voice. It formed so clearly in her mind, as she bent forward and cradled the phone between shoulder and ear, that the voice of the operator came as a shock. A second shock was hearing American English for the first time since those few minutes with Tim in Long Awan, months ago. And the third shock, when she opened her eyes from the first two, was the amount of money she already owed, and how rapidly the numbers were rising. She hung up the phone and went back to the clerk. "It's a collect call," she said. "The charges are supposed to go to the other person, in America."
"But you're using our phone," he said cheerfully, never losing his smile. His teeth shone whitely from between his parted lips. "Yes, and my mother, in America, is using her phone. It's still just one phone call, and the charges from it should go to either of us, not both."

"Then they have to be here."

"But you don't even know the rates. They're American rates, I'm using an American operator."

"Ya, if you call America, you call America. It costs what it costs."

"That makes no sense."

He raised his shoulders and palms, and kept on grinning. She glanced back at the phone. Her mother had been that close. The phone might have been ringing, the old yellow princess phone that hung in the kitchen, maybe with her own grubby fingerprints still on it. "Okay," she said. This was still the place she depended on for her fax from Mark. "What do I owe you so far?"

It was as much as she had. Trembling with rage and sorry, she paid him and walked out, feeling like a character in one of those old songs, talking to the operator, unable to connect. A truck almost hit her before she re-awakened to the fact that she still had to survive in the here and now, this vinegar and chili-spiced street, littered with black plastic bags and hazy with leaded gas. Not just survive; live.

"Distant relations could wait."

"So the key thing is, they're fictive, right?" Jennifer asked. "Nobody's really dead." She was in her curled-next-to-Adan position, watching his mouth move in profile. It was a delicious mouth; she struggled upwards and kissed it.

He kissed back, deliciously. Then said: "How do you expect me to answer if you act like that?"

"Sony," she said, snuggling back down. One of his hands reached around her back, and his hand rested on her waist. She felt wide-hipped, womanly, alert to every
nuance and gesture of his body and hers. She wanted to climb on top of him, but the wounds remained sensitive.

“That kind of offense you don’t have to apologize for,” he said. “It redeems itself.” He ducked his chin and looked at her. “You’re lovely, you know.”

She didn’t know. But let him think so. All those years she had spent with Geoff, feeling defensive about her body, insisting that the two of them notice and then excuse every flaw, the slightly hooked nose, the smallish breasts—she saw now that they had been wasted. Because now she did not have any need to pursue distractions. With Adan presence itself was a fiery promise, and all her body parts did what they needed to do: smolder. God, she wanted to climb on top of him.

“Death names are not fictive,” he said, “They are perfectly factual. You will die and so will everyone you know; eventually, bereavement is total. Death names are the reminder. A mother calls her child a name, which means who-has-lost-a-mother. Then he is attentive, loving, and true. Because he remembers.”

“But what if he doesn’t want to be attentive, loving or true at that moment? What if his mother is driving him crazy? My mother drives me crazy when I’m with her. I don’t want to think about her dead; that would be a distraction. It would give her an edge.”

“What would it distract you from?”

“From the fact that I am right and she is being a neglectful manipulative bitch.” He raised his eyebrows. “If you want to know.”

“So if she was dead you would remember her as a...bitch. That is all?”

“No,” said Jennifer.

“Then there are truer, deeper feelings? A bond that is more than the conflict of the moment? Then why not think of that now, instead of getting lost in an argument that might be petty? Wouldn’t it hold more hope of reconciliation while she’s alive, too?”

Jennifer turned and stared at the ceiling. A little lizard crawled across the tiles, upside down, stalking a fly that also landed upside down, then flew away every time the
lizard got close, bumping repeatedly into the ceiling before it calmed down enough to land for real, hanging on by its hairy feet. What does that look like to the lizard? Did it look right side up, the way that humans see birds take off and land from the surface of the earth, the same surface to which our feet are stuck? Or did it look like falling, and catching oneself again?

“What do you call a lover?” she asked.

“Nangi jinan. The one who is left alone.”

“Who will be left? Does it apply if the lover walks away, or just if she dies?”

“She is lost, that is all.”

“I can’t call you that, then.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m in the middle of doing everything I can to come back. I can’t do that Asian thing of acceptance, of detachment. It freaks me out too much to think about my own death.”

His lips curled slightly upwards, a sad smile. Perhaps he was watching the same lizard she was; it had lunged, and missed again. The fly was bouncing all over the ceiling, making an angry, surprised noise every time it hit.

The fax finally came. Mark Reynolds: “Many apologies for the delay. I was out of town for the holidays. By all means, come see me the moment you get to Jakarta & we’ll talk about developments re: your work, our Kalimantan initiative. You’ve been in touch with Stuart? A whole team of his graduate students are about to descend on your village, so we’d better make sure you’re there.” Jennifer, leaning against the counter, felt her knees sag in relief. Tears actually came to her eyes. The panic, which had built up so gradually she hadn’t realized how high the flood had gotten, receded suddenly. All this under the watchful eyes of the grinning clerk. He said something.

“What?”

“Good news?”

“The best.”
“Ah,” he said. “Worth the wait.”

“Umm…”

“What was it exactly?”

“The news?”

“Yes. You know, it seems so important. All the people in here, they seem to have such important news. The cables connect in every direction, and in every direction is the buzz of talk. We who work here never know anything. That’s frustrating. But you look like someone who could be asked.”

She blinked at him.

“So what would you say it is,” he persisted. “What is the good news?” He held up his hand to stop any precipitous answer. “Not the details. Those are private, of course. Just, if you had to sum it up.”

Jennifer considered for a few moments. “Money,” she said. “And love.” Because this was her passage back to Adan’s world, and her continuance with him.

“And family”—thinking of all the people affected—from Oswald, who would win his safe release only from her, to her mother, who would have to wait another year to see her home.

She added, as an afterthought almost, “And saving the world.” Because this was NFI’s mission, no more nor less: to rescue animals (and by extension, humans) from extinction by preserving their habits more or less intact. Corporate entity that it had become, a sprawling presence with offices in most countries in the world and a budget larger than many small nations, it was good to remember what NFI stood for, the ideals that had launched it, and the millions of subscribers to those ideals whose contributions kept it going.

His grin stretched even more broadly, as if to say: this is what I thought. This is the service we provide. This is the center of human connections, and now you know why we charge so much for phone calls. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you,” she said.
Mark Reynolds also gave her the address of NFI’s Samarinda headquarters and suggested she stay there while in town. “We can’t afford that kind of luxury in Jakarta, but in the provinces it’s cheap enough. Farida runs the place; talk to her if you’re interested. On the other hand, the Hotel Mesra--I assume you’re staying in the Hotel Mesra, it’s the only decent place in town--has its pool, its bar, its jazz pianist in the lounge...not to mention its ‘Intimacy’ (as if! What a name for a place full of stodgy businessmen!). If you don’t want to give that up, that’s quite understandable. Farida will be prepared either way.”

Jennifer rode a blue bemo out to the section of town with NFI’s headquarters. This was her first trip outside the city core, and she stared out the window at the seemingly endless stretches of one- and two- story homes and rooming houses, whitewashed or shaded a weak blue or entirely encased in bathroom tile. Every block had its street vendors, its pedestrians, its children in school uniform, blue pants or skirt, white blouse. Beyond a certain surface chaos—the dust of the streets, the shouts of the bemo conductors, the evident disrepair of many of the people and buildings, an orderly pattern was not hard to discern: this was home, this was life in all its stability and expectedness for thousands upon thousands of people.

The bemo dropped Jennifer off before an unassuming house which had as its only sign of institutional affiliation a small triangular NFI logo, its trademark grizzly bear, nailed to the iron fence that surrounded it. She let herself in past the gate and walked through a yard whose keeper must be of the same school as the hospital’s, though perhaps a junior member. The grass was kept at the same shortness, almost like a golf course, and had the same crispy snap underfoot despite the near-daily rains. The bushes here retained geometric forms, pyramids and spheres and trapezoids like old lampshades.

She knocked at the door. It did not open immediately, though she could see in the textured glass beside it the ghostly movement of a white form, and hear through the thin wood the muffled sound of a voice. After a minute (she did not think it polite to knock again, when the person was so obviously near), the door opened and a tiny
Javanese woman in her early twenties stood there, her long neck bent over a telephone. “Hold on, deh,” she said, “There was someone at the door.”

“Come in,” she said in English, covering the mouthpiece with one hand. “You must be Jennifer Hawley. Farida. Put your stuff down anywhere, I’ll have Azwar take care of it. Relax, relax, make yourself at home. Eh! Jangan kurang ajar,” she squealed into the phone, and twirled around to face away from Jennifer.

She chattered on, the matter at hand evidently personal from her teasing, familiar tone. A lot of Jakarta slang mixed in, which Jennifer’s ears were no longer quick enough to follow, if they had ever been. Having no stuff to put down, she stood awkwardly for a moment in the center of the room. Shelves of books in English lined two walls, everything from computer manuals to Stephen King paperbacks to coastal ecology tracts. A large conference table dominated the center of the room, knee-high and surrounded by woven mats. A good compromise between the informality of the floor and the alien style of American business, she thought. Floor to ceiling paneled screens separated the conference table from the rest of the room. Off to one side was a small office, the door open and several computer monitors glowing inside.

Jennifer kept glancing back at Farida, who turned now this way, now that, still talking. Did she pause even for breath? She was like a doll; everything about her perfectly formed, but diminutive in scale even by Indonesian standards. Her pants were pleated at the hips; this gave them the only suggestion of three dimensions. Likewise, the stiff collar of her brightly printed rayon blouse was all that suggested dimensions more substantial than a paper cutout. Yet she was animated, even dynamic, her extraordinarily large eyes shining in a small face of precise, unblemished angles. Her fingers, tiny as they were, circled the neck of the phone handset. And, Jennifer realized suddenly, she was talking about her.

“Oh yes, she’s cute,” said Farida. “More than half Dayak already, I’d say. No, her earlobes aren’t long. Don’t be silly, they don’t do that anymore.” Now, at last, a pause. Then: “Okay, some do.”
Who was she talking to? Some girlfriend, from the sound of it. Dishing gossip. Jennifer twirled some hair around a finger—a habitual gesture, though she couldn’t remember when the habit had developed. Perhaps it had grown along with her hair, which at this point badly needed a trim. Suddenly she realized there might be a mirror in this house, a real mirror. Neither Adan’s hospital room nor her losmen had mirrors larger than the broken medicine cabinet that had sufficed in Long Awan. As Farida’s conversation moved on to other topics, Jennifer drifted from the room.

A bathroom connected to an empty bedroom, the bed a creamy invitation to sleep. It looked like a real spring mattress, with white sheets and a blue comforter turned down at the corner. The reason for the comforter occupied part of the window: a small, modern-looking air conditioner with winking yellow lights. Next to the bedstead stood a blonde wood nightstand with a small brass lamp and a copy of The Nature of the Future, the book by Nature Foundation’s international CEO that laid forth the vision statement for the whole organization. Mark Reynolds had suggested she read it. At the thought that this might be her bedroom, and that book considerately placed for her, Jennifer’s chest swelled with a hope that nearly choked her.

The bathroom held a fantastic mirror, fitted to the upward sweep of the room’s southern wall, lit by soft white bulbs on curved necks slender as cranes. The face that greeted her frowned in familiar recognition. She leaned towards it, seeing how age had begun to reshape her face, subtly—more bone to the cheeks, a slightly rounder, softer chin. She did look more Asian, she thought. Or maybe she had just grown used to seeing Asians, so what before read to her critical gaze as deformities now took their proper place as characteristics of race. A suggestion of crow’s feet perched at the corners of her eyes, though if she took care not to squint at all, letting her lower eyelids fall open in a look as guileless and naïve as a cartoon character’s, those disappeared. More worrisome were the wrinkles of lighter skin radiating downward across the corners of her cheeks, a dozen on each side, in parallel, that did not quite go away no matter how young and uncomplicated she made her gaze. What to call them, these scorings, one for each year of her life? Tiger claws would rake like this, in parallel.
Stepping back from the mirror, she saw the same old faults were there, despite the months of hiking and the bouts with dysentery—dimples at the knee, full, almost puffy thighs above spindly calves. Narrow shoulders. She was like a creature built on two different models: from the waist up slender, compact; from the hips down built wide, substantial, strong.

She lifted her shirt and ran the fingers of one hand lightly across her lower stomach—the small round curve at the bottom that exercise did nothing to cure, and that her friend Julie had called her “Buddha belly.” Julie had been with her the last time she had had a reasonable mirror, in the room of a four-star hotel that Julie had treated her to the night before Jennifer left for the jungle. On that night as she was dressing, Julie had encircled her from behind, her arm across Jennifer’s belly, the hair on her forearm as invisible as spider silk until it caught the light. It had been simultaneously goofy and uncomfortable, the way things tended to be with Julie. She could feel Julie’s breath whistling past her ear, could see in the mirror Julie’s pale blue eyes assessing her, or assessing Julie herself, or assessing the two of them together. Julie had a long chin that rested on Jennifer’s collarbone, and a smile a little longer on the left than it was on the right; other than that she was glamour-magazine beautiful. “You’re not half-bad,” Julie had said. “You carry yourself like you’re hiding something, but you have nothing to be ashamed about. You have those long lashes, and that long, slim waist. And there’s something in the curve of your neck, the upward tilt of your mouth, that makes you very kissable.” Jennifer had pushed her away and said, “That’s a little too much information, Julie.” But secretly, she had been pleased.

She watched her fingers trail across the skin, the touch just a tickle at the surface. Strange how when Adan’s fingers had traveled the same course, just the backs of his knuckles lightly, he had awoken in her something almost unbearable, a symphony of rich and compelling harmony. We are instruments made to be sounded by others, she thought.

Farida cleared her throat just behind her, and Jennifer dropped the edge of her shirt and felt her face burn. “Where’s your stuff?” Farida asked. “I’ve got Azwar on
task.” Jennifer turned around and saw the woman looking at her with a face set as politely as it was possible for a face to be set. But those eyes missed nothing. And Jennifer had reason to fear her mouth.

“I didn’t bring any stuff,” Jennifer said. “I wasn’t planning on staying tonight.”

“Nonsense. Why waste money on another night at the Hotel Mesra?”

“I thought it would be best to check this place out first, and meet you, rather than just show up.”

“Well, that’s silly.” She appeared to think. “I’ll have Azwar pick your stuff up from the hotel. He loves any excuse to drive the company car.”

“I’m not at the Mesra,” Jennifer said hastily.

“Then where are you? He’ll go anywhere.”

This had turned into cat and mouse. Farida was a sharp one, all right: she knew that Jennifer hid something. Jennifer didn’t even know why she was hiding it. Why should she be ashamed of staying in a cheap losmen? For that matter, why should she be ashamed of looking in what was to be her own mirror? But instinct told her—more than instinct. The very surroundings, and Farida’s neat metropolitan style, told her that class mattered, that she shouldn’t appear desperate or needy. Jennifer glanced again at the mouth-watering room, its neatness and order and comfort like the promise of a better land. “It doesn’t matter,” she said with what she hoped was decisiveness and finality. “I’ve already paid for tonight. I’ll come by tomorrow.”

Farida seemed to sense defeat, but handled it graciously. “Can I have Azwar pick you up, then? Really, you’d be doing him a favor. The poor boy doesn’t have enough to do.”

“Tell him to get me at the hospital. Four-thirty.”

“When someone dies, their name is not mentioned again,” said Jennifer. “Because of fear of the spirit, right? So even someone whom you loved and who loved you may turn malevolent as a ghost. I don’t understand that.”

Adan laughed. “I had this conversation with Susan.”
"I don’t want to hear about Susan. This is this conversation.” Susan was rapidly emerging from the pack of Navy doctors as the one she liked least.

He laughed again. He was strong enough now that the nurses cranked the back of the bed up and he reclined as on a throne of pillows. It had changed their conversation; she now sat beneath him, and he spoke like a teacher. “Okay,” he said. “Think of it this way: who hurts you more when they’re dead: a stranger or a lover? Whose name, invoked, haunts you?”

Jennifer nodded, conceding.

“And whose death changes you more? That is why when someone dies, the names of all those who knew them also change. How can you make sense of a mother who has lost their child if you call them by their old name? What does that reflect? Nothing of importance.”

“We talk about someone being shattered when they lose a loved one—“

“Yes. Pecah. Broken. Like an old dragon jar, that the Dayaks use to store bones. The container that is the person has broken.”

“And the container that is the village has broken.”

“Yes!” he said. “We move on.” She bent forward and laid her head next to his leg. “And Susan accused us of forsaking memories, fleeing reminders, trying to forget the dead as quickly as possible, but I think the truth is the opposite: we alter our entire lives and identities, irrevocably. We just do so in a way that minimizes ghosts.”

“Not Susan again.”

“What is your picture of a ghost? If it is like—someone—said, then you think of a glowing phantasm with a white sheet and fangs. But ghosts are simply the vivid presence of the dead—and who does not know such things?”

Jennifer pushed her forehead against her knuckles, rolling her face from side to side to massage her headache.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not on duty right now,” she said, irritably. “I don’t need ethnography.” He was silent.
She rolled her head over to look up at him. “Tell me about growing up with Bu Lejeng. Was she always such a terrible gossip?”

He looked at her. “I didn’t grow up with Bu Lejeng. I grew up with my mother.”

Now she sat up. “Tell me about that. I want to know about your life.”

He shrugged. A nurse came in and checked the bag on his IV, handed him two small blue pills for pain, and left.

“Jennifer,” he said. “Nangi jinan—”

“You’re leaving me?” she said.

“I’m reminding you.”

“Of what?”

He considered. “You can’t keep anything. You can never have it all.”

“What does that have to do with it? God, I’ve just got the worst headache.”

She sat back in her chair, rubbing her temples.

“Come here.”

“What.”

“Close the curtains, and come here.”

This was not how it was supposed to happen. Not at all. She moved slowly, closing the door and pulling the wastebasket against it. She drew fast the white curtains across the window. She dragged her feet across the space between them and stood with the heel of one hand against her forehead. “I think I’ve got malaria.” Adan reached out and cupped her between the legs. She stared dumbly down at him, felt the alien presence against her. They stayed that way, not moving, for what seemed like minutes. Then something that slowly revolved within her stilled and hung suspended, and the headache unlatched and poured downward as heat. She moved toward him: hunger seeking company.
CHAPTER NINE

Farida seemed to spend every waking moment in conversation: on the phone, most of all, but when she didn't have the phone in hand (and often when she did) she convened groups of serious young activists for discussions around the conference table. When small breaks opened up she addressed Azwar with a hundred small tasks, from restocking the kitchen gas to crushing the three-inch long flying cockroaches that seemed to find their way into the main room only to bang themselves into the light fixtures like moths. Azwar, a quiet man in his thirties, took every assignment in stride, as if he too were curious as to any limits of his competencies, and regarded Farida's orders as the most expedient means of testing.

"He's quite remarkable," Farida said to Jennifer while Azwar looked on, mildly. "He's taught himself to keep the computers running, as well."

"An all-around de-bugger."


Farida had a cunning little computer, a laptop smaller than any Jennifer had ever seen, and along with it she had a tiny printer in the shape of a magic wand. These she placed at the center of every meeting held around the conference table. She sat before it with her elbows tucked in close and her wrists bent so that her hands dangled at the ready. She seemed perfectly able to talk while typing; it was only when she bent her head to stare at the screen, uncovering some amazing new facility that it contained, that she broke off both talk and type.

"I think this will crunch the numbers for us," she said, interrupting whoever might have been saying something. "What if I plug in some best guesses? We can get a bar graph output." Or: "Look, this will let each of us insert comments. I have a sentence here that captures the broad outlines of what we've been talking about. If the rest of you come over here and add your thoughts to it, we can end the discussion in time for dinner. I think we can even record the comments as audio files."
“So what is your job with NFI?” Jennifer asked her at the end of the first night, after witnessing two consecutive meetings and an hour-long phone call that seemed a continuation of the one she’d overheard yesterday.

“I’m a facilitator,” said Farida. “I make things happen. If Mark wants it done, he tells me and I set it up. Hey, check this out. I’ve got a GPS attachment—a global positioning system. It reads signals from military satellites and tells you your exact latitude and longitude.”

Jennifer dutifully stared. It was late; she was getting tired.

“The thing is, they scramble the signals and send misinformation,” she said. “You have to sit in one place long enough to filter through all the conflicting information before you know exactly where you are.”

“That sounds lifelike enough,” Jennifer said.

Farida looked at her sharply, those large eyes again seeming to take in more than just the words.

“You know, when Mark saw this little baby”—she patted the laptop—“he got so excited he went and bought one just like it, but at an Indonesian mall. So he got ripped off on the price, and it doesn’t do half as much. He still drools whenever this one’s around.”

“Where did you get it, then?” It seemed the polite thing to ask.

“Taiwan, of course. Where they make them. I was there on a conference for a United Nations women’s rights organization. Now that was a group with a budget.” And before Jennifer knew she’d opened the topic of conversation, Farida talked about all the places her good will had taken her. The Philippines, apparently, were like a back yard to her she was there so often on issues of economic justice, and Thailand and Bangladesh had more than their share of appropriate technology conferences. She had been twice to the United States just this year, LA and Seattle, for trainings in human resource management for non-governmental organizations: “Bingos,” she called them. When Jennifer had asked for an explanation, she said, “Well, these are all non-governmental
organizations, NGOs, right? But that refers to the little ones like the groups I facilitate here that have no income at all other than what I give them on Mark’s orders. So to distinguish, we call something like NFI a Big International NGO, get it?"

"Bingo," said Jennifer.

"It’s all a feeding chain: money pools at the top and then spreads out. And all the conferences are about identifying new places for the money to go. You should have seen the Australian international development people in Yogyakarta last week, begging for anyone to step forward and take cash off their hands. They were coming up on the end of a grant cycle and the conditions on the money were so tight that they had hundreds of thousands of dollars left. If they don’t spend it all on time, their budget will shrink for the next five years."

"Why couldn’t they spend it all? There’s no lack of need, right?"

"That’s the thing. They had this model called ‘Self-propelled development,’ and they needed the little guys to write proposals using the terms ‘self-propelled’ and ‘self-sustaining’ and the like. But they had this tight cap on how much to give to any one group—because it was supposed to be like seed money, right, and then the group takes off in a self-propelled way—and it wasn’t enough for the little NGOs to bother getting retrained in their jargon. So at the last minute they held a big conference to say that they were lifting the spending caps and would anybody please write proposals using their terms."

"And did it work?"

"Did it ever! There were NGOs even I didn’t even know about crawling out of the woodwork. Maybe they’d just been formed in some back room at the conference—some civil engineer and a publicist cooking up a grassroots project that they could do on the fly.” Farida laughed, a high laugh that grated a little. "You know, the term ‘grassroots’ is on its way out now, so everyone’s trying to come up with a new word to describe the common people. I don’t know why—"
Jennifer closed her eyes, completely exhausted. “Because the connotations of being stepped on is too strong?”

Farida was silent. Jennifer, surprised, opened her eyes open to see the facilitator staring at her thoughtfully. “That’s good,” she said, as if savoring something. “That’s a good one.”

“You’ll hate her,” Jennifer told Adan the day of his scheduled discharge from the hospital. He still walked with a limp, and got tired, but the effects of the infection and toxic shock syndrome had dissipated. His skin was whole, and the bandages unnecessary unless he dislodged the large yellow-brown scabs. “She’s all the things you criticized me for, but worse. Yesterday I watched a meeting between a German film crew and an association of Kenyah Dayak that she ‘facilitated.’ By the time she was done she had been appointed the film crew’s guide to several villages she’d never been to, and the Kenyah were going to coordinate the timing of all cultural activities to her specification so as to better serve the filming schedule.”

They strolled among the topiary; haltingly, though, because he was just recently upright. “That doesn’t sound like you,” he said. “Too effective.”

“What?” She whirled to face him, and he reminded her with light pressure on her arm that he needed her to be a more steadfast pillar. She turned back to face forward, proceeding at a more measured pace. “Are you saying I’m not effective?”

Over the past days they had talked through each of the insults Adan had seemed to offer Jennifer back in Long Awan, before they had properly met. He had admitted to judging her hastily, but had also defended his perspective: “The fact is, you were over your head, medically. And you were overinvested in that bear. I have proof,” he said, with a grin. She accepted it all, grateful that he could laugh about what had almost killed him. She let him talk her into a different self-image: no longer the marginal, inoffensive researcher on a
shoestring budget, but someone who brought much-needed cash to the village, and whose voice could be heard in the halls of power in a way that local voices could not. “It’s a matter of responsibility,” he said, over and over again. “I learned this with NAMRU—both from what they did and what they failed to do. What you say matters; where you’re from matters; what you give matters. Maybe the people can’t articulate their problems—think of those Irian Jaya people who had never known anything but dysentery—but simply to call their conditions ‘traditional life’ is wrong. You must help where you can.”

So she had been set to help—her new grant from NFI would push her in that already warned her it was naïve to think she could determine anything. But now he had gone further: he called her ineffectual.

“You’re someone who tries to understand,” he said. “That can get in the way. Farida doesn’t sound much bothered by understanding. She senses opportunity and she grabs it. That’s effective.”


“And you call yourself anthropologist,” he said gently. “Let us not forget the names of things.”

“You and names,” she said.

Just after noon the doctor pronounced Adan fit to go. They walked together to the business office, which featured pews like a church’s or courtroom’s lined up before a barred window. Many gloomy families sat on the benches, holding envelopes bulging with bank notes, their lips moving, rehearsing arguments. A man wearing the special batik shirt of the national civil service cried, “My mother has been sick already three times this year,” a man said, trembling from rage or fear. “How can I pay any more?” Jennifer and Adan sat and watched as one by one the cases were closed against protests, questions, and outright pleas for understanding. Money was transferred from the families of the
sick to the hands that reached under the grill of the business office window, and stamps were stamped inside, and paperwork issued forth. It took forever.

By the time she and Adan neared the head of the line visiting hours ended. Jennifer approached the window, cutting off an elderly woman mid-complaint. “Excuse me, but my... fiancée and I prefer to wait here together. Do visiting hours apply?”

The man inside, whose face was as long and bony as a horse’s, gave a short whinnying laugh. “Not in the business office.”

She sat again next to Adan. “I told him you were my fiancée,” she said.

“Does your husband know about this new engagement?” he teased. She had admitted to him the truth about Geoff. To his credit he had refrained from crowing about having guessed as much. “Doesn’t it give him the right to be jealous that the engagement is exactly as real as the marriage?”

“Yes,” she said. “As long as the jealousy is also exactly as real.”

He laughed. The crawling pace of the queue, the atmosphere of dread and the smell of medicines and old bedpans did not seem to bother him; rather, he acted euphoric to be at the end of his captivity. She handed him her insurance card just before they went up to face the clerk. It provided fantastic coverage: the entire cost of the private hotel room, the medicines, the lab work, everything. He presented the card wordlessly. “Jennifer Hawley,” Jennifer said. “He’s fully insured.”

The horse-faced clerk looked at the card and at the chart. “Just a moment,” he said. He disappeared into the back. When he came back he slid a bill back to Adan as wordlessly as Adan had slid the card. Adan glanced at it, raised his eyebrows, then handed it over to Jennifer. When she saw the figure she leaned forward. “This doesn’t take the insurance into account,” she said. “We filled out the paperwork when he checked in.”

The clerk said, “The insurance hasn’t paid anything yet. So the full amount is due.”
“How can the insurance pay anything before the bill is even assessed?”
He shrugged. “We cannot let him go until the account is paid in full.”
“You mean he physically can’t leave?”
“Of course he can’t,” said the clerk.
“He’s well.”
“All the more reason you should pay for his treatment.”
“And if he stays another night?”
“It will be added to the bill.”

Jennifer argued the case, and then begged the case. “This is too much for me to pay just on my own.” Her voice took on the same pleading, helpless tone of the other patients and patients’ representatives, and to no more effect. Eventually the clerk waved her away, and it was a choice between launching herself at the bars and trying to wring his neck through them, or giving up. She gave up.

“I’ll call the insurance company tonight,” she told Adan. “I’ll tell them to call the hospital directly. We’ll have it cleared up by tomorrow.”
“You don’t have the money?” he said. “Really you don’t?”
“I don’t,” she said. “Really.”

He slumped. On the way back to his room, an orderly stopped her.

“Visiting hours are over, Ibu.”

She gave the monkey-shaped bush by the bathrooms a kick in the ass as she left.

Samarinda sprawled across three sides of the Mahakam River, a great muddy channel half a mile wide that bent here before spreading into a massive swampy delta that fed into the ocean thirty miles away. It was the logic of Borneo: all villages centered on a river, and the larger the river, the larger the village. The first side of Samarinda, coming from the south, consisted of the shacks and decrepit housing of the extremely poor. Then there was a bridge over
the Mahakam leading to the city proper, the city of the governor’s office, the markets and hotels and tourist shops. Then the wide, wide expanse of the river, as yet unbridged, leading to the third side: the plywood factories that lined the shore for miles upstream, massive box structures bristling with cranes and tractors, each with its mountain of logs piled by the quays.

Jennifer sat on a painted wooden bench just outside the Pasar Pagi, the morning market, listening to the din of transactions and gazing at river traffic. The square-sailed wooden prahus of the Bugis people, riding invisible winds, navigated near the shore while out in the center, churning the brown water to a yellowish froth, barges laden with coal and lumber proceeded in phalanxes toward the open ocean. Upriver, towboats guided a log raft hundreds of yards long and fifty feet wide toward a plywood factory dock. Even from a distance Jennifer could see that these were the trunks of giants from the upriver clearcuts. Soon enough the logging would reach Long Awan; soon enough everything below it would be gone.

She counted this morning among the most frustrating of her life. First she had called her insurance company—from the Wartel, because she didn’t want Farida knowing her business. She had paid the international rates to Singapore. This insurance was the best you could get—the Asia Association insisted on their Fellows having not only standard health coverage but also Asia-wide emergency airlift; if Jennifer could get to a radio, then presumably a helicopter would be hovering over Long Awan (or anywhere else) within six hours to evacuate her to state-of-the-art facilities in a more developed place. The operator picked up immediately, spoke in cool, clear professional English, and told her that they couldn’t help her. “We’ve had this problem before with Indonesian hospitals in the provinces,” the woman said. “Their accounting is primitive at best, and frequently corrupt. They want payment in cash because so much of it gets diverted, and they don’t like paperwork from us because we keep careful track.
You can try reasoning with a manager, but frankly, your reasons will be more persuasive if you hand over a little cigarette money."

"If I had the cash, I’d just pay the bill."

"Then do so. We’ll be more than happy to reimburse you; as I said, we’re aware of this problem. Give us six to eight weeks to process the payment, in either case."

Jennifer forked over money to the Wartel clerk. He said, "Your phone calls seem to be upsetting to you."

She didn’t reply. She had walked the length of Jendral Sudirman Street to this bench, and now she sat considering her options. She had enough money in the bank to pay the hospital bill—but then not enough to send Adan back to Long Awan, and herself to Jakarta. Nor could she support either him or herself for long in hotels.

On the other hand, she had a credit card. A cash advance would solve the problem at once; however, the cash advance would immediately incur interest, and if she was to be in the jungle for another year, by the time she got out she might be hopelessly in debt. How could she make even the minimum monthly payments if she had no reliable access to mail? And if her income was in rupiah?

The Pasar Pagi began to wind down; vendors piled their remaining batiks and handicrafts into pedicabs or shuttered them into padlocked handcarts. The heat of midday seemed to melt the will to buy or haggle; the air had reached its maximum of humidity, and human flesh took on a sheen like chicken flesh in the broiler. This was the time that many Western tourists stirred from their hotels, having slept in and breakfasted, and some of them came now to the market to admire the molded rubber models of Dayak warships and the butterflies pinned against fake velvet inside crude balsa frames. They moved like dreadnoughts, large and self-contained and perhaps not even noticing how deftly human traffic flowed around them. The remaining vendors hawked their wares in broken English—“This sweet jungle fruit! Unique Borneo wild! Orangutans eat in
jungle, happy!”—and the tourists responded in broken Indonesian: “Dua ratus! Nah, no way, mate. Satu ratus!” Men and women held each other around their fleshy waists, and white skin reddened in the sun, and sweat poured off of them into dark patches on their floral clothes—clothes that were neither Indonesian nor appropriate in their home countries but instead existed only between worlds, as a kind of uniform or international code for tourist.

No one bothered Jennifer except the Bugis crewmen passing by in groups, slim dark men in white pants with their arms around each other’s shoulders despite the heat. Every unaccompanied woman of any race excited their imaginations and attention, but Jennifer ignored the catcalls and suggestions. Tourists took her for Indonesian and Indonesians didn’t seem to take her for a tourist, since she didn’t become the target of sales pitches. She tried not to feel superior to the tourists—she remembered Julie, blond Julie’s bitter complaints about how easy Jennifer had it being able to blend in somewhat. “If I so much as blink, it’s noticed and commented on,” Julie said. “They call the freckles on my arms ‘fly shit.’” Not only that, but Jennifer wanted the easy companionship of English, of American norms. But it was no longer only the fact that she could blend in that separated her from the tourists; it was the fact that she had blended in, had learned the language and accepted the culture. If there ever had been a time when market trinkets would have appealed to her, that time was over. If Dayak, or rainforest, or Asian used to be exotic to her, it was no longer. Nor was she in a state of leisure, though she sat on a bench in the tropics. It was impossible, in fact, to say what state she was in.

An older white woman got out of a taxi and blinked in the sunlight. She was heavy and had gray hair that still retained an impression of yellow; it stuck out from her head in long straggly clumps that might have been an ill-informed attempt at dreadlocks. Her blouse, a bright pink rayon, gapped open when she bent to pay the driver, and her pendulous breasts hung loosely in their halter. The woman strode through three lanes of honking traffic with an apologetic ducking
of the chin, and looked around the market with eyes as simultaneously greedy and prone to disappointment as a child’s. She bought snakefruit, *salak*, from a vendor and eased off the scaled skin. She took a bite and made a face, spitting out the fruit from a mouth made suddenly dry. Merchants on all sides of her watched and laughed among themselves, making her rudeness and corpulence the day’s entertainment.

The woman made Jennifer think about her mother, who would never see this city. If she did come, she would be on the other side of an invisible veil: would seem exactly this pitiful and out of place. *Why didn’t you go to the Philippines with him*, Jennifer had asked her mom as a child, crying for the life where she would be normal, and Brad would not. “Honey, I never would have fit in there,” her mom had said, and Jennifer felt, viscerally, for the first time that her mom had been right. She never would have.

She couldn’t ask her mom for money. Not only would her mother not have it, she wouldn’t know how to go about sending it, and no amount of explanation would cause her to see the need for it. Jennifer stood and, feeling guilty at the disgust this woman inspired, approached her and said in English, “I wonder if you’d like me to take a picture of you here in the market.”

“Nice try,” the woman replied, barely glancing at her. “But I’m not letting you take my camera.”

“Shame on you,” a familiar voice said in Indonesian, “Trying to steal that woman’s camera. What an old trick.”

Jennifer whirled and saw that it was Azwar, in glasses so dark they might have been for the blind. “You startled me,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Carrying out her highness’s orders, what else?” he said. He had a square face in which his large, sensuous lips seemed out of place—or maybe that was just an effect of the glasses. “She needed souvenirs for the German film crew. Something authentic, like—let’s see—these playing cards with maps of Borneo on the back.”
Azwar was more cheerfully two-faced than anyone she’d ever met. Around Farida he stayed silent, even gloomy, accepting each new task with a shrug. Away from her, he cracked jokes (mainly about Farida). But Jennifer had a feeling it could have been about any boss. “NFL won’t put me in charge,” he’d said in the car, sharing confidences immediately as if they were old friends. “I don’t have any education, and I don’t know how to fill up a meeting with empty words. And I’m Ambonese, not Dayak, so I don’t even make a good poster child. So I just keep the place running, and take orders from whoever is there. They never last long.” He did, however, know how to fill a car with talk—he had stopped only when he dropped her off at the hospital.

Now he said, “Can I tell her that you, the anthropologist, pronounced these authentic? She’ll believe you, I think.”

“I don’t think so,” said Jennifer. “Only the snakefruit is authentic around here.”

Azwar lifted his shades and blinked around at the remaining stalls. “Oh, I like that,” he said. “Give them something perishable.” He seemed immensely cheered at the plan, though he did not buy the fruit. They toured the market, passing the woman on occasion, laughing as she eyed them warily. “If you’re a pickpocket, I must be your partner,” he said. Finally he settled on some small rubber figures of Dayaks rowing a slave galley. “She won’t know the difference,” he said. “Besides, she doesn’t seem to have a problem with slaves.”

“You’re awful,” Jennifer said.

Azwar raised his eyebrows in mock offence. “And you probably need a ride someplace. That’s why you followed me to the market, right? Where are you going?” Jennifer took a deep breath, made her decision.

The clerk appeared delighted to see her again; on the other hand, he also would have appeared delighted if she dropped dead on the street or stripped off all her clothes and shouted long live communism. “I need to make a phone call to the U.S.,” she said. “I’ll do it regular, not collect.” He set her up in the booth,
and she picked up the phone and took a deep breath. It was midnight on that other side of the world, but she had Dr. Ashwright’s home number. She dialed, and closed her eyes against whatever bad news the numbers might bring. This was a gamble, and almost the last one she could think of. If she lost it—well, she’d be broke anyway.

“Hello? Who is this?” said a weak, faraway woman’s voice. Mrs. Ashwright.

“Hi, Mrs. Ashwright. This is Jennifer Hawley, remember me? I was at dinner a couple of times? Can I talk to Dr. Ashwright? This is kind of an emergency.”

“Of course, dear. Just give me a minute to get downstairs.”

So he was awake, good. Or perhaps he slept elsewhere than the bedroom? The thought made her sad: Mrs. Ashwright had always impressed her as human, and caring, and centered—how Jennifer herself might aspire to be in middle age. If they slept separately, that meant marital problems, loneliness—more than she wanted to know about her major professor. “Eh? Jennifer?” he said. “Where are you calling from?”

“Samarinda,” she said. “It’s costing me a ton of money, so I have to be quick. I’m doing fine, and my project’s gone well, but I’ve got a situation with money…” and she explained to him about the hospital policy and the insurance. “So I need to ask someone to wire me money, just to cover for the next month or two. I’ll have it back to you by the time you’re out here.”

“So you’re calling from the hospital?” he said. “That’s resourceful of you.”

“Uh, yes,” she said. “Can you do it? Advance me a little? If something goes strange I’ll pay you back when I get back to the states, or donate some Research Assistant time.”

He laughed. “No problem, Jennie. I’ve got money coming out of my ears right now anyway. Did I mention that I got that National Science Foundation
grant? In fact, consider this an advance on your work under that grant. We need you healthy and back in Long Awan by February 15, right?”

“Right,” she said. She hadn’t realized it was so soon. The team of graduate students would be there almost the moment she got back. Suddenly she remembered her determination to talk him out of using Long Awan for his site—so much for that. “Hey, I should get going,” she said, “or the money will go to the phone company.”

“You used an American operator, right? I told you how to do that?”

“Ye-es,” she said.

He explained to her how to pick up the money he’d wire her. “It’ll be there by...tonight, your time,” he said. “I’ll include extra to pay for the call.”

“Dr. Ashwright, I—”

“Stewart. Don’t let all that Indonesian stuffiness affect you now...”

“Stewart, I—I” she could feel tears start to well up in her eyes. “I really appreciate this.”

“Nonsense!” he said, hale and hearty. “We wouldn’t let you rot in some foreign hospital. Besides, this is your money anyway. An advance for services rendered.”

She hung up, and only then collapsed in sobs. You fool, you, she thought. You think you’re so alone all the time. Look at this. Look at this.

With Azwar chauffeuring and an assurance of money, Jennifer was able to purchase a missionary air flight ticket and a set of clothes and all the antibiotics Adan might need up in Long Awan where he’d be bathing his fragile wounds in river water. These she presented to him at the end of visiting hours along with her apologies that it would be one more night in the hospital. He received her gifts with good grace, and she kissed him goodbye. “You don’t have to fly out immediately,” she said. “I’ve got money now for a hotel room, too, if you want to stay in Samarinda...”
“With you?” he said.

“For a day or two,” she said. “But I have to get to Jakarta to make my proposal.”

“To get even more money,” he said.

“To be able to get back to Long Awan,” she said.

He eyed her with amused skepticism. “Why don’t you skip going back to Long Awan, and you and I will play here for a while.”

“How could I do that? My research isn’t finished, my stuff is still up there, Oswald is up there—the whole point is to get back.”

“Is that,” he said, “the whole point?”

“You’re getting at something.”

“What am I to you?” he said.

Stunned, she sagged against the doorway. “You’re someone I love,” she said. “But don’t you see that I have to get back to Long Awan in order to see you again, too? I know!” she said suddenly. “You’re upset I didn’t mention that at first. Well, to be honest, it’s a big reason now, maybe the biggest, and I—”

“Nangi jinan,” he said. “Relax. I don’t expect you to change your whole life for me.”

“I knew you’d use that name against me. I knew it!” She stepped outside and looked down the row of rooms. A hospital orderly had begun making the rounds, forcing visitors out. She stepped back in to find him looking at her mildly. “I did a lot for you today,” she said. It sounded wrong even to her. He didn’t respond.

“Look,” she said, “I’m coming back to Long Awan. I can’t believe you don’t believe that.”

He just looked at her. She could hear the orderly’s footsteps coming nearer.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Go, then. You’ll see me in Long Awan.”
"I'll see you tomorrow!" She pulled back, lower lip quivering. She turned. She turned again, getting to the door just before the orderly, speaking loud, cutting him off. "Do you hate me?"

Adan said, "If we had time, I'd show you how much I don't."

Farida was furious. "Why didn't you come to me for help? Do you realize how bad Mark is at stuff like this? We could have had your friend out today."

Jennifer’s fork hovered in midair, speared clean through a chunk of river fish—cooking courtesy of Azwar. It had hovered quite a while, because her appetite was gone. "So what happened?"

"Well, hold on. First things first. How much is it?"

Jennifer named the figure. Farida disappeared into her bedroom. Jennifer had barely put down her fork when the woman came out with a stack of rupiah about two inches thick.

"Here," she said. "I'm calling it operational expenses, because if this friend of yours is intelligent enough to monopolize your time the way he has, then he's probably somebody we want working for us anyway." Jennifer stared at the stack of bills. "So you say he's Punan, right? We don't have any Punan on staff. Would he be interested in a job? Part time, strictly on an occasional basis?"

"I think he would," said Jennifer.

"And am I right? Is he smart?"

"Very."

"I knew it! People like you don't bother with people who aren't."

Jennifer wanted to ask what 'people like you' meant, but she sensed a trap. Of all people's judgments, she wanted Farida’s the least. She couldn't explain to herself exactly why.
"So here’s what happened," Farida said. "Mark calls me up—I swear he calls every day, I don’t know why he’s not just up here himself; it’s like working for six bosses how often he changes his mind—and he’s got a call from Stewart Ashwright, who’s another of those academics who couldn’t organize his way out of a paper bag. Ashwright—you must have called Ashwright?—I hope you used an American operator? The rates are exorbitant otherwise."

"I didn’t call from here," Jennifer said. Farida flashed another of those sharp, assessing looks. Jennifer felt that all her secrets were being worried loose. "I wouldn’t do that."

"Well, anyway, Mark gets it all wrong—he thinks you’re in the hospital, and he’s furious at me for not getting you out and to a better hospital immediately. And I tell him: no, she’s got a friend from Long Awan—"

"I told him that! I wrote that to him; all he had to do was check the fax—"

"I know! But like I said, it doesn’t take much to rearrange Mark’s reality, he does it all the time just to himself. Anyway, I said I didn’t know anything about money issues and he said: what do I hire you for? And I said: what can I do if the person involved won’t tell me anything”—here she positively glared at Jennifer, daring her to deny that she’d been withholding—“and he said: she has to be telling you something, she’s at the house, right? And I say: no, she’s at the hospital most of the time. So then he’s spinning this huge delusional theory that you’re sick and hiding it, and I say no, and so on and so on.” Farida rolled her eyes. "Finally I said: just authorize me to give her the money, and she’ll take care of whatever her actual needs are."

Jennifer pushed her plate further away, head spinning. "I’m not sick," she said. Her voice sounded childish and helpless and far away, even to herself. "And I did call Ashwright—but I don’t know why he’d call Mark…"

"Oh, that." Farida waved her hand. "Well, it was ridiculous. He was going to wire money at some huge expense and have it hit by fees and the exchange rate—which is horrible right now, by the way—and then he didn’t
realize that it takes several days for a bank transfer, and yada yada yada. As I said: why didn't you come to me first?"

Jennifer said: "I'll know next time." In how many ways had she blown this? NFI thought her sick; they knew her ineffectual; quite probably, Farida knew very well that Jennifer had lied to Ashwright for money. Farida seemed in a near-euphoric mood.

"Well, good. Anyway, no harm done." She got up to go to the telephone, then stopped and said: "Hey, can your friend—what's his name, by the way?"

"Adan."

"Have him come with us to Tenggarong tomorrow. They're having some big ceremony at the sultan's palace, a reenactment sort of thing, and I'm supposed to go check it out for cultural tourism purposes. A lot of the remoter sort of Dayaks are sending dancers."

"He's still pretty weak—"

"I need to interview him anyway, if he's going to work for us."

"He may want to head straight back to Long Awan—"

"Well, does he want a job or not?"

It occurred to Jennifer that a beetle, held by a mantis, might regard its captor with not just fear, but a certain awe for its glittering, terrible efficiency. She nodded. The cash was on the table.

Farida touched the speed dialer. "Mark, darling, I told you she wasn't sick..."

"Oddly enough, I trained as a doctor," Adan said above the rain and the engine noise. The interior of the car smelled of close human bodies, and the windows were fogged. Outside, Kalimantan loomed as an indistinct place of dark shapes. Azwar had the wipers slapping furiously, and he leaned so close to the glass that on the worse potholes he banged either his chin against the steering wheel or his forehead against the windshield. "That's how I met up with the
NAMRU people; they gave a lecture at the university, and mentioned that they
generally employed native guides.”

Jennifer couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Adan had always refused
to share much about himself; now Farida asked, and he simply—answered. No:
he shouted to be heard.

“No one has,” said Adan. “I was to be one of the first.”
“You’re not still at it, then?”
“No. The money ran out—which is why the NAMRU opportunity was
perfectly timed: I was sitting in the auditorium thinking it was time to go join
logging crews.”

“But you could go back!” Farida said. She reached across Jennifer and
laid a hand on his arm and Jennifer added what she was seeing to the list of things
she couldn’t believe. Farida’s voice had been coy and extra bright from the
moment that they’d picked Adan up from the hospital. Adan seemed oblivious.

All three of them sat in the back seat, leaving poor Azwar to be a true
chauffeur; Farida had insisted on interviewing Adan on the way up, and Jennifer
hadn’t wanted to leave Adan alone with her in the backseat—a terrible thing to
admit to herself, this jealousy, but Farida’s charged energy had unnerved her. Not
that sitting between the two of them offered any impediment, however. Farida’s
forearm rubbed gently against her as she withdrew her hand from Adan, and
Jennifer had to fight an impulse to grab the arm and break it over her knee.
Jennifer wasn’t aware of ever having felt quite this way before. It distracted her
for a moment from what Adan was saying.

“...and my mother’s people had paid for everything, so I took the
NAMRU salary and paid them back. Anyway, it was great training, maybe better
than if I had a medical license to hang on my wall. NAMRU handled the
emergencies that came up in the field, everything from acute malaria to
compound fractures, so I learned from watching them, and eventually they let me help out.”

Farida said, “This is good. Very good. We didn’t expect someone like you in Long Awan.”

“Even my father didn’t expect me in Long Awan after I left. Settling down and gaining cash had been so much my mother’s idea, and my being a doctor had been so much her dream, that I think when she died he thought of me as gone, too—my future had been so tied to hers. Still, he wore himself ragged trying to hunt gaharu and bezoar stones to get more cash for me, so to spare him—he was getting ready to move again, to a coastal village with more market opportunities—I just took off one day. Walked to Kuching.”

“In one day,” Farida teased. “Those were big strides.”

“A month,” he said. “Little ones.”

Jennifer wanted to ask so much—and already so much was becoming clear: the confrontation about Nenek Sunal for instance. But why didn’t you say, she wanted to shout. She felt constrained by Farida’s presence, however; had felt constrained ever since seeing Adan and realizing that the tension between them needed room, needed time, needed talk that couldn’t happen with Farida poised and listening. They had said little to each other. Every once in a while now his eyes met hers, and she read in them an expression that might have been pity. It was enough to make her wish for Geoff, for the simple way they had taken each for granted and used each other to shut out the world. This kind of world, in fact: where you gave your heart and body to someone who then seemed to resist even incidental touching, when the car swayed and threatened to press them together.

Farida, on the other hand, put her lips close to Jennifer’s ear during a break in the interview, and said in a whisper that Adan might or might not have been able to hear: “You didn’t say he was so cute!”
The rain fell in a ragged fury as if making up for the unusually tame monsoon season thus far. As they got out of the car, Jennifer may have grumbled—she had many reasons to grumble, and the rain did not help her mood. But Azwar handing out umbrellas, said to her quietly: “This is a good thing, Bu Jen. Maybe this won’t be another year of fires.” Twice in the past decade, after inadequate rainy seasons, Kalimantan had burned: so massively that the smoke shut down airports in Singapore, 1400 miles away. The logging had changed the weather, had primed the island with small, brittle tinder, had driven away the rain and decreased the rivers. Samarinda, an hour from the ocean, had suffered an influx of tidal salt water up the Mahakam, and the poor people who bathed in the water and drank it sickened with diarrhea. “Good reminder,” she said to him.

The other party discomfited by the rain, though, was the sultan of Kutai, whose ceremony had had to move indoors to escape the deluge. Circulating among the Dayak of the local Benuaq tribe, Adan gleaned the relevant information. They had proudly begun the ceremony this morning by standing outside risking colds and bedraggling their hornbill-feather-and-leopard-skin outfits while the sultan (who was also the provincial governor) deliberated for an hour about whether to acknowledge the weather conditions and move inside. Some advisor had finally made a few convincing arguments about the wisdom of placing electrified speakers and amplifiers out in the rain and connected those things to a microphone that would be very near the sultan’s lips, so the entire thing had moved indoors. Now the palace was as humid and close as the car had been, and the much-smaller-than-expected crowd huddled against one end of a long gallery, while the sultan sat on a throne. Jennifer studied his face, which was not at all like she’d expected a sultan’s to be: sallow, puffed into jowls, and afflicted by liver spots. He appeared bored or indifferent, though that may have been a prescribed facial expression; his apparel was military, though it did not look (to her admittedly inexpert eyes) like real military. Military as superficial stylistic application. His hands, empty of scepters, gripped the white arms of his
throne. At his side sat a thin, dry form of wife—she looked like she could never have sex, much less children—her hair pulled back so tightly that her widow’s peak was as defined and dramatic as Minnie Mouse’s. They looked like a particularly boring middle-aged couple you might meet at a Treasury Department function in Washington.

Farida spoke to the event’s organizer, the sultan’s right-hand man, whose title and name Jennifer could not retain; Azwar spoke to the servants, who were as numerous as they were irritable about the weather and the proliferation of primitives in the hall. Jennifer stood alone, watching. Her proper place, strategically, was with Farida—the acquaintance of a governor or governor’s high assistant could conceivably be extremely useful in securing permissions for research in the province. But she did not want to be with Farida right now, no matter the material advantages. Then again, her place by feeling ought to have been with Adan—not only because of him, but because the Dayak among whom he circulated represented ethnographic information, new perspectives, comparisons. Some of the men carried enormous carved masks and painted shields; a troupe from the Bahau region had shaggy grass head coverings that spilled down their backs as if they were living haystacks, and as they took impatient, warm-up dance steps the whole covering shook as though multiple earthquakes traveled the room. But Jennifer did not care for ethnography, and Adan had not done anything to show that he invited her along.

The start of the ceremony, then, came as a relief. Azwar stood next to her and whispered that everyone knew that it would rain today; the traditional time for a ceremony such as this was the hot season. “Naturally,” Azwar said, “The government had a different timetable having to do with party politics and tourism dollars and the like. Serves them right. Only two tourists here.” Jennifer had noticed them earlier: a middle-aged couple whose face bore expressions of tolerant amusement rather than interest—ex-pats, people who lived here, by her
guess, not tourists at all. Their conservative clothes marked them as either missionaries or oil company workers.

A hush fell over the hall as an aide gave the microphones gave a couple of exploratory taps. Then one functionary introduced another, on up a chain of hierarchy that at great length and much repetition led to the sultan, who approached the podium with his own name: "Axis of the World His Honorary Royal Highness the Thirteenth Ruler of the Kertanegara Empire and Bupati of Kutai Province" ringing in his—and everyone's—ears. He began without preamble or excitement to speak in an Indonesian so circuitous and formal and bureaucratic that Jennifer, who had grown used to the casual rural cadences and limited vocabulary of the highland people, had to turn to Azwar for a translation of some of the terms into simpler language. "That's the acronym for the village-level economic development committee," he said, anticipating phrases that might give her trouble. "That's the term for the provincial level representative of the civil servants' political party." One term that kept coming up that he did not translate was upeti. She kept trying to guess it from context, but the context kept changing. First it was something offered, then something demanded, then something not to be misunderstood, then something that was historical and venerated. When the speech finally ended, she asked. "Tribute," said Azwar. "In this case, the tribute that the Dayaks offered to the Kutai sultans once they were conquered vassals, or in some way fell within the sphere of his tax collection. It's also used these days as a synonym for 'bribe' or 'corruption.' That's why he's being so careful."

"I see," said Jennifer. She turned to him and said loud enough that she hoped Adan could hear it: "You've really been a help. You've made this trip worthwhile." He bowed slightly in pleased acknowledgment, but no reaction came from the intended audience to her remark.

Then the dancers stirred forth, with drumming and gongs, the sinuous movement of women enacting the harvest and pounding of rice, or the men
leaping with swords drawn in acts of beheading. The haystacks trembled and whirled and approached and receded. From the Apo Kayan a Kenyah troupe performed the dance that Jennifer had seen so often in Long Awan, enacting the swooping flight and throaty calls of the hornbill. Their costumes were magnificent, consisting of exotic furs and feathers and headdresses and bells at the ankles, and their movements practiced and precise. For the first time Jennifer understood what Pak Apuy meant when he said that culture in Long Awan was rudimentary, fractured and borrowed: that they were a village of those left behind. Or understood what the strength of the church had taken away from ritual. Where Long Awan people were half-apologetic, and cobbled something together at holidays, these Kenyah from the Kenyah homelands showed unmistakable, living pride and self-possession.

Jennifer clapped along with everyone else through the dancing. But after each group went, some representatives came forward and, bowing low, placed at the feet of the sultan offerings of flowers and woodcarvings and beadwork. These offerings Jennifer did not applaud. Toward the end of the day, when she was growing tired anyway, the dancing petered out and all that happened was tribute after tribute after tribute. She couldn’t hear the speeches—no one could who was not within a few yards of the sultan—but each group offered its praises as well as its material symbols of fealty and submission. This went on and on. And even after it was done, a functionary of some kind made a speech which catalogued every little thing that had been offered, and remarked at length on the viability of the Sultanate into the next century, and the eternal bond between this kingdom and the Dayaks of the hinterlands “no matter how far from seeming civilization” who would work together to make for not just this province but for the whole Indonesian nation a vibrant future full of unique and profitable cultural life.

“Oh my God,” said Farida, as they tumbled into the car for the hour-long trip back. “I’ve never heard so much talk. I’d say that as tourism goes, this is a dud unless they learn to skip the damn speeches and get to the dancing.”
Everyone seemed to have a headache as they drove back through rain that had only increased in gloom as the day wore toward evening. Even Farida was silent. Jennifer could feel Adan next to her and a million miles away. She said, hoping to lure him back, “The tribute part was pretty awful, too. I mean: the politics of it. Why would the Dayak let some petty bureaucrat who’s inherited the name sultan continue a tradition so abjectly humiliating? Why don’t they do their own dances, and gather their own income from it, rather than act as vassals for some tired old lord?”

Farida said, “Good point. We’ll do a feasibility study on it; see if we can get something else going for ecotourism purposes. We’ll probably have to set up our own tradition.”

Azwar leaned forward as intently as before, whether to avoid discussion or to see better in the gathering dark. Finally Adan spoke. “In the old days—not that old, actually—less than fifty years ago—the Dayaks offered tribute because it was what got them markets. You know that, Jennifer. The Malay kingdoms like this Sultan’s controlled the trade routes and all the shipping. And the Dutch colonial empire came in and strengthened them with soldiers and with Christianity. The Dayaks worked in their villages and paid their tribute: that’s what they did.”

He spoke stiffly. They had regressed to the teacherly mode again, she supposed. But it was better than nothing: he had spoken. “But why bother now?”

He sighed. “Who controls the markets now, Jennifer? Did you notice who was governor?”

“You’ll stay with us tonight, won’t you Adan?” Farida said. “There’s another room at the headquarters.”

He looked at Jennifer. “No,” he said. “I have a friend from college here. You can just drop me off at his house.”
The slap and squeak of the windshield wipers, and the steady beat of the rain on the roof, eventually put Jennifer to sleep. She woke up when Adan pulled himself out from under her. He had no bags, just a change of clothes folded over one arm and a ticket in his pocket. He said goodbye, then limped through the rain to a doorway that opened like magic and spilled forth light. Jennifer watched him disappear into it, and then slumped back down into the warm space he’d left. Her headache had only gotten worse, and she wondered again if it was malaria—the recurrent form. She pulled up her knees and rested her head against them all the way back to NFI headquarters, not even needing to look up to know that Farida’s eyes were fixed on her.

“He’s hired, by the way,” she said, as the car stopped and a door slammed.
CHAPTER TEN

Jennifer came into Jakarta on a magic carpet, or so it felt as the wide-bodied jet carried her from Borneo in an air-conditioned window seat. A smiling stewardess brought an ice-cold shandy, and she gratefully accepted, and asked for more. She arranged the wind of her own passing, dialing it in from the ceiling. The seat buoyed her with padding more luxurious than anything she'd experienced in the past year. She was in heaven, with a lovely view of the clouds.

"Mbak?" Jennifer turned to see the stewardess leaning over the empty seat to offer candy from a basket. "Oh—sorry." The stewardess covered what she obviously considered an embarrassing mistake with a smile and flutter of the eyes. She switched to English. "Is everything all right, Ma'am?"

So Jennifer was Mbak now—a young woman. She could be that way in the city, in a place where education and affluence meant something, where women wore makeup and put off childrearing until later in life. And where she needn't pretend to be married. Bu Jen was a name she was glad to leave behind, for a time.

"Mbak aja, deh," she said, insisting on Indonesian. The stewardess made that fluttery eye motion again, telegraphing another apology. Jennifer continued in Indonesian: "Everything’s fine.” She smiled into the basket of candy as she chose her flavors. Apple, grape, and... she was pleased to find durian. As she rummaged, the stewardess's smile began to look strained. "Cukup?" she asked.

"Cukup," replied Jennifer. She eased back in her chair, unwrapped a candy, and popped it into her mouth. The distinctive taste of durian—rich, creamy, decadently organic, like caramelized squash—was largely absent. Instead there was sugar, and a harsh, slightly rotten flavor. Still, she rolled it around her mouth, in tribute to the durian season she was missing in Long Awan. At the time of Adan’s accident, the fruit had been ripening, hanging headlong in its spiked leathern casing from the crotches of the trees beside the village. The children were pinching each other to stay awake, listening on the porches of the longhouse at night for the
distinctive sound of the pumpkin-sized fruit tumbling from the forest canopy to the jungle floor, ready to run through the dark and be the one to seize the first durian of the season.

She bit the first candy to small pieces and unwrapped another. Outside the window, the sun glittered on the plane’s wings and the ocean far beneath. The morning had held disappointments. Farida had insisted on accompanying she and Adan to the airport, and Adan had continued distant. But once on the plane and strapped in, pillowed, accelerated and shot into the air, she felt another mood overtake her. A euphoria, and a clarity. Her last flight, that from Long Awan with Adan, had been a dark passage, as all her trips through the jungle had been. Everything close and dank and lacking in perspective. This trip was the command of a dizzying height ...the power of jetsetting above, the real luxuriousness of modern, Western technological space. Space to reconsider and derive meaning.

She had not done badly, and she would not do badly. She had enough money now, and confidence in NFI’s support. It had been a rough year in Long Awan, but she felt like she had finally made it into a home. As she considered her feelings, they weren’t of permanent escape--she wanted to get back. She just wanted to have a break, to luxuriate for a spell in technologies of comfort and consumption and satellite calls between continents, everything electric and air-conditioned. But then she'd return to Long Awan, with more funding, and stay another year. As Dr. Ashwright had advised her before she took on this research: the first year is the dues you pay. The second year is the payoff. When she got back to Long Awan in a few weeks, it would be a completely different entry than before: she’d know everyone, she'd have a house, friends, and maybe--not that she could read him, not that she knew--a lover. Nangi jinan, Adan had called her again at the airport. “I’m coming back,” she’d insisted. She’d free the bear, endure a few weeks of other graduate students’ intrusion—and then be taken back into the embrace of the community.

Doubts, issues, yes— they existed. On some level, they even crowded her. If things worked out with Adan—wouldn’t she have to make a commitment? And what
would that look like? Staying in Indonesia indefinitely (every year or two for the rest of her life refiling her paperwork, popping over to Singapore, renewing her permissions)? Persuading him to come to America? And if things didn’t work out with Adan, what kind of awkwardness would result? Then of course the research issues: would Dr. Ashwright accept her reorientation of her research efforts, and would she ultimately have enough data on any one topic for a dissertation? But somehow these worries had shrunk, like figures on the ground that the plane had left behind; present but vanishingly small. For now, she floated above.

The captain's voice came on, in Indonesian and then English, announcing the visibility of the Pulau Seribu, the thousand islands, and the harbor at Tangerang outside of Jakarta. The skyscrapers rose abruptly, thorns in the earth. Beneath them, the slums, and the trash falling away into a septic river. And nested within and among all of that, the sweet, sweet cosmopolitan playground: everything that money could buy. Lights, music, cars chasing each other down wide boulevards. A margarita, crushed ice sour through salty lips. The stewardess came by again with the candy--last minute landing supplies. Trapped by her thumb against the side of the basket, already picked out, a yellow-wrapped durian taffy. Jennifer accepted it with thanks, and began to chew.

The airport taxi driver could not at first find Nature Foundation Indonesia’s headquarters; he circled the block several times, and inquired of two passersby, before Jennifer spotted the NFI logo, the grizzly bear in its circular medallion, halfway up a ten-foot tall fence of steel plating with barbed wire on top. A ladder leaned next to the logo, partially obscuring it, which is why they hadn’t noticed it before. A painter had stenciled a diagonal line that cut underneath the grizzly, and drawn another circle beneath, forming with the first circle something like a percent sign--an impression made stronger by the fact that the new circle contained a face as round and appealing as the grizzly’s was fierce: that of a sun bear cub.
The painter himself came out with a bucket of fresh water and climbed the ladder as she got out of the taxi with her backpack and stared. He turned to her--he was a lanky man with oversized hat and a mustache of a walrus—and flashed her a thumbs-up. "Lumayan, ya?"

"Bagus," she said, deciding she liked the thought of standing within NFI and looking out with, as it were, Oswald’s point of view. The painter beamed, climbing up and pulling a detail brush from the bib of his paint-splattered overalls. As she watched, he began to add texture, the suggestion of leaves, to the green field upon which the sun bear was rampant.

She asked Mark Reynolds about it, having been shown immediately upstairs. Mark disarmed her immediately by his friendly, casual demeanor. He looked like nothing so much as a scarecrow, tall and thin with graying hair that hung like straw almost to his shoulders. His eyes were alert and friendly, though his complexion seemed a little pale and worn. When she asked about the bear, he got up from his desk, which was strewn with slides and maps and a sleek new computer with a scanner beside it. He squeezed behind her in the narrow space and gently pushed the door shut. His slightly rounded belly pinched her hair against the back of her chair as he passed--painful, but she said nothing.

"That's Joko," he said, settling back into his chair, looking as secure against his floor to ceiling bookshelves as a hermit crab within its shell. "His idea on the local bear angle. I need to warn you about him. He was brought on to be a kind of cultural liaison, a marketer to bring our message to Indonesians. Frankly, I think he's an idiot. But he's very firmly ingratiated himself with Wilson--he's the director, I'll introduce you later."

Jennifer blinked, wondering why he was telling her this. But he kept looking at her, eyebrows raised, so she asked: "And the warning?"

"Oh," he said, rolling his eyes. "Just don't let him monopolize your time. I swear to God, he does nothing but stand around the halls and gossip. I've never known anyone so oblivious to the big picture, and focused on the most annoying
and irrelevant personal intrigues. I'm just telling you, don't excite his curiosity and don't feel like you have to satisfy it. The man is a snake."

Jennifer blinked again.

"I'm just saying don't trust him." He brushed his hair back from his forehead. "He's really gotten to me, hasn't he? Sorry. I'm a little distracted this afternoon."

Their talk turned to other things, to the nature of Jennifer's research. She was more honest with him than she planned to be—his friendliness, his enthusiasm making her preparations seem ridiculous and overdone. "I started off strictly on culture," she said, "strictly language, strictly social change for its own sake. But it's so obvious that the community is facing threats"—here she began thinking of Adan, wishing she had his rhetorical flair, grateful for how he'd woken her to the issues during their hospital conversations—"I want to turn what I've learned, my position, to more practical ends, the urgent matters. Cultural survival. That's why I'm here and not just the Asia Association"—her first half-lie—"because you're working to save places like Long Awan; I just feel a little ashamed at how...not-useful...I've been. Farida--"

Mark groaned. "Farida! She's another one."

Jennifer paused, confused. "Another what?"

"Farida," he said, "is a careerist, someone with only her own advancement at heart. Do you realize she calls me incessantly? Not just me, but Joko, even Wilson? I don't know why I hire these people—"

"I thought she got stuff done," Jennifer said, her voice carefully neutral.

"She does," he conceded. "Somehow." He rubbed his forehead again and said, "Sorry. You're hearing a lot more complaining than I ever do. Go on."

She thought it best not to mention Farida again, though it was gratifying that he shared her dislike. "I heard that you have a library of applied research here—human ecology stuff—and I want to look at it, first for my own learning but also to present a proposal for funding my research in a more useful direction."
Mark looked at her good-humoredly. "Well, you're more than welcome to look," he said. "I hope some of it is useful. But frankly, a lot of what we've funded is just a way to get people up there. A lot of it's pretty bad, research-wise. Especially from the Indonesian universities—they just aren't preparing people to do serious work."

Jennifer wanted to ask, so then will I get funding for anything? Does it matter? He seemed to read her mind.

"Look, someone like you, trained under Stewart, all your experience, you're going to do fine. And it won't be utterly worthless if you look through what we have. In fact, it will help me out if someone actually looks at it. We don't have time, what with applying for grants and attending conferences, selling the ideas. How about we set a time—Thursday say, next week—for a presentation to the executive committee: that's just Joko, Wilson, and I. You'll know more about what's down there in the library than any of us by then. And we'll get you back in Long Awan early enough to help Stewart run his grad student team."

She tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the excitement from her voice. "You will?"

"Sure," he said. "You're clearly articulate and intelligent—put together a coherent plan and you'll be fine."

She must have looked apprehensive.

"You'll be fine."

Through the afternoon, she surveyed the holdings of NFI's library, a large room dominated by a wide, flawless hardwood conference table, but ringed around with books and papers organized—Mark warned her—fairly arbitrarily. The expected was there—the glossy booklets detailing NFI's work across the Indonesian archipelago, the flagship book by NFI's founder, *Wild Kindness*, proclaiming NFI's new mission, since the indigenous rights criticisms of the late
'80s, to "enhance the sustainability of the interdependent relations between human civilization and natural systems and resources." Many maps, aerial photos, planning documents, whole shelves of grant proposals and grant reports. An entire wall of books on environmental policy, sustainable development, participatory research methods, exhortations to sustainability—most of these books, if not all, she had seen before in Dr. Ashwright's office. None of them spoke directly to Borneo, and most appeared unread. Still, *Wild Kindness* would be useful: it would coach her in the language NFI wanted.

The standard historical works on Borneo were there, the newer ethnographies as well as the Victorian standbys with the washed-out old photographs of the author holding a gun above a collapsed orangutan, Dayak porters standing behind in their exotic nudity. A paperback copy of *Lord Jim* was crammed in sideways as if it was never intended to be seen, its spine creased and pages yellowed and dog-eared, *Bali Book Buyers* stamped inside the front cover.

The only truly useful information seemed to be in several four-drawer legal-size filing cabinets along the wall. These were the reports commissioned by NFI's own grant activity, paper after paper of stiff and inefficient scientific prose, appended to thick wads of charts and graphs and hand-drawn maps, transcripts and statistical analyses. This information was incoherent to a degree she hadn't anticipated—organized not according to author or topic or even region, but by the grant year and by the institution to which the researchers belonged. At a glance she saw research teams from University of Indonesia, Gadjah Mada, the Institute of Technology in Bandung, LIPI, even the Indonesian Institute for the Arts—every major institution of higher learning in the country, and several from Kalimantan itself. Then there were the British reports from London School of Economics, the School of Oriental and African Studies; Dutch reports from Utrecht and Delft; German ones from Gottingen, Hamburg. A whole filing cabinet was nothing but American reports, from the geography department at
Columbia, the human ecology unit at Rutgers, the Southeast Asian Studies program at the University of Wisconsin. As she went through, giving up her early notion of creating her own thumbnail catalogue, she saw that Mark had been right to put her off for a week. It would take that long just to gather some portion of what she needed here.

With a rather apologetic air, Mark showed her the available accommodations. Separated from the main office suite by the garage for NFI's fleet of cars was a white, windowless room with an oversized air conditioner, a bed, and a small desk with a phone on it. A small bathroom was attached, with a shower and a little gas water heater screwed to the wall; the pilot light was visible inside. "We have ambitions for this space," he said, "but for the moment it's just what you see."

She said nothing; she wanted to appear neither too grateful (which might show she was desperate) nor too dismissive. She had been thrilled when he'd offered it during a phone call from Samarinda. A pulp novel lay on the desk, and he made an embarrassed move to scoop it up. "Leave it," she said.

"That's right, you're just out of the forest," he said. "Well, enjoy it, then." He explained that the room didn't lock, but that it was perfectly safe because NFI was entirely encased within the steel wall, and guarded by several penjaga, or doormen. These would be the ones to let her in or out. "They look grumpy when you come back late, but don't let that limit you. You've got to grab the city life while you can."

"Thanks." She sat on the bed and then felt uneasy at what might be taken as suggestiveness. Mark hadn't reacted in any obvious way, but she felt his presence to be very masculine, maybe even a little interested. She wondered if his thick body hair—as evidenced by his forearms—was intolerable in the Jakarta heat.

"One limitation. No, two: first is that this phone doesn't make long-distance calls, so you'll have to do that elsewhere. The other is that you shouldn't make plans for tomorrow night."

"Why? Is there something—"
"I’m inviting you to dinner at my place. Sorry it can’t be tonight, but I’ve gotta run and meet some people visiting from Malaysia."

She thanked him and then he was gone.

She unpacked a few things, put toiletries by the sink bathroom, paused a moment to appreciate the Western-style toilet. She’d grown used to squatting, whether in the river by Long Awan or above the rather frightening holes in the floor that served as Indonesian toilets, but only in the sense that she tolerated it as long as she had to. Nor had she learned to prefer the use of water and the left hand to a good roll of soft toilet paper, as Julie had. ("It’s cleaner," Julie had said—this was a year ago, the last time she was in Jakarta, when both of them had been making their adjustments. "It’s like, no matter how hard you wipe, it smears a bit—"

"Okay, Julie, that’s enough…"

"Besides which, I feel far more at one with my anus since being here—"

"Okay, Julie."

She took a long, hot shower—well, intermittently hot. The water came out ice cold at first, then the water heater snapped to life with a rather alarming orange flame, like a blowtorch playing over the copper pipe, and suddenly the water burned. Then the flame snapped off, and the shower was cold again for a time. It was just enough like a real shower to make her longing for one more acute.

She needed to work on her presentation (Mark’s words echoed in her mind: a coherent plan. A gentle way of telling her that the outline she’d provided by fax had not quite done it). She also needed to buy new clothes. She had worn her one relatively intact and presentable outfit for today’s meeting with Mark, and even that had barely sufficed: her good shirt was stained at the back of the left sleeve and, like her underwear, which was more holes than cloth at this point, it had not survived well the regime of near-daily washings on Payung river rocks. This hadn’t mattered greatly in her other settings, but in the coolly professional setting of NFI, she had felt the assessing eyes of the secretaries in their small, neatly tailored business suits.
Yet what was on her mind above all else was connecting with Julie, who was for her indelibly associated with this city. They had arrived at the same time, both on fellowship money, both traveling the same circles of international agencies. Julie, whose blonde beauty was marred by a jaw that seemed to be hinged slightly to the left of center, had attached herself to Jennifer at one of the innumerable ex-patriate parties featuring self-consciously regional cuisine in elaborate preparation. They had laughed together at the cook (a woman fresh from the kampung whom the director of the Asia-America Fellows introduced as a “godsend”) who pulled Jennifer aside and warned her against the black magic of the Dayaks. “Don’t break the heart of the young men,” she said. “Don’t look anybody in the eye. They can do this thing that turns your women’s organ—do you understand?—to stone. Fills it with mud. You can’t even pee.”

She sat at the desk and dialed the number of Pak Tandjung, the Navy veteran with whose family Julie stayed. The contact had been provided by one of Julie’s professors at Princeton, and Jennifer had been jealous of it. Julie had had all the advantages of an Indonesian home—the two cute little kids in her professor’s photo album were now high-school-age boys and provided Julie an easy introduction to youth culture in Jakarta—but, because Pak Tandjung was used to foreigners living there, none of the disadvantages. Julie had had virtually no restrictions on her—she could stay out late, sleep in, lie in bed all day reading a book, and the family was fine with it.

“Bu Sosro?” she said to the voice that answered the phone.

“Siapa ini?” asked the pembantu, the maid, after a short hesitation, her voice hard and suspicious.

“Uh...ini Jennifer,” she said. “Julie’s friend? Dari Amerika?” There was breathing on the other end. Jennifer was remembering all of a sudden that Bu Sosro was the one member of the household who could be a real hard-ass. “The family watchdog,” Julie had called her.

“Julie tiada lagi di sini.” Julie was gone.

“Where?”
"It's not my problem where."
"Back to America?"
"Who knows? It would be best."
"Umm...how about Pak Tandjung? Is Pak Tandjung there?"
"No one is here."

Jennifer waited into the silence for an invitation to stop by, to rejoin the family. Nothing came. "I'm back from Borneo," said Jennifer. "I'll call later."

"It's up to you," said the housekeeper, and hung up.

Julie would have written her, surely, if she had left for the states? Bu Sosro's tone worried Jennifer—why had the pembantu turned so strange? Taking it all off, Julie had written—had she moved from the Tandjungs' under bad circumstances?

She dialed several other numbers, including that of Bu Sri Ayu, who had told her to give a call next time she was in Jakarta, but didn't manage to reach anyone. It still didn't feel like she could concentrate on her presentation, so she decided it was time to go out and sample the city life, buy a few clothes, maybe call her brother or Geoff. Well, not Geoff. His letter had loaded far too many complications onto their fictional relationship.

The Wartel at the mall looked down onto a three-story skylit atrium, a crystal tower of such clean lines and glass elevators that the people with their shopping bags looked small and venal—insects with crumbs. Jennifer sat in the mirrored booth before a chrome and plastic phone with the inevitable flashing red LEDs, counting minutes in rupiah, dollars, and yen. "Hello!" she shouted into the handpiece. When AT & T answered on the other end, she almost wept. "Hold for your party," said the AT & T operator. Then a voice came on—a woman's.

"Jennifer, hi! It's gotta be you calling from Indonesia, right?"
Oh God, the girlfriend—what was her name? "Uh, yes. It's me all right."

"Hey, this is so great. Brad is taking a shower right now, and then we've got to go to work, but—"
“What time is it there?”
“Seven-thirty a.m.”
“Sorry to call so early—it’s p.m. here…”
“Oh, I know.”
“You know?”
And that was a big mistake, because the girlfriend—was it Deanna? Debra?—started talking about when she and Brad were vacationing in St. Moritz and she called her mom in the middle of the night by accident, which is why she was now always careful to know times for places all over the globe….and meanwhile, the red LED numbers were going up in increments of nearly three dollars a minute, accompanied by a small beeping sound on the fifteen second intervals. “Hey, listen, do you think you could tell Brad…?”
“Oh, yeah, sure, he’ll be out of the shower in a second.”
There was a silence, with the numbers beeping upward, the silence as expensive as the prattle. “Uh…”
“Sorry, just listening. The water’s still going.”
“Can you…interrupt him?”
“Oh no, I wouldn’t do that, he was just out running this morning.”
“So he’s still running,” Jennifer said, forcing a casual laugh. Twenty-one dollars.
“Yeah, you know him, he’s a fanatic. Says he ate too much cake at the wedding. If he’s gained any weight at all, I don’t see it.”
Jennifer had to either cut this off—then the question was how—or make it worthwhile, make it an actual talk with this person whose name she couldn’t even remember, but who stood within a few feet of being able to hand the phone to her brother, complete the circuit. “So you guys were at a wedding recently?”
“Haha! Jennifer.” This last she said with a descending, complacent humor, as to a child who’s drawn a very nice flower.
Haha. Jennifer. A meaning dawned on her and she said, “So... you guys are...”

“We’re doing great. It’s funny, they say it makes a difference, but they don’t say enough about it. It’s like, there’s the Brad I dated—a fun guy, you know? With all the things that are so Brad-ish, like his little red car and—well, his sister off in Borneo, for one thing—and then you get married, and all those things aren’t separate. It’s like, my mother is this religious fanatic. It’s the same mother he has. It’s totally different.”

Dorie. Diane. Oh God. Fifty-four dollars. Jennifer’s knuckles were tight around the receiver and she uttered some weak congratulations.

“Hey, thanks—Brad’s out. Hold on.”

The numbers blinked upward, and Jennifer closed her eyes to them. All she could remember about the girlfriend—her brother’s wife—her sister-in-law now, was that she was wealthy and blond. Wealthy enough, apparently, to not be thinking about the cost of this phone call. Sixty dollars. Sixty-three.

“Hey, sis! Long time, no hear!” Her brother’s voice, as clear as if he stood next to her, the tones rich and round and assured. “You got the invitation, right?”

“Well, no, actually—“

“We sent it like you said, to your village, Long whatever it is.”

“Hmmm. So when--?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Well, congratulations, sorry I’m so late in—“

“No problem, really. We knew you couldn’t come, but we couldn’t exactly wait for you, either. You coming home?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not yet, anyway. Maybe another year.”

“Jesus. You’re hard core. Well, I’d love to talk but I’ve got to get to work. Hey, have you called mom?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, make sure you do. She’s pretty low right now.”

“Low? Why?”
“Crap, Jennifer, don’t you get any mail? The diabetes?”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“No.” Eighty-eight dollars. “Hey listen, you don’t have a number to call you back, do you? I’ve got to go. If there’s no number, I guess this is goodbye. I love you!” She was frozen by the money, unable to protest. So she said I love you too, and got her mother’s new phone number, and then he hung up, the numbers stopped at just under a hundred. The cable snapped at one end, the satellite beam truncated, and everything unraveled at the speed of light. She leaned her head against the mirrored wall and stared at the greasy pattern her furrowed brow had made. Beyond it people came and went, mouths moving without sound, bags emblazoned Gucci, Prada, California Fried Chicken. She thought that every last one of their lives made more sense than her own.

She got halfway through dialing her mother’s number before she stopped; the conversation was as clear in her mind as if it had already happened. The upshot? Jennifer come home, take care of me. Leave that godawful place.

She edged out of the booth, wandered the mall. It didn’t exactly clear her head, but it distracted her. They were showing off new satellite-equipped projection TVs in an electronics store, and she turned up the volume to watch a speech of her new president: she had been vaguely aware of him, a Southern governor, a year ago; now everyone else had perhaps had time to get used to him, his speech nasal and badgering, but to her he seemed false, an actor playing a part, his meaty hands waving, waving.

An hour later she came back to the phones, dialed Julie’s number, holding bags of her purchases: sturdy underwear, a robin’s egg chemise from which she’d have to remove the shoulder pads, a navy business skirt—and a single peach encased in Styrofoam and shrinkwrap. This time the pembantu transferred the phone to Pak Tandjung. “Bapak,” she said. Father.

He recognized her immediately, asked about Borneo, her work. She remembered what she loved about this man, his depth, his calm, his probity. He asked about her mother, her brother. “Married,” she said. Pak Tandjung sighed.
“And your sons?”

“Tito is still here. Andi is gone.”

Gone. Like Julie, just gone. What was happening to that household? “You want Julie’s number,” Pak Tandjung said. “I have it here.” He read it off.

“Can I ask, Pak—what happened?”

“You’ll have to talk to Julie,” he said. “I don’t want to say what it looked like to me.”

Nothing more was forthcoming. She sent her warmest greetings to Tito, and hung up. It was evening, the sun dropping behind a wall of skyscrapers, being swallowed whole. Business logos flashed fifty feet tall like corporate mating displays, and the stores had begun to empty. It was Sunday night. Far down the street a one-and-a-half story tall Ronald McDonald sat lotus position on a rooftop. Jennifer dialed and said, “Julie?”

“It’s you!” Julie said. Her voice was huskier than Jennifer remembered, and at the same time more shrill. “I conjured you up out of desperation! You have to help me figure out how to get more funding!”

“Rob a bank,” Jennifer said.

“Done that.”

“Write a grant proposal.”

“BINGO! Hey, where are you? I’ll meet you.”

“I’m just at Sarinah.”

“Oh!” Julie shrieked so loud that Jennifer had to yank the phone back from her ear. “We’ll meet for dinner. The Green Pub. You’ll stay with me tonight. Do you have plans? Oh, good, good, good, good.”

She had last been in the Green Pub on the night before her departure for Borneo. She had been with Julie, who despite her easy circumstances had been hit hard, very early, by homesickness. Whereas Jennifer had felt impatient at how Westernized the city was, and had sped up her departure for the forest, Julie had
hooked into the network of expatriates, attending parties where the only Indonesians present were those attempting to ape the Westerners aping colonials; they went hashing together and most had personal servants and company cars and drivers and company expense accounts. Their children, if they had children, went to the Jakarta International School, which advertised in its glossy brochure its curriculum in English, its walled safety, and its frequent “Field Trips into Culturally Interesting Areas!”

It hadn’t been her scene, and Julie had sworn that it wasn’t hers, either, sitting across from her forking a smothered burrito into her mouth, wiping her lips with a napkin after every bite. “Look,” she said, “I’m Jewish. I don’t belong anywhere anyway. You can blend right in to either group—”

“Oh neither.”

“Well, I’m starting where it’s comfortable, although it’s never entirely comfortable. I mean, last night Henke—you remember Henke, Dutch guy, tall—”

“Oh, a tall Dutch?”

“Yeah, okay, so it’s not unusual—he’s the one with the—”

“Blonde hair?”

“Will you let me—”

“Blue eyes?”

“The Acehnese chauffeur.”

“Oh, a chauffeur. And does he have a Toyota Kijang? An export-import business? Does he drink a lot of beer on the hash?”

“Do you know who I’m talking about or not?”

“No.”

They looked at each other. Julie attacked her burrito with greater vehemence. Mouth full, she said, “I suppose you can tell me what he did, though, can’t you?..”

“Did Henke display a shocking ignorance of and condescension to the natives, while getting drunk and dancing lewdly with English-speaking Indonesian women?”

Julie continued chewing, eyeing her, for several moments. “More or less, yes. Good guess.”
“Well, I’m glad it’s not your scene, then.”

Julie accepted the point with a grimace. “You sure you don’t want something? The food is really good.”

“No thanks. I’m just not craving this kind of stuff.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.”

Now here she was and her mouth watering as she waited to be shown to a table. Amazing what a year could do: two seasons of pig and pumpkin greens, and even Jakarta wasn’t Western enough for her.

But Lord how this place tried. A waiter in chaps and cowboy boots took a menu fringed by braided rope from the wall and led her past a décor that consisted of riding saddles and branding irons and photo portraits of longhorn steer. He sat her at a table covered by a red-checkered tablecloth, and sat her in a rough-hewn hardwood chair, stained dark as if by years of fieldhand sweat and tobacco smoke. There were peanut shells on the floor, and the brass-railed bar stood like an island in the center of the room.

At every table, people talked—a mix of Americans, Europeans, tourists and businesspeople, a few Indonesian couples dressed up enough to be featured by the New York Times Style section. Waitresses pranced around the tables in gingham, serving up trays of margaritas and Texas chili. People nursed tall drinks, kicked back chairs, and talked and talked until all the words were lost in a dense layer of garbled sound that pressed against her ears and made her feel like a deep sea diver, senseless, under pressure.

“What’s the music tonight?” she asked the waiter, in Indonesian, as he led her to a table against the right wall, near the stage.

“Ya, musik,” he said, with a look that let Jennifer know that it was a dumb question.

There was a greater proportion of Indonesians, or people who looked Indonesian, here tonight than she remembered from that other time. As she sat down,
she felt conspicuous for being alone, and so immediately buried her gaze in the menu. 
Let anyone who wanted to stare get their staring done before she looked around.

A sudden squawk of feedback pulled her gaze forward. A guitarist stood on 
one leg, tuning. She could not see his features at first, but as she looked, the banks of 
hot colored spots came on, catching the man by surprise. He had fine features, pale, 
but with some unnatural darkness around the eyes that might be makeup. He didn't 
look Indonesian somehow, but there was nothing about his broad nose, dark eyes, or 
skin color that would exclude him from being Indonesian.

Hands cupped her eyes from behind and Julie’s voice strained low said, “Guess 
who!” And then Jennifer stood up and had time to notice only the thinness of Julie’s 
face, the aged quality of her eyes behind a smile thick as putty before the two of them 
hugged in an embrace. Jennifer couldn’t tell which of them was trembling. Both of 
them dropped into their seats and started talking simultaneously. “God, you look 
terrible!” said Julie. And Jennifer said, “You look great!” And both of them laughed 
because they’d said exactly the same thing.

Jennifer folded one leg over the other at the ankle, leaned back in her chair—a 
gesture that in Long Awan would be considered mildly scandalous—and said “Julie, 
what happened at Pak Tandjung’s? I tried to call you there.”

Julie waved the question away with a flick of the wrist. “Just typical 
Indonesian hypocrisy,” she said. “They decided I was a bad influence on the kid.”

“Andi?”

Julie nodded. She took out a clove cigarette and lit up, offered one to Jennifer, 
who declined.

“They said he was gone, too. With you?” Jennifer had been teasing, but Julie 
looked at her sharply and with sudden coldness.

“You go right for the jugular, don’t you? Okay, so they told you.”

Jennifer blinked. “They didn’t tell me anything. Just that he was gone, and 
you were gone.”

Julie said, “We were fucking. They caught us. End of story.”
The waiter came up and they ordered margaritas. Jennifer had time to compose the next question carefully. “The way you say that, it makes it sound like—“

“Like exactly what it was. He was just a kid. How could it be anything more?” She took a drag on her cigarette, lighting the embedded cloves in sparking embers.

“So, where is he? Isn’t he in college by now?”

Julie blew smoke from both nostrils and her mouth. “Libido is a crime in this country.”

Jennifer nodded, her expression neutral. After a while, Julie said, “They sent him away. A grandparent or something in Sumatra. They consider him safer with tigers than with a bulé woman.” She used the derogatory term—literally, albino—some Indonesians used for Westerners. “But hey, how’s your life?”

Jennifer didn’t answer at once, turning her attention back to the stage. Had Julie coarsened, or had she always been this way? The taste of bile was strong in her mouth, and the sting of smoke. “I’m going back to Long Awan for another year once I get some funding.”

“I’d love to visit you—once I get my own funding, that is.” Julie grinned: it was a hollow, starved remnant of her old grin. “I’m hoping you’ll help me—I quit the business paper, you know—I’m filling in at the Culture Weekly but it’s just part-time…. Anyway. You’re so good about those things. I was so glad you called.” Her voice had a forced enthusiasm to it, a desperation. The margaritas came, and Jennifer cupped her hands around the ice-cold glass. Onstage, a drummer now sat on his stool, reaching under the cymbals to adjust them, and rearranging some kind of cloth inside the kick drum. A keyboardist joined him, thin and hard-eyed, his hair cut in a spiral as abrupt and jagged as a tree shot open by lightning. A lumbering, stoop-backed, potbellied bassist came out and stood over his instrument, checked the tuning. A few short blasts of synthesized horns shot out from the speakers as the keyboardist flexed. The guitarist re-entered. He leaned forward into the microphone, which had been switched on, and said in an oily, boisterous announcer’s voice: “Good evening, Green
Pub! We’re Manzilla, straight from Manila, and our first singer tonight’s Yasmin Nagoyan, welcome her won’t you!”

A smattering of applause went up from the ex-pats in the room, Jennifer included. The woman stepped forward in a fringed yellow-spangled outfit with black boots and enormous round black sunglasses. There was laughter as she pushed them up her forehead with one thin finger. The laughter died with the first notes of “Unchained Melody”: *Oh my love, my darling, I’ve hungered for your touch...* By the time it was over, the melodrama squeezed from it by her thin voice, the only one applauding was Jennifer. She had not heard live music, Western music, amplified music, in a year—the muscular, rolling notes of the bass blew right through her, the chair vibrating sympathetically beneath. It felt like her heart dropped lower in her stomach on the bottom notes, tripping around the hiss of the snares and the boom chuck of the trap-set. She closed her eyes, embarrassed at being swept away.

Julie touched her hand. “Jennifer?”

“It’s stupid.”

“What is?”

“It’s such bad music. I just—”

Something was being said into the microphone, some words that Jennifer couldn’t make out—a heavily accented English. Then the spotlight turned and wandered the front of the crowd, probing, lighting the features of men and women who looked up from their eager, private conversations dazed, exposed. The light crossed Jennifer as she blew her nose into her napkin, and settled on Julie for an instant, turning her eyes to narrowed slits as she lit another cigarette off the stub of the first.

Once dark was restored, Julie said: “It’s always this way, isn’t it, when you get together after a long time? I don’t want this to go bad. I really do need your help.”

Jennifer choked out a last sob. The music started back up, the singer moving like a marionette through some stiff introductory dance. There were more songs, more singers—a new one ushered out every couple tunes. “Give a hand to Didi! ...Endang! ...Miri!” Each one’s outfit sparkled more than the last’s; each dispensed a high-
pitched sentimentality during her few moments onstage. The band grew visibly bored, moving their hands over their instruments without feeling. The crowd’s talk had swelled to an even more aggressive roar, as hundreds of sets of lungs and vocal chords tried to overpower the electronic amplification of the music. Julie and Jennifer ate smothered burritos, and settled into a tense silence.

Jennifer was beginning to get a headache, nursing her second margarita and wondering if it was time to go back to the hotel, when the band finally announced a break. The musicians racked their gear and started to migrate toward the bar.

A hand patted their table, rattling the ashtray, and the guitarist plopped into the seat across from Julie. “So you like the music? You play? Sing?”

“No,” said Julie.
“No what? You don’t like the music?”
“I don’t play or sing. She does.” Pointing toward Jennifer. The small man turned small eyes on her, eyes that glittered like a rat’s. “What do you do?” he asked.
“I don’t do anything but watch,” Jennifer said.
He turned back to Julie. “Hey, she speaks good English at least. Better than the one we have.”

“I’m American,” Jennifer said.
“And you too?” he asked Julie.
“Yeah, American.”
“Me, too.”
“Bullshit.”
“Hey, I was born in Subic Bay, you’ve heard of it? The big Navy base.”
“Sure,” said Jennifer. It was where her Dad was supposed to be from, where he had run after leaving her mother.

“Well, we call ourselves Americans there, some of us, ‘cause it’s like, the culture, you know? I mean, the best jobs are in the Navy, and it’s all American dollars, American movies, American cigarettes…”

“Really.” Julie’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “So who’d you vote for in the
last election?"

"Mister Yankee Go Home!" He slapped his knee and laughed with forced hilarity.

Julie took a deep drag on her cigarette. The guitarist grabbed her pack and shook one loose for himself, inserting it between his thin lips and talking through it. "Sandpaper for the lungs. These things kill twice as fast as any other cigarette."

"Why smoke them?" Jennifer asked.

"Why stay up 'til four every night and drink too much and stand in front of an over-cranked amplifier until my hearing goes?" He shrugged. "It's a lifestyle, you know?"

Julie shrugged too. This last had connected. Jennifer could see it and thought the guitarist could, too.

"Hey, meet me after the show," he said to Julie. "You look like fun. You look beautiful. You know why we shine that spotlight out in the audience? So we can see someone as beautiful as you."

Julie said, "You know why we sit out here in the audience?" He looked at her. "Because of the body odor up on stage."

He laughed. "So stay here, okay? Don't run off to the land of the leggy blondes and leave us all alone."

"You've got the lines, don't you," Julie said.

He smiled and stood. "You'll like the second set, I promise. We got the real singer for this one, Vina Kamora."

Jennifer started.

"You've heard of her." He sounded pleased.

"Kamora. Is that a common last name?"

"She's the only one you would have heard of here, if that's what you mean."

"No, I mean in the Philippines. Are there lots of people with that name?"

He considered, pursing his lips and glancing over the crowd. "I wouldn't say it's common," he said. "Except maybe among the hill people. You could ask Vina."
“Hill people?”

“Headhunters,” he said, drawing a finger across his throat. “Watch out!” He laughed and turned his back on Jennifer. “Hey, so I’ll come out after the show.” Then he strutted over to the bar to rejoin the band.

Vina Kamora was as good as the first singers were bad; over every song, in every style, her voice was full and rich and took on the colors of the original singers: Ella Fitzgerald, Madonna, Dusty Springfield. She even did a cover of Nina’s “99 Red Balloons” in which she nailed the German girl singing English by phonetics.

They could be cousins. Even sisters. This is what Jennifer kept thinking, as she stared at Vina, who had the performer’s knack of seeming to cover the entire room and everyone in it with her gaze. Vina was smaller, and *hidung peset*—small-nosed, like the Dayak—but dark in color, and with Jennifer’s same broad shoulders and short waist and long legs; moreover, she had a little bit of pouchiness beneath the eyes that, if it was like Jennifer’s, never went away with rest. And the way her eyes were a little too close to the bridge of her nose, and her nose a little long for her face—well, the characteristics were less well defined in Vina, but they were there. And she had her father’s name: Kamora. Headhunters! Suddenly a cosmic significance seemed to ripple through the room, transforming it into a day that was meant to be. In other circumstances she might have been scornful, even humiliated, at the way the Filipino band played such pitch-perfect covers of American songs, as if they had none of their own. She would have laughed at anyone superstitious enough to mistake coincidence for meaning. Now it was herself that seemed impoverished, her judging self that, on other nights, in conversations with certain other people, had perfected such shallow scorn.

She drank in song after song, and another margarita. She listened to Julie rattle on in the breaks about her current project, some proposal having to do with circumventing government censorship of news stories. Everything had changed, and
become more magical. Her entire life she had waited for some sign from her father or about him, and this was it.

When the band announced the last song, Julie stood up to go. “Come on, let’s split before that guitarist comes over.”

Jennifer shook her head. She was more drunk than she thought: when she stopped shaking her head, the room kept moving, tilting slowly off its axis. “I want to talk to the singer,” she said.

“Come on, that guy is really a drag. Besides, it’s like two in the morning. We’ve got to get your stuff from NFI and get it over to my place.”

Jennifer shook her head, enjoying the way it sent the world falling away. Although she might need to throw up. “I’m serious, Jennifer, I want to get out of here.”

“That’s fine. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Julie said, “Come on, you know you’re just drunk.”

“Julie, stop trying to control me, goddamnit!”

Julie looked down at her with undisguised resentment. “Fine.” They sat in silence while the band unraveled its last notes into the emptying room.

Vina stalked off the stage as abruptly as the other singers had; chasing her in the dark among a clutter of tables and clattering chairs, Jennifer passed the guitarist, who was making a beeline for Julie.

Behind the stage was a tall space with cables snaking everywhere in whorls and tangles, and she kept tripping and almost falling. To the left was a narrow door, and she opened it. A dusty greenish corridor led to another door which led to the street; just to the left of that was a stairway that looked like it had been nailed together by a high school float committee. She checked outside—nothing there but the road, wet with a rain she hadn’t known about, headlights and taillights chasing each other about like ghosts.

Up the stairs was another corridor, three doors. She began to despair. “Vina?” she called, feeling foolish, using a name that wasn’t for her to call. Her own name.
“Vina Kamora?” Come tell me about my father’s people, Vina Kamora. Sing to me of sea pirates, or hill people, the lazy drift of a breeze through banana trees. Sing to me of a sunny childhood, of pink and pearl houses and jeepneys puttering by in kaleidoscopic paint. Tell me who I’ve always been, and who I can be without trying.

Sudden laughter echoed down the corridor: woman’s laughter, high and a little coarse. She turned, and one of the three doors opened. A huge, fat white man, with a moustache as thick as a vacuum cleaner attachment, stumbled out. The hand on his shoulder belonged to the laughing woman, and she gave him another teasing little push. “Too tired!” she said. At that he turned and grabbed her waist and stumbled back toward her, mumbling, “Who’s too tired? I’m not tired!”

“Me, me!” said the woman. Jennifer recognized her now as Didi, one of the singers from the first half of the night. The mystery of the revolving stage solved. At the same moment, Didi noticed her, and slouched back against the doorway with exaggerated ennui. “It’s up to you,” she said, “This man is an animal.” He gave a mock growl, and lurched toward Jennifer. Jennifer shrank flat against the wall, and luckily he passed by.

She drew a breath, and felt the cool wall at her back. “Vina,” she said. “Where’s Vina?”

Didi hooked a thumb back toward another door. Jennifer knocked, aware of Didi’s eyes on her. “Oh God, who is that?” she heard a man’s voice say. The door opened and Vina stood framed in it, looking up into Jennifer’s face with a mixture of surprise and impatience. “What is it?”

“I have some questions,” Jennifer said. “I—” She saw the man lying back on a green sofa, his face covered by one arm—to protect his identity? “I can pay for the time,” she said. The ethnographer’s way.

Vina had her hands on her hips. “Mr. Enthusiasm here can wait,” she said. “His wife doesn’t mind.” This last was said as a cruel, teasing barb, and the man half-giggled, half-groaned at being revealed.
“Your name.” Jennifer launched in desperately, aware of the shadows around her, the scene she was in, Julie below. “Kamora. Is it from hill people? Headhunters?”

She laughed out loud, a rich, pealing laughter with enough liveliness in it to wake the dead. “Wherever did you get that idea?”

“The guitarist,” Jennifer said. “You see, my father—”

“He’s trying to impress you,” Vina said. “It’s utter nonsense.”

“My father, you see, his name was Kamora.”

Vina looked her up and down. “And?”

“I don’t know anything about him,” Jennifer said.

Vina laughed again. “You’ve mistaken me for a gypsy fortune-teller, I think. Let’s see: your father was tall and dark, with dark hair. How’s that?” The man in the room laughed, too, but he kept his arm crooked across his face. “I won’t even charge you.”

“But—”

“A long voyage and great challenge lie before you,” Vina said. “Goodbye.”

And she slammed the door in Jennifer’s face.

Jennifer could feel the shock of anger travel through her, up and down, leaving her shaking with rage. She swung both fists over her head at the door, stopping at the last instant. She sagged down to the floor, twisting as she dropped, so that she sat with her back against Vina’s door. She bent her head between her knees but that made her incredibly nauseous, so she raised her head and stared at the blank wall while tears came to her eyes. It would have been so easy for Vina to help. Jennifer was willing to pay. But this was how it had always gone, hadn’t it? From Junior prom to college to Adan to Vina, all the chasing she’d ever done of Asia, of her father, had been a stupid and inept waste of time. The thought that she had not been strong enough to call her mother now hit her like a second blow. Her head dropped, and she lost the struggle to keep her stomach.
By the time she staggered downstairs, Julie was gone. “Where’s my friend?” she asked the bouncer, and he steadied her, gripping her arm. With a meaty thumb, he indicated that she had gone. “Alone?” asked Jennifer. The bouncer smiled and shook his head. “Get me a taxi,” she said, and sat and waited to see if she would throw up again.

Jennifer neither brushed her teeth nor took off her clothes: she turned the light on only long enough to dive headfirst onto the mattress. She rolled onto her back and with eyes closed felt the room corkscrew steadily to the right.

Her dreams were incoherent, but over and over again she was parched, reaching out for water she couldn’t reach. “Please,” she told a faceless pursuer by the bridge above Long Awan, “please let me drink.” And indicated the river, which had swollen into a flood the color of shit.

She woke to the ringing silence that follows a scream. It might have been herself that screamed. When she turned on the light, she saw that an enormous spider clung to the wall beside her, six legs braced like a dancer about to leap, and the seventh and eighth legs tucked into the body like a football player with the ball—only this spider’s football was a small lizard, which as she stared blinked its golden eye, and trembled.

It was bent double at the belly so that its tail stuck out past its chin like a long, pale tongue. Its rib cage stretched and shuddered with a breath. Its heart was pushing at its throat in quick, shallow pulses. This then was the scream she’d heard: the spider just above her headboard, the lizard in its last agony. A cicak, a house gecko, sharing a wall with an assassin it must have expected no more than Jennifer had. The thing could eat lizards. It had been inches from her head.

The lizard struggled feebly, and the spider clutched it tighter. “Hey!” said Jennifer, nonsensically. There was still something wrong with her from the drinking, or lack of sleep, or maybe from Jakarta generally, as if her thoughts were wrapped in constricting gauze. The spider tensed at the sound of her voice, the lizard, squeezed...
more tightly, began to look in danger of its eyes popping out. “Let go!” She waved at
the spider. She lurch to her feet. It flinched, spinning three quarters of the way
around, its movements seemingly unimpaired by the burden it carried. “LET GO!” she
yelled. She cast her eyes around the room: the cicak could be saved, perhaps. The
plastic trash can.

She brought it close and clamped it down over the spider, taking it by a surprise
as great as the spider had taken the lizard. She heard and felt the spider hitting the wall
of the can as it jumped, and she nearly dropped it. But she held on, and with one hand
slid a piece of newspaper across the mouth. It got most of the way across and then
stopped and would not budge; she imagined it up against the spider’s legs. She slid the
can along. “Hey!” She thought about righting the can in order to get the spider to
fall...but would a spider fall? And worse, she imagined the bite it could deliver to her
hand, to her face, if she failed. The poison, injected. Enough to kill a lizard.

Sweating, she tried several more times to force the paper through, but it would not go.
Three hairy legs curled around the lip of the can. She dropped it.

It bounced and rolled, and the spider stood in the middle of the floor, still
holding the cicak, which looked grayer, and dead. Jennifer needed something long,
and the only thing that came to mind was the mandau, the machete, that Urn Barnabas
had given her. She grabbed it out of her backpack, and pulled the blade free of the
carved wooden sheath. It was dull and black, and she held it towards the spider as
Jason might have held his sword at the Minotaur.

It skittered away in three short hops that brought it right back to the wall. She
took a few steps to poke at it again, get it out of her chamber at least. It leapt across
the corner to her right. On instinct, she swung. The blade bit into plaster and sent it
crumbling across the room—the spider, meanwhile, had skittered higher up. She
swung again to make it go away. The contact with the wall was jarring, and more
plaster scattered.

This is madness, she thought as she struck again, and the spider retreated up
into a crevice between the wall and ceiling, only a couple legs visible as hairy
reminders, just out of reach. She reached down and threw the peach she’d bought and forgotten to eat at it, and missed, the fruit leaving a dull wet spot then landing hard on the cement floor. Madness. Fencing with a spider in the middle of the night in Jakarta. She dropped the blade to the table, where it made a much larger noise than she had intended.

Footsteps scuffled down the corridor. A gentle tapping at the door, a single finger. “Mister?”

She sank back to sit on the bed.

“Mister?” The tapping again at the door.

“I’m sleeping!” she said, loudly, hearing her voice echo from the walls.

The tapping did not stop. “Mister?”

“What?”

“You’re all right?”

“I’m all right.” She’d have to figure out something about the plaster. Oh, what was she thinking.

There was silence for a second. “Tidak apa-apa?” He wanted an assurance that it was nothing.

With a last glance at the spider’s legs, which seemed to shake in a way that horribly suggested the other legs were already busy dismembering the lizard, Jennifer got up and went to the door, her hand securing the knob. She felt like just now she was waking up from her dream, and she shivered.

“Tidak apa-apa,” she said. The footsteps went away. She didn’t think she could fall back asleep with her mouth full of cotton and an act of vandalism against NFI on her conscience, and a killer spider in the room. But she did.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Despite the late night and the alcohol, Jennifer made herself get up and into the NFL office at opening time the next morning: seven-thirty a.m. and a chorus of jackbooted monkeys leaping up and down on her head. She staggered from the library for long drinks of water at the cooler and to beg aspirin off the secretaries. Her tongue had swollen and it knocked against the back of her teeth when she looked down at documents, so she spent long minutes with her head tilted back against the chair, staring blearily at the ceiling. When she heard footsteps approaching the open door to the library she’d straighten and pretend to examine maps again, her heart beating loudly with shame. Second day on the job and I already want to call in sick, she thought. The only thing going in her favor was that Mark hadn’t come in that morning.

By eleven o’clock things had gotten worse, not better. A ringing in her ears had become constant, and she worried that the aspirin had thinned her blood to the point where she’d have an aneurysm; the pounding of vein against temple would bring the walls of her skull crashing down. Her stomach churned and she made so many trips to the bathroom that she refused to make eye contact with the secretaries, keeping her head down as she rounded the corner and slipped into the cramped space with its grinding, grumbling ceiling exhaust fan. Still, she heard—or imagined she heard—the secretaries whisper about her, the two of them, Tuti and Endang, in candy-colored blazers at their double desk in the entryway, picking up phones, keeping perfect track of all entries and exits, all paperwork neatly filed away and desks immaculate. They looked like they had never had a hangover, nor any bad habits whatsoever.

In the tiny bathroom mirror her face looked gaunt, her eyes jaundiced, her hair dead. Worse, NFL had that classic problem of people in the building—the gardener, by the looks of it—not being used to Western toilets, so half the time she went to sit down she had to use up half a roll of toilet paper first wiping muddy
footprints off the seat. Then there was the embarrassment of needing to ask for more toilet paper, which she avoided by forcing open a metal cabinet door near the water cooler and rooting through supplies. It almost made her long for the river by Long Awan.

On one of her trips to the water cooler she was blocked by two workers talking—she had briefly met one of them, Heru, a Sumatran computer technician—but the other was someone new. They were deep in a discussion about paper flow in the office, and how to reduce it. In Jennifer’s condition, or maybe in any condition, it was hard to imagine such passion about such a topic, but the two seemed oblivious to her presence and her own urgent task of hydrating a body that seemed possessed by an incurable parchedness. After a while, she cleared her throat. With a practiced nonchalance that let her know he had been aware of her waiting all the while, the new one turned with a shrug of his shoulders. “Ah,” he said. “Heru…have you met her? Our very own Jane.”

His face was grave and sallow, with eyebrows arced into permanent question marks. It was impossible to guess his age—the smooth cheeks suggested thirty, the hooded eyes suggested fifty. His hair crowned the sides of a head that was mostly bald. “Jane?” she asked.

“As in: me Tarzan.”

Heru giggled.

“What?” She really couldn’t deal with attitude right now. “I can’t imagine what you’re talking about.”

“I’m disappointed,” he said. “Here is this whole organization dedicated to saving the animals and you’re the only one who’s actually done it single-handedly. I would have thought you’d want bragging rights. Jane.” The image of the cicak from last night flashed through her mind. Was that what he was talking about? The spider? It had lurked in the back of her mind all morning, and she had planned to borrow some posters to cover the damage she’d done.
Now she stared at him, stricken. But her aching mind rebelled at the thought of playing along with whatever game he was playing.

“I’m just here to get water,” she said. Heru moved out of the way, but the new man stayed.

“People don’t tend to stand between you and what you want, is that it?” he said, that same smirk playing on his face. “Not between you and your bear, right?”

“Oswald? Is that what you’re talking about? Oswald?”

“Oswald’, yes. This is about ‘Oswald.”’ He seemed delighted by the name, lingering over it.

“What does Oswald have to do with anything? How do you even know about him?”

The man laughed. “You have no idea? Well, let’s tally the damage. Should we count the crops destroyed? The number of villagers who’ve complained? The news about you that travels up and down the rivers of Kalimantan, growing as it travels, of that half-witch half-American in Long Awan? Or should we simply count the near-death of one of the Punan you study, and the strain on NFI’s office staff in Samarinda?”

She could feel her face darkening with anger and resentment. “You’re twisting everything. If this is Farida’s work—”

“Farida! So, you can imagine what I’m talking about! Good! We’ve awoken your imagination! But imagine further, about this ‘Oswald.’ Imagine there is an organization that needs the goodwill of a village, and would like to save entire ecosystems of animals. Does Oswald help?”

She said nothing.

“I’ve had a royal fit at Tim about this—you remember Tim, the other half of your destructive teamwork? Who, when you took the child, took the mother—her skin, anyway? Does it help, to have an entire village thinking ‘So this is what NFI is about, this is what these people mean when they talk about conservation’?”
“You know Tim?”
“I know everybody.”
“And who are you?”
He laughed, shifting back on his heels. “Oh, surely you know who I am.”
So this was his game. He deployed his knowledge around you, built it up into a giant snare, and then yanked a string and you had to say it, had to name him at the center. She resisted. “Is Tim in Jakarta?”
“Oh, yes. He’s organizing the latest sally of American graduate students into the forest for your Dr. Ashwright. You’ll see him, I’m sure, if you hang around here long enough. You may even consider joining him.”
“I’ve got my own research that has nothing to do with him.”
“So I’ve heard. Or, to be more accurate, so it has been asserted. I’ll look forward to hearing your presentation. It’s not everyday, as I said, that we meet someone whose zeal to save the animals at any human costs equals our own.”
“Heru,” she said. The man, who had been grinning along, looked startled at his own name. “Could you please introduce the two of us? I don’t believe we’ve properly met.”
Heru looked puzzled. “But I thought...”
“You thought those stories about me meant that he knew me? No, he has never met me. And the person he has heard stories about is not someone I recognize.”

Heru shrugged. “Pak Joko, this is Jennifer. Jennifer, Joko.”

During this exchange, Joko had narrowed his eyes at her, but now he suddenly relaxed and stuck out his hand. “Make sure you visit me in my office before the presentation.”

“Of course,” she said, shaking.

They sat in an open courtyard, above them Jakarta smog, and above that the stars. Mark’s house surrounded them: through glass doors and picture
windows she could see into the living room, the study, the bedroom if it had been lit—everything except the kitchen, from which his housekeeper emerged from time to time with ice to keep the beers cold, and fresh dates and fried bananas that kept them eating long after dinner. Mark held a guitar on his lap, and occasionally strummed it as they spoke.

Jennifer felt more relaxed than she’d felt all day. Leaning up against the smooth, pressure-treated wood of Mark’s deck, his comfortable lifestyle on easy display, his interest sincerely trained on her work, his beer settling the muscles in her shoulders, Jennifer allowed question after question. She spoke openly of her past, her aspirations, and her confusion over her role in Long Awan. Mark nodded, smiled, and when she asked him to, picked out a cowboy blues on his Yamaha. Mark was singularly reassuring about Joko, reiterating his earlier assessment and adding to it that Joko seemed to enjoy digging up dirt that no one else had, and that no one else cared about. “Of course you’ve made some mistakes,” Mark said. “What Joko doesn’t understand, first because he’s never spent any time in the field, and second because he’s got that Javanese arrogance and doesn’t take other cultures seriously, is how bewildering the field can be. You lose track of yourself, make decisions in a kind of limbo. Only later do you wake up to the real consequences—and that’s called ethnography, when you write about it and figure out what it all meant. You can’t do it while you’re there. You have no bearings.” He took a long swig of beer. “If you have bearings, then you haven’t opened yourself properly to the other culture.”

“Will all this affect my chances of going forward?” she asked.

“Oh, no, no,” he said. “It’s basically my decision on the funding; Joko will just be sitting in. Besides, from what you say the bear hasn’t been nearly what Joko thinks it is. I don’t know where he got his information—it’s a little worrisome to think that he’s developing his own network of informants in the communities we work in—but it doesn’t sound reliable.”
Where had Joko gotten his information? It hadn’t occurred to Jennifer until Mark mentioned it, but it had to be a villager in Long Awan. Who?

As they talked on, she asked about the curious organization of information in the NFL files: by grant instead of by topic. He thought about it, and answered. “I see your implication, and of course I’ve wrestled with it. But the truth is we’re a kind of investment bank—we fund ideas. And those ideas get carried out into the world by the people who wrote the reports, they find their way into other publications and discussions, and then the dialogue about managing the environment gets better. So if the actual, physical reports don’t get read at NFL, then no biggie, really. We’ll hear about the crucial stuff at conferences, later on.”

She hadn’t considered that, the larger process, the endless rounds of conferences and symposiums. “But what about the real specific stuff, and the urgent things? I was reading Dolvi’s report on rice varietals—“

“Dolvi is a sweetheart; you’ll have to meet her.”

“She claims that the Lun Dayeh have abandoned the biodiversity model for miracle rice at a rate of something like 33% a year—“

“The reality is, Jennifer, everything’s going to hell in a handbasket. Anyplace you look, it’s getting worse. All of it’s a crisis—the deforestation, the contamination, the transmigration, the overpopulation, everything. So the question is, what can you do? What we do is we keep the bank open. We fund people like Dolvi so that they can look at these things. And where it makes sense, where we have grant money, we get involved.” He took a long swig of beer. “It’s pretty sad, actually, for me—I just don’t get out into the field anymore. Haven’t been for years, except for brief inspection tours. I sit here and manage an office and watch younger people like yourself go out and live the exotic life.”

“How old are you?”

“You ask! Fine. I’m forty-three. Been here in Indonesia since I was in your position, finishing my Ph.D.”

“That’s not old,” she said.
"You flatter me. I'm old enough to be out of the running, anyway. I'm not a hot prospect anymore, academically or professionally—just a middle-management, mid-career, middle-aged guy."

It sounded flat and depressing when he said it, though he said it with a smile. "Farida seems quite taken with you," Jennifer said. "Calling you all the time."

"Farida! Farida plays games. Cruel games. She likes to torment her victims—or should I say, to torment everybody—and then select from among the tortured her special victims. Is there such a thing as a cat that plays at cattiness, then reveals itself a saber-toothed tiger? If so, that's what Farida is."

"Really?"

"Really. Can I talk to you about this so frankly? Is this okay? You seem like a good listener, but I don't want to take advantage of you. I'm a bitter old man, and you're a young girl."

"Neither of those things is true."

He paused and eyed her with what she thought might be humor. "I don't want you to be influenced in any way by my attitudes."

"Fine."

He picked up his beer by its long neck and held it above his mouth, draining it. "I should have left here a long time ago. I'm even starting to like Bintang beer, a very, very bad sign." He put it down and strummed a couple chords on the guitar. "Stayed...too...long," he sang, making it a blues.

"So why did you hire Farida?"

"She's competent, isn't she?"

Jennifer took a deep breath and committed herself. Somehow, around Mark, it was easy to do so without thought of costs. "Unless you count people skills. I think every meeting I witnessed ended with the people leaving disgruntled at how self-obsessed she was."
"That’s surprising," he said. "At the very least I’d expect her to be ingratiating."

"Maybe she hasn’t found anyone in the field to whom she feels she needs to ingratiate herself."

"Nose all browned up and nowhere to put it," Mark sang. Jennifer laughed. "It’s good talking to you," he said. "It really is."

"I just wish I played some kind of musical instrument," she said. "I’d join in."

He smiled sheepishly and put the guitar down. "Sorry. I provide the soundtrack to my own episodes of self-pity."

"So what’s so bad, then? I don’t think I get it."

Mark looked at her with something like craftiness. Then the look faded and he said, with perfect sobriety, "You know, nothing is so bad. Monday I’ll head back into work and take care of whatever comes up. That’s what you have to do it, isn’t it?"

Jennifer took a sip of her own beer. After a few minutes of silence, she said: "So how did you get involved with Borneo in the first place?"

"Do you want the real story or the one I wrote on my grad school applications?"

"The real one, of course."

"Heartbreak," he said, simply. "My first encounter with a Farida."

"Farida again?"

"A Farida. See, I was at Cornell studying Indonesian when—"

"Why Indonesian?"

"Because there was money for it. No deep reason."

"Same here," she admitted. "I should be in the Philippines now, but Stewart—Dr. Ashwright—was rolling in cash for Indonesian research."

"Hmm. Well, I was in class with a beautiful woman who took an interest in me."
“Details?” She was a little tipsy, she realized.

He grinned. “She was Asian—Tibetan, Indian, a mix. Her parents were on the faculty at Harvard, in Economics and Religion. Her name was—well, I’ll just call her Ida.”

“Short for Farida.”

He nodded. “Although it’s a bit unfair to accuse someone of being shorter than Farida.”

Jennifer giggled. Oh no, she thought, after a laugh that was alcoholic in origin. Am I flirting? “And the interest?” she asked.

“I walked her home one night after a dinner. She had many phobias, including fear of the dark, when it was convenient. I was extremely preoccupied that night—a health problem I’d had since childhood was acting up—“

“Details,” said Jennifer.

“Ah, no.” He took a swig of beer. Another bottle polished off. He balanced the empty on the railing next to him on the third try. “It’s all resolved now. But at the time, that’s what I was thinking about, and meanwhile she kept talking about how this other guy in our class—he’d been at the dinner—creeped her out. I think she may even have said something like ‘I want you to protect me from him. Keep him away,’ and I answered yes automatically. Then we got to the door to her apartment and I hesitated, trying to form an apology for my inattentiveness without revealing my problem. And she said, ‘Oh my god, are you going to kiss me?’”

Mark popped open another bottle.

“I have a hollow leg,” he said. For just a moment Jennifer thought he was revealing his medical problem, before the absurdity of the image struck her: how could a leg be hollow? Then the long-dormant vocabulary of idiomatic English had its neurons activated and she hiccoughed a laugh. But by then he was on to the rest of his story.
"The funny thing is that I wasn’t thinking of kissing her – not at all. She was incredibly attractive, with dark, clear skin, and glowing, overlarge eyes, and eyelashes long enough to generate a breeze when she blinked, and that breeze carried the natural scent of her, which was like a perfume of patchouli and nutmeg. But the chemistry wasn’t there for me – she was too nervous, talked too fast, laughed out of the side of her mouth with a coarseness that was hard to overlook, and the laughter itself didn’t always track with anything funny. And I suppose I had also written her off as unavailable – she was royalty, more or less, so I didn’t even think about her. But when she asked, I said “yes”. It’s what I nearly always said when she asked anything. Not just me – everyone had the same answer for her, all the time.

“So I said ‘yes’, and we kissed – not a particularly good kiss, because she had a terrible habit, which I hope, if I accomplished anything in that relationship, I cured – of sticking her tongue out of her mouth and into yours with all the subtlety of an erect phallus – stiff and straight out and unyielding. Lord, I hope I’m not shocking you,” he said, looking down at the ants collecting around the dates.

“I’m an adult.”

“And I’m going on too long about an ex-girlfriend. It’s in poor taste. Here’s the upshot: she was going to Borneo, she asked me to go, and that was a ‘yes’ too. And by the time she dumped me – well, I had the ticket and the idea. So I went.”

That got them into talking about past relationships, and they laughed together over her fictive relationship to Geoff. He told her about a Dayak princess that he’d dated, and whose ex-boyfriend had nearly taken his head off with a mandau. She told him about the horrible date she’d had with the faculty advisor of the Asian-American Alliance at college, who kept calling her Pinay (“I’d never heard the term before, if you can believe it—I was that clueless about being Filipina. I thought he was saying pinhead—he had an accent—and I was
trying to figure out why that would be a compliment, since he said it in a friendly way”) and who might have succeeded in seducing her if it had not been for a breath so foul it half-sobered her.

Mark seemed to straighten up at that one.

He said: “I better get you back to NFI. It’s late.”

“I hope I didn’t—”

“You didn’t,” he said firmly.

“I mean—”

“Jennie, trust an old man when he says he’s hit his limits. Tomorrow’s a work day, after all. Maybe it’s already unconscionable, me keeping you up this late.”

The next day, a Friday, Jennifer managed to encounter neither spider nor Joko—the first because she hadn’t looked, the second because she kept the library door closed and avoided the water cooler upstairs. The posters in her room, classics from the NFI fundraising arsenal, actually cheered the place as well as covering damage. One depicted a cross-sectional view of an island shoreline, with the island itself represented only in a tiny sliver of land, insubstantial, away near the top. The rest was a dramatic falling-away of the island shelf into the depths of an ocean that teemed with living creatures: lionfish, anemones, skates, whales. One unfortunate effect of the perspective was that the sea gaped like an open mouth, with coral teeth and cloudy upper palate, but that was only right, in a way, given global warming and its probable effects on such islands. Save the Wild, the poster read. The other poster was much the same, but it applied its x-ray vision to the jungle, depicted as a colorful and friendly place with many animals and birds emerging, as if to hold press conferences. Biodiversity, this poster read: the Web of Life supports us all. Jennifer had thought it particularly appropriate because of the spider connection.

In the library, she settled herself at the table with a pencil and forced her way through the distractions. Not only did she have the worries about Long Awan (Adan,
the bear, her dissertation research, what Dr. Ashwright would think of her results so far), but Jakarta, far from being the technological escape she had sought, had so far been uncomfortable. Not only did the shower alternately freeze and burn, but the room was much the same: with the air conditioner on it was like a morgue, with it off the temperature quickly rose and the air smelled like fumes from the garage. It was blind, encysted within an ugly corporate complex within steel walls. And the city had presented her with depressing complications: the apparent loss of Julie, the hard to ignore energy with Mark, and the weirdness of the way their evening had ended. It was this last that was most on her mind, and it made her grateful that yet again Mark seemed not to be at work. Of course, there was her mother, too.

But getting started was always the hardest part, and once she'd chewed the pencil eraser off, she found that dreaming of Adan—which is what she was really doing—provided a bridge into thinking about Long Awan and the ‘human ecology’ that had to make up the substance of her presentation. Once her pencil was moving across the page, and words through her mind, she could be anywhere. This was the familiar space of her desk in Long Awan during the early days, and of her desk at Hansen Hall at the university during three years of being a research assistant to Dr. Ashwright, and of her desk at home where she wrote her high school and university papers while her mother ironed and sighed and ate air-popped popcorn in the next room, the TV on low, pacing until Jennifer came out. Brad’s accusation when Jennifer had been named valedictorian—“you had to study so much to keep mom and me away”—was only partially true. Equally important was the calm she found in focused reflection; the very act of sifting from life’s puzzle a set of flexible and universal rules, an underlying and universal grammar to event and meaning and language.


She underlined “Datu.” This should be easy: she knew this stuff like she knew her own life; it wasn’t like orals for candidacy, memorizing names, quotes, theories. This was as real and as present as where her meals had come from the first hundred
days in the rainforest. She had only thought to ask about the pigs when the pork dinners stopped: prior to that, the diet had been startlingly consistent: gray unidentifiable cuts of swine shot through with cracked ribs, gristle and marrow; fatback cut into thick wedges, dripping hot from the woodfires; over rice or in soups, smoke-dried for trail provisions, breakfast, lunch, dinner, pig and pig and pig. Then it stopped, and they were eating other things: cassava, boiled pumpkin greens, squash, jungle fruit slippery as okra. Datu had joked that it was musim aji-nomoto, the season of monosodium glutamate, and it was true that the flavors were so bland that the flavor enhancer became as necessary as the occasional fish caught in basket-nets from the irrigation canals.

"If this is musim aji-no-moto, before it was musim babi," she said, laughing at the thought of pig season. But he, serious, nodded.

"Musim buah ngedah," he said. "Always the babi comes then."

"So there is a musim babi?"

"Jelas! What was it we ate all that season?"

"It comes every year?"

"Nothing's certain. Sometimes it doesn't come in five years, sometimes twice in one."

She had grilled him on the ethnobotany of it, the knowledge of the plants that drew the pigs, and asked about folklore and legends concerning the season of the pig. "The only clear thing is it's a season of plenty. Sometimes it’s a season of peace if people are busy with the hunt. But sometimes in the old days it was a season of headhunting, because people could get all the food they needed in a short time. Idle hands pick up mandau."

"That's a saying?"

"That's a fact."

"Your own hands?" But she could easily picture him, pale muscles sweating, crouching with the machete in his hand.

Datu had smiled. "No, no."
She wrote down buah ngedah, headhunting, and then, with a question mark after it, village displacements. The great question of Dayak human ecology was whether migration resulted from local resource depletion. This was, especially, Nature Foundation Indonesia's concern, since they would potentially contract with the government to manage a nature reserve with Dayaks in it. And though Jennifer's own research had originally had little to do with the topic, she began to believe, as she shaped a narrative about Datu, that she could finesse the connection.

Toward the end of the day the secretaries rang through two telephone calls: the first was from Mark, who apologized for not making it in. “Something came up of a personal nature,” he said. “Why don’t you come over to my house again Tuesday and we’ll strategize the presentation then.” Jennifer was so grateful that the strange ending to the last evening hadn’t queered things that she offered to bring dinner. He sounded amused, but said yes.

She expected the next phone call to be Mark with a cancellation (had it seemed forward, saying that she was going to bring dinner? Why did it feel like every signal got crossed with him?). It was Julie, however, with an apology for the Green Pub. Jennifer had resolved to rescue the relationship, if she could: she forgave Julie immediately and asked forgiveness for herself “God, we’ve gotten so Indonesian, haven’t we Jen? Can’t even have an evening out without abasing ourselves afterwards.” There was a pause. “Hey, if you meant what you said about helping me, if you could: you know, with the proposal...”

“You never really said what it was for,” Jennifer said.

“It’s big,” said Julie. “I swear to God, Julie, if this goes down I will be on easy street. I could be here forever.”

“You already told me all of that. But what’s the proposal?”

“Not over the phone,” Julie said. “Let’s meet in person. I’ll buy you dinner. Anything.”

“The trust fund finally kicked in?”
"Better."
"Then I'm saying Italian. Lasagna."
Julie said, "You're on." Then, "Wait. That's too obvious."
"Obvious?" Jennifer said, waiting for the punch line.
"Yeah," Julie said, dead serious. "How about Indian?"
"Italian," Jennifer said. "I'm willing to be obvious."
Julie breathed into the phone for a few moments. "Okay, but you have to
come by here first."
"Jesus, Julie, that's all the way across town."
"I know it's a favor."
"Why does it have to be over there?"
"There are reasons."
"Well?"
"Not over the phone, I said."
"Oh, the proposal?"
"How about if you stay here for the weekend? Then it's not such a trip, is
it? There's a driver, and he'll take you to NFI Monday morning."
"He can pick me up?"
"I'll pay for the taxi." Jennifer heard triumph in Julie's voice.
"There's room for me?"
"Of course. And it's nice, Jen—it's a really nice building. It's the editorial
offices of the Culture Weekly, and there are guest rooms upstairs. Hot showers."
Jennifer considered—almost putting her hand over the mouthpiece while
she did so, mirroring Julie. It gave her an excuse not to pay the visit to Joko
today—she had put it off until the latest possible moment, but tomorrow would be
even better. "Okay. I'll get there around six. Real hot showers?"

At 6:30 Jennifer pulled into the gated courtyard in a cab. Julie bustled her
upstairs into a room with one wide glass wall facing the remains of twilight. Julie
had been pacing the courtyard when Julie pulled up and now paced behind
Jennifer as she took a fresh shirt and the Balinese sundress from her backpack and
laid them out on the spring mattress. "What are you doing?" Julie asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm going to go take that hot shower
and then change."

Julie made a small sputtering noise. Jennifer turned. "Are you that
hungry?"

"I'm not hungry, I want you look at the proposal."

"Now? Before dinner?"

Julie cracked a smile that slid from her face as soon as it formed. "We
have to talk about it at dinner."

"How much do you have written?"

"I don't know."

"Tell you what. Go print it out while I shower, and I'll look at it on the
way there."

"I'm nervous!" Julie said, her voice coming out a squeal.

Jennifer said, "Relax," and smiled, hoping it would be taken as
supportive. Resolution or no resolution, her impatience with Julie was back
already, and they had a whole evening and night to get through.

Halfway through the shower the door started to open. Jennifer, after a
panicked moment, kicked it back shut. "I had a question!" Julie said.

"I'll answer it when I get out. Don't open that door again!" Silence from
the other side. "Did you hear me? Don't open the door."

"Fine," said Julie, muffled behind the door. Jennifer heard the sound of
the bedsprings rocking in their uneven cradle. Jesus. Julie was just sitting there,
waiting to grab her the second she came out.

Jennifer took her time, refusing to be rushed by the sighs and shiftings
going on outside. She rinsed the gray Jakarta dust from her shoulders and her feet
and face, the warm water sluicing over her and falling on the tiles with a steady roar.

When she got out, Julie wasn’t in the room after all, and Jennifer wanted to go back and start over with the shower, call “Doesn’t count” like in a kids’ game, actually let herself enjoy it this time. She sighed, and finished drying her body, and told herself it was unfair to be just as annoyed at Julie for being absent as for being present.

A sudden crash from below startled her. “Julie? You okay?” she called, slipping on her clothes. No answer through the closed door. She opened it and stuck her head out. “Julie? You okay?” Worried now, she slipped on her sandals and raced downstairs.

Julie, standing by the front door, pulled her hand from her head, leaving her blond hair standing half-lifted from her scalp like a tangle of straw. She hopped from foot to foot, back and forth. “Are you okay?” Jennifer asked again.

Julie nodded impatiently. “I had some printing problems,” she said. “The damn machine. Goddamn computers. You’ll have to read it on the screen.”

Jennifer followed where Julie’s eyes darted—a computer station across the room, the monitor glowing. “What fell?” she asked.

Julie ran her hand through her head again, noticed it standing on end, and flattened part of it by batting at her skull. “Just the hutch,” she said. “I’ll clean it up later.” Jennifer saw now the broken-backed manuals, the ugly splintered wood, the lamp on its side with its light bulb in jagged splinters beneath it. “Christ, Julie, what were you doing?”

“I needed the printer driver software. It was up high.”

“You want me to help with that?”

“Later. Let’s get to dinner.”

“What about the proposal? Don’t we need a copy?”

Julie shook her head, sneaking Jennifer a look from beneath strands of hair. “It shouldn’t leave here, anyway.” She spoke low, like a conspirator. “I
was foolish earlier, letting you talk me into taking it to a restaurant. Imagine what
that could lead to!"

Jennifer couldn’t. "What?"

Julie pantomimed a noose around her neck, jerking it so that her head
lolled, eyes unnaturally wide. Then she pulled herself upright, eyes narrowed.

"I’ve got to watch what I say to you. I trust you too much."

Jennifer didn’t know what to say, but a laugh seemed to force its way out
of her, and Julie laughed right along, heartily. "Shouldn’t you turn off the
computer, then," Jennifer asked, "If you’re worried about anybody seeing it?
Does the magazine staff come in here at night?"

Julie started, her jaw dropping so her mouth formed almost a cartoon “O”.

Then she looked toward the computer with puzzlement and terror, like a sleight-
of-hand artist who finds their stick really has turned into a viper. It was an
incredible look, one that melted the familiar Julie right off her own face, and left
Jennifer in a strange room with a stranger who was more than a little frightening.

As the moment dragged on and the look grew no more comprehensible, Jennifer
shuddered and said, "But this is a safe place, right? These are your friends.
Maybe they’re in the proposal?"

Julie kept gazing at the computer, but her voice was more normal.

"You’re very smart. You know that, Jen? You’re very, very smart. I’m glad to
know someone as smart as you."

Jennifer touched her arm. "You want to get out of here?"

Julie nodded.

At dinner, Jennifer watched blood-red wine spill from Julie’s right hand as
she gestured, each emphatic point splashing more of the thirty dollar wine through
her fingers, staining the tablecloth and ruining the flavor of her forty dollar
Linguini Alfredo.

Julie talked about the wondrous life she’d made for herself in
the capital, the connections she’d made, the foundation she’d been asked to create
from ex-pat money, the faculty position at the University of Indonesia, all of it laying open before her based on her proposal. As best Jennifer could understand from the hints and teasers that Julie dropped, she was central to some effort that would circumvent government censorship of news by using the Culture Weekly as a front for an encrypted electronic bulletin board service. In the candlelight Julie seemed assured, competent, articulate. Jennifer felt envy rise to mix with her misgivings. “Now you’re making me sorry I didn’t get a chance to read the proposal,” she offered.

Julie said, “It’s simple in here,” and she knocked on her own forehead, “but I don’t know how to put it on paper. That’s why it’s so good that you showed up. Besides, you inspired me to do it.”

“Me? How?”

“Your letter about NFL. I realized: if Jennifer can do it, so can I. I mean, we’ve always been the same, you and me. Except, up to now, you’ve been smarter.” With this last Julie looked sharply at her from beneath her eyebrows.

Jennifer felt goosebumps form at the backs of her arms. “How’s that?” she said. She had been aware on some level that it was competitive between them, but Julie had brought it into the open with an unsettling intensity.

“You sell yourself better,” Julie said. “You say the right things. You hide the right things, too. People trust you.”

“I think,” said Jennifer, with a firm tone that she hoped would steer the conversation away from its very uncomfortable turn, “that what you’re describing is good proposal writing. It’s the art of making people trust their money to your intentions.”

Julie wrenched off a piece of bread and stabbed it into her linguini. “Okay,” she said. “That sounds good. That’s very smart, very Jennifer. Tell me how to do that.”

So Jennifer, relieved, spoke in a general way about proposal-writing, and Julie meanwhile kept lifting her fork but the food fell off it, over and over again,
until Jennifer snapped: "Am I just entertaining myself here? You asked me a question."

"Sorry, sorry," Julie said. "I just didn't think this was the right place." She fumbled with a napkin, brought it to her lips.

"Why not?" Jennifer was nearly done with her lasagna; she at least was succeeding in bringing it to her mouth and enjoying it. After a year of a rice diet with precious little variation, she considered this a kind of gift from paradise: sitting in a darkened room, candlelight illuminating her second glass of Australian shiraz, on a seat with actual padding to it, a waiter at her call, someone else's expense account to cover the damage.

Now something like anger crossed Julie's face. "I told you—it's too obvious."

Jennifer slowly and deliberately brought another bite of lasagna to her mouth, and slowly and deliberately savored the layers, parting them with her tongue. She could feel the steam building up in Julie, the jittery looks to the side speeding up in frequency and duration. Finally, Jennifer said, because it had to be asked, "What was obvious, and why does it matter?"

Now Julie leaned in close, and Jennifer could see there was a much deeper hunger in her than that for food. "It matters because this is a valuable proposal, and I don't want anyone stealing it, and I don't want the government to know about it."

"I suppose you'll have to do away with me, too, once I help you."

Julie stared.

"That was a joke, Julie."

Back at the editorial office, Jennifer insisted that Julie print out the proposal, since she hated reading things on computer screens. "I read with a pencil," she told Julie. "I need to mark it up." Julie, agitated, agreed, and Jennifer left her downstairs with the mess and the proposal, sitting on her bed.
with her NFI photocopies and working on her own ideas for Thursday. The biggest gap in the NFI data was the Punan: everything from census information to studies of sago harvesting remained unknown, speculative. Jennifer began to feel even more confident, thinking of her wealth of information from Om Barnabas and her connection to Adan.

Without being quite aware of it, she reclined further and further until she was lying down, pleasantly drowsy, in a bed with creamy white sheets in a climate-controlled room, and art on walls, artifacts on dressers – how different these things looked from here. Everything Julie had ever done or not done, even her freakish paranoia tonight, was forgiven her, because of this room. The Long Awan life with its sweaty, mosquito-net nights, its hard floors and thin sleeping mats, receded far, far away from her mind as she drifted into dreams.

And then Julie stood over her, calling her name. Jennifer blinked, and Julie said, "I couldn't get the printer to work. Could you help me?"

"Go to bed," Jennifer mumbled. "We'll get it in the morning."

And she closed her eyes though she felt Julie hovering nearby. At some point she must have fallen back asleep--it was a blessed bed--because Julie woke her up again. Her voice tense, strange. "I'm scared I lost my file."

And Jennifer thought: well, I'm her guest. Regretfully, she peeled herself from the warm embrace of the sheets and went downstairs to see about the computer. On the screen were a few sentences that Jennifer had suggested on the ride home from dinner. But Julie’s continuation began: "All power is heretofore invested in me" and ended with "Oh those scheming bastards"; in between elaborated on three conspiracy theories about the government and one about the Princeton Alumni Association.

"Is this supposed to be funny?" Jennifer asked, but she knew it wasn’t. Julie looked over her shoulder, a fixed glare and frown. Jennifer decided it wasn't a good time to quibble on the details. It was never clear to which agency the proposal was aimed in the first place; she had taken Julie's vagueness to be part of
It occurred to her now that there may be no intended recipient. She pressed the "print" button on the off chance it might work—and it did.

"You're an angel," Julie said, giving her a big hug that nearly cracked a rib.

"I just pressed print. You could do that, couldn't you?"

"I couldn't figure it out."

"Try it now. I don't want you waking me up again."

"Right, right," Julie said, coming over to peer at Jennifer's hand like it was some intelligent spider the likes of which she'd never encountered before.

"P-R-R-I-N-N-T," Jennifer said slowly, pressing the button.

"I've got it!"

"Great. I'm going to bed."

Jennifer went upstairs and lay there getting worried. Crashes came from downstairs. Bare feet slapped the stairs going up, going down, going up again.

At some point she made a decision. She got up, got dressed, put on her shoes, put a letter opener from a desk drawer into her pocket for self-defense. Then she stepped outside to find Julie at her door, an expression on her face halfway between the guilt of Richard Nixon and the suspicion of Timothy McVeigh.

"Couldn't print again?"

Julie shook her head in a way reminiscent of a small child. A blue vein stood out on her left cheekbone, disappearing into her eye socket. "But I don't want to print anymore, Jennie," she said.

Jennifer's hand, in her pocket, gripped the handle of the letter opener. "Why is that?"

"You know why," Julie said. "You know very well. Why."

Jennifer said, "Do you want me to read it on the screen, then?"

"No. You stay the hell away from it."
Jennifer felt a shock of electric fear at the back of her neck. Her hand, in her pocket, must have tightened on the letter opener: Julie’s gaze darted down and then back up. “You don’t trust me, Julie, I can see that,” Jennifer said. “Is there anybody in Jakarta that you trust?”

Julie momentarily startled, then her face twisted into an expression of sneering contempt.

“Look, Julie, no one wants your proposal. It’s not a good proposal. It’s a terrible proposal. It’s not even a proposal at all.”

Julie’s eyes slid to the side, slyly. “Then why did you come?”

“Because we’re friends?” It sounded ridiculous even to Jennifer.

Friendship was not what she felt. She felt like she would stab Julie in the belly if Julie made a move towards her. “And it was because we were friends I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to...upset you.”

“Okay,” said Julie, waiting for more.

“And...” Jennifer groped for words, something that would de-escalate the situation. She trembled nearly as badly as Julie did, both of them standing there across a doorway, vibrating. “Julie. If you could just forget the proposal—”

Julie’s eyes narrowed and her hands hardened toward claws. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean forget it. I mean—what if we just call tonight a vacation. A break. A total break. We haven’t seen each other in a long time, and—what do you want to do for fun?”

“What?”

“Do you have a deck of cards?”

“What?” The muscles in Julie’s slightly imbalanced jaw worked furiously, as if she were trying to calculate what this new angle threatened her with, exactly.

Julie affected the high, breezy tone that the people who detested her mother used at church as a way of subtly coaching her to respond politely. “Oh
sure, let’s play cards. Go get a deck. You can’t expect me to work all the time, you know.”

Julie backed a few steps. “Go on,” said Jennifer. Jennifer backed all the way to her room, then turned and ran into it.

Jennifer closed and locked the door to her own room. She packed everything she’d brought and then picked up the phone. But who to call? Bu Sri Ayu, of all people, came to mind. This time someone answered, but it was just her pembantu, who said that Ibu would return the next day. Jennifer had no number to leave. She called Mark, but no one there answered. Where had he gone to? She heard Julie’s bare feet slap their way downstairs again, and there was another large crash from downstairs.

Finally Jennifer dialed an international number: Brad at work. It rang. Thank you, she thought silently. The Cultural Weekly offices were taking a far larger hit tonight than just this phone call. “Brad,” she said. “I can’t talk about anything right now except what I called you for, okay?”

“Damn, you sound strange, Jen.”

Briefly she outlined her situation to him. “Jesus,” he said. “What are you calling me for? You’ve got to get the police or something. Don’t fuck around with someone nuts.”

Jennifer took a deep breath, blew it out slowly. “That’s what I needed you to say, Brad. Thanks. You just have no idea—I just—I can’t believe I’m in this situation, and I didn’t trust my own perceptions. Also—”

“What is it?” he said, urgently. “What? What? I can’t hear you!”

“I’m crying, Brad!”

“Oh.”

“I just wanted someone to know where I was. In case something happens.” She hung up, feeling for the second time in two phone calls the explosive unraveling of connection.
There were other phone calls to make. She was aware of some screaming downstairs, ripping, a man’s yell. It must be the penjaga, the night watchman. She dialed her insurance, got the recommendation of a clinic. She dialed the clinic, got an emergency service to promise that a doctor would come. A door slammed. Immediately someone was battering at it with something heavy—a flashlight? The bare feet came slapping up the stairs. Jennifer put down the phone and cracked the door in time to see Julie stalk by, stark naked, breasts bobbling crazily, red bleeding stripes in her side from someone’s fingernails, or her own. As a beatific smile spread from her face across her entire body, she disappeared into the bathroom.

“Julie!” Jennifer shouted, but there was no answer except that the shower began. Steam started to billow out the open door. The sound came of Julie moaning the vowel “Ahhh” continuously, nearly gagging, as if her throat was full of water.

The door downstairs gave way with a loud report and the penjaga came toiling up the stairs. A round, grandfatherly man with a moustache, he seemed shocked to see Jennifer. She told him who she was, what she was doing there. The two of them together listened to the sound of Julie strangling in the bathroom. “I called the police,” he said in Indonesian. “Your friend’s crazy.”

“I called a doctor,” she said.

“The doctor will get here first.”

Something seemed to boil up in him. “She has a filthy mouth,” he said. “Sorry. But do you know, she called me a pig. She said all Indonesians were filthier than dogs.” Jennifer didn’t know what to say. “Then she told me to fuck her. She grabbed me down there and told me to stuff it up inside her. Then she laughed at me and locked me out of my own building.”

“She was working on a proposal,” Jennifer said, then realized how disturbing that sounded.
When the doctor came, a tall Tamil man, he refused to go into the bathroom to get Julie. “We have to find some way to get her out without forcing her,” he said. “She can be in quite a dangerous condition.” He prepared several syringes while they waited for the police.

But the police, too, seemed nervous about approaching her once they heard the *penjaga*’s story. The two men unsnapped the guns they carried at their sides. Foreseeing a bloodbath, Jennifer said, “She’s not much bigger than I am. You don’t need guns.” But they wouldn’t go in without them, and they wouldn’t go in as long as Jennifer protested—it was a delicate matter, apparently, dealing with a naked foreign woman.

Neighbors had followed the police cars into the Cultural Weekly compound, and into the house. One of the Indonesian journalists who worked there lived only a few blocks away, and he came up the stairs carrying a professional camera and flash assembly, introducing himself to the policemen and Jennifer, greeting the *penjaga*. Smiles all around. All that was lacking was someone to bring the tea. Meanwhile, Julie had gone quiet except for an occasional wet cough.

Something had to be done.

Jennifer said, “I’m going to get her out.” But before she could move, the journalist blinded her with a flash that left a significant hole in her vision. “Sorry,” he said, as she swore. The *penjaga* jumped back at the sound of her anger. “I don’t want my goddamn picture in the paper,” Jennifer said. The journalist shrugged in a way that was probably meant to be disarming.

Jennifer glared at him as she called to Julie, explained to her, firmly, that people were here to help her. When there was no answer she went in.

She found Julie out of the shower, though it still ran, expelling billows of hot steam. Sweat crawled across Julie’s back and chest, and her head tilted, all the way back, for an open-mouthed view of the double fluorescent lights, doubled again in a mirror. She held a limp, soaked towel in her hands.
“Julie,” Jennifer said, “Do you know where you are?”

“I’m with God,” Julie said. “So beautiful.”

“Do you know who you are?”

“I am God. So beautiful.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“No.”

Jennifer turned out the light.
CHAPTER TWELVE

“What time is it there?”

“God, I don’t know. Three o’clock a.m.?”

“It’s afternoon here.”

“I know.” Jennifer fought down her impatience. Her back was beginning to ache from leaning down to the phone, the cord of which barely reached past the bars of the prescription cage. Finally, she dropped to her knees facing the window, her mouth right at the level of the metal tray, as if she was eager to swallow any psychopharmaceuticals that the druggist might prescribe. Or as if she was fellating him through the iron grill. If the latter had occurred to the druggist, he took it quite coolly, picking at his left thumbnail, which was extremely long and thick and white. The only chairs in the room were bolted down, and none was nearby.

“You sound just like Julie,” Julie’s mom said. “I can’t get over it.”

Jennifer had begun to see reasons why Julie might have cracked up.

“Mrs. Bruner, I just want to be sure that you understand the situation. Someone needs to come get her.”

“I understand,” she said.

Jennifer waited to see if more information would be forthcoming, such as who, or when. “Mrs. Bruner?”

The woman let out a sob. “She’s so lucky to have you with her.”

Jennifer took a deep breath and waited some more. This call, at least, had been collect. Of all the places she’d tried, the Sanatorium Darmawangsa seemed to have the inside line to an American operator.

“Goddamnit, Bob,” Julie’s mom said under her breath.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s her father,” Julie’s mom said. “This is totally his fault. He’s bipolar.” When Jennifer didn’t say anything, she clarified: “It’s genetic.” After
another moment, she said, with a rising note of defiance in her voice. “I’m going to tell him to go get her.”

Jennifer knew that Julie’s parents were divorced, that her father had contributed nothing to her college expenses, that she hadn’t seen him in years except for a disastrous ski trip with someone who had been introduced to her as ‘your new mom.’ But the wedding hadn’t gone off. “I still don’t think you understand,” Jennifer said. “I can’t stay here long. A day or two, tops. When I leave—”

“I don’t think you understand,” said Mrs. Bruner. “I don’t travel well.”

“Then pay for an emergency evacuation.”

“The embassy said it was twelve thousand dollars?”

“The embassy strongly advised getting her out of this country.” Jennifer looked around for more lurid details. This was the main room, empty and dark since they’d arrived. The walls institutional green, the floor tiles a brown linoleum streaked with a fungal yellow. “Immediately.”

Mrs. Bruner sobbed.

“You could be here by tomorrow.”

Mrs. Bruner sobbed.

“But you won’t be, will you?” Jennifer said this last almost to herself. She struggled to her feet.

Mrs. Bruner continued sobbing.

After hanging up the phone, Jennifer slipped down the hallway to the women’s rooms and into the darkness where she could hear Julie’s breath, slowed by three injections, dragging back and forth against the rack of her ribs. When she started to feel sleepy, that caving-in after a crisis passes, Jennifer turned on the light, which was harsh and fluorescent, and was glad to see that Julie didn’t budge. She needed to stay awake. If she slept in the bed next to Julie, she might easily wake up with hands around her neck. Again. She had talked Julie from the
dark shower, once God was out of the picture, but had been forced to physically hold her while the first injection took effect.

In the unreal light, Jennifer watched Julie’s sweat-streaked face, her limp hair plastered to one cheek, her nakedness covered only by a hospital gown that had the straps cut from it (so patients’ wouldn’t strangle themselves?). It was a face unmarked by dreams, doughy and pale with a bruised look around the eyes and the corners of her mouth. Jennifer shivered. There was no sense that a living soul animated the body; the chemicals that had pushed the brain into flat waves of paranoia and exultation, and the chemicals that had shut the brain and body down into artificial unconsciousness, met and combined and reacted in her coursing bloodstream. Where was Julie in all that?

Jennifer was furious at herself for not reacting sooner, for not drawing the appropriate conclusions even the night of the Green Pub. Julie’s talk about her proposal had never made sense, never connected with reality, and Jennifer had been too self-absorbed, too concerned about her own career with NFI, to notice. Or worse: if she was going to be honest about her thinking, she’d have to admit she had been glad that Julie had not seemed very smart about the whole thing, because her project had been so much more ambitious than Jennifer’s. I have been competing with a madwoman for grandiosity, Jennifer thought. What does that say about me? There was something chilling, too, about how Julie had lost her Indonesian, had stared red-eyed and hateful at the Indonesians around her, when the other contention between she and Jennifer had been mastery of the language.

Julie did not shift, did not toss or turn, lay like a slab of meat on the slab of foam that was the mattress: although the doctor had promised that she might wake up with the episode over—“schizoid episode,” he’d called it—it was hard to believe that this would be a healing rest. It seemed more like stasis, a pause.

Jennifer needed to use this pause to come up with a plan. It was Saturday morning; her presentation was Thursday. She could afford to take the weekend
off and stay with Julie, make sure she was stabilized. But Monday she’d have to get back to NFI. She found herself dreading it: she wanted nothing more to do with proposals, with seeking grants, with selling herself. If Adan did not wait on the other end, if a dissertation and her career—the title ‘doctor,’ especially—did not wait on the other side, she wondered if she would bother. She could call back Mrs. Bruner, tell her she’d escort Julie home. The woman would be ecstatic.

_When do we call you Dr. Hawley_, Brad had asked her in his aerogramme, and Jennifer had been secretly thrilled to see the title written down even in the context of the question. Doctor seemed the last thing the only Asian girl in Gallton would be called: even in its most diminished form, applied to a Ph.D. holder in the Humanities, the word set her apart, said about her: this is someone special. Strange, too, how she kept getting into these situations where she should have been the other kind of doctor, a medical doctor. There was such an impotence to the position of saying ‘the only help I can offer you is to study you, observe you, make some comments on the side.’ Maybe Adan had the right idea. Looking at Julie now, Jennifer realized that the notion of ethnicity, of identity, even of language, was terribly abstract—housed in this fragile shell that was the body. If Jennifer had grown up tortured by questions of who she was, what had Adan grown up with? The question of survival, of moving through the forest, of keeping bones fleshed. And now? He saw a village that needed income, needed voice, needed power over its own fate. And she had seen only a remote pocket of a kind of purity on the map, a purity that had dissolved as she looked more closely.

Jennifer sat cross-legged in one bed; Julie sprawled across the others. Jennifer saw that her ankles were filthy, almost black from wearing sandals through the dirty town. She needed Adan, suddenly, needed him so badly she stood up from the bed and paced a few steps. She wanted to be held so hard that the holding reached all the way inside her, battered at the door within, opened her to the exhaustion and grief and loneliness.
Is there anyone in Jakarta you can trust? Julie had laughed at the question. Jennifer fell back to bed, pondering. She must have drifted off to sleep, because she blinked her eyes open to see other eyes staring into hers at close range, eyes so pale a blue that the whites seemed to have mixed with the irises. Ghastly breath, breath of sambal and suspicion, was exhaled right into her nose and she thought she would gag. The eyes blinked; a blink this close was like the horizon shutting up and reopening. Jennifer’s heartbeat shot up so fast she thought her chest would burst open, and she scooted backward, raising her arms to defend herself. Only once she was braced against the wall in the corner of her bed did she become consciously aware of the ruckus of voices, insistent as whitewater, breaking against and penetrating the closed door of the room. How could she have slept through all that, when Julie in her drugged state had not?

From a distance of a few feet, Julie’s face seemed less alarming, the expression more numb and terrified than malevolent. Jennifer took a few breaths to calm down.

“Jennifer,” she said. “Do you know where you are?” Julie stared fixedly at her. “Why did you turn off the light,” she asked. “Did you know what that light was saying to me?” “You told me.” “When?” She snapped the question, angry. There was that feeling of rising electricity again.

“When it was happening. Calm down, Julie. Julie, we have to talk.” She started to pace up and down the room, and Jennifer thought: this is why hospitals, modern hospitals in other countries, have call buttons. She braced her legs so that if she needed to run for it, there would be no sheets tangling the way. Her hand reached up for the doorknob.
Julie looked at her again, and her frown was terrible to behold: a frown, which pulled down not just the corners, but also the center of her face. "God spoke to me," she said. "He told me he loved me. Do you know how much I've wanted that?"

Jennifer had some idea: after all, her mother had dedicated her entire life to a church that promised the same kind of ecstatic redemption. Julie’s eyes narrowed and she turned to squint up at the light in the room, her face full of suspicion and hope. She seemed gradually to freeze.

Jennifer opened the door and vaulted out of the room, slamming the door behind her on her own words: "You stay here."

She sprinted along the corridors looking for a nurse. There were no clocks. If there were nurses, they had blended into the general population of the asylum; no one she saw looked any more reliable than anyone else. A man as thin as a mantis knelt on a plastic mat and mouthed words which might have been the morning prayer or the Jakarta yellow pages. In the main room, two men in white were at a ping-pong table, holding paddles, each ten paces back from the table that floated between them like a distant island. There were no balls anywhere in sight. "A nurse," she said. "Is there a nurse."

One of them turned to her and asked in surprise and wonder, "Where do you come from?"

She rushed the prescription window and the same orderly was still there, sagging slightly, listing perhaps a little to one side. "The sedative's worn off," she told him, "my friend’s awake. She seems nervous."

He regarded Jennifer placidly.

"I need a nurse," you say. "A sedative. New sedative. Fresh sedative. A dosage of sedative." She was grasping for the words to make this man react. Julie had lost her Indonesian when she lost her mind. Was Jennifer losing hers, too?

"Ah, sedative," he said.
"Yes, I need it now. My friend... violent."

He smiled at her. "We are ready for that." He made a little pantomime with both hands. Straitjacket.

"Where's a nurse?" she demanded, perhaps a little loudly.

His smile didn't falter. "New shift, half hour."

"GET ME A NURSE NOW!" She was screaming, and he looked alarmed—not at the situation, but at her. This was not what one did in Java; this is loss of face, loss of power, loss of dignity.

He did not say it, but his face broadcast his thought: maybe you're the one who should be committed. But he picked up the phone and dialed two digits, and exchanged words in Javanese with someone at the other end.

"They'll take care of your friend," he said.

She stalked back down the halls, taking several wrong turns, distracted. By the time she located the room, Julie was gone and the door stood open. She heard yelling from down the hall, and she rushed to that doorway to see Julie tied spread-eagle to a steel-framed poster bed, canvas cutting into ankles and wrists, and facial muscles writhing as she bellowed and spat insults. The hospital gown rode up her thighs, and did nothing to cover her backside. Jennifer felt a nauseating dismay and fear.

Two female and three male nurses were gathered around her. One of the women leaned over her and encouraged her, in Indonesian, to calm down. A male nurse rubbed his shoulder, which showed dark tooth marks. When they noticed Jennifer, they smiled at her. One asked:

"Where do you come from?"

"It won't help to talk to her," she said. "She can't understand Indonesian any more. She doesn't like Indonesian."

They seemed stunned by this information. The one rubbing at his own shoulder says, "Then she should go home."

It sounded so simple; certainly the logic was clear enough. But it was too late: no airline would take someone violently psychotic aboard.
The nurses and Jennifer watched as Julie wrenched at all four corners of the bed and proceeded to twist, slowly, making from deep within her a noise like tortured steel.

She did not leave Julie alone for a minute. She escorted the nurses escorting Julie to the doctor's office; the doctor did not do room calls. In an office that was just off the pharmaceutical station where she made phone calls, the doctor sat behind a desk. Everything in the room smelled like vinegar or alcohol, except the curry-scented dust, which seemed to coat the wood cabinets and the countertops. Julie sat stupefied and straitjacketed as the doctor, a man so round at the bottom and thin at the top as to resemble an inverted, upright chicken leg, proceeded to ask her questions. Jennifer answered for her, hoping that fear and exhaustion wouldn't adversely influence the accuracy of Julie's diagnosis.

Yes, she was moody even before this incident; yes, she was manic too. She had not seemed physically ill. She did seem promiscuous, but no, she had never complained about womanly problems, not to Jennifer at least. Jennifer began to explain about the proposal, Julie's paranoia.

"I don't have time for every last detail," the doctor said. He wrote out a prescription.

"What's this?" Jennifer asked.
"For your friend," he said. "Your Indonesian is quite good, by the way."
"But you don't know...you didn't look..."
The doctor tapped his middle finger firmly against his left temple, above his gold-rimmed glasses. "I know."

Jennifer stood, along with the nurses who dragged Julie to her feet. She hung like a puppet from their hands. "When will you be back?" she asked.
"Monday."
"And for the next two days...?"
"The nurses will help," he said. "And so will the prescription. Excuse me."

"Wait." The doctor gazed at her with open impatience.

"These are the best medicines?"

The doctor gave a withering smile. "Of course."

"And her diagnosis?"

"Later."

The horse pills that the doctor prescribed put Julie back into a deep state of unresponsiveness. When it had been an hour and Jennifer could not rouse her even by violent shaking, she let herself take a small nap. She could not decide whether it was more unsafe to leave the door closed, and her alone again with Julie, or open, and both of their slumbering bodies vulnerable to whatever predation wandered the halls of the Sanatorium Darmawangsa. Finally she left it closed.

When she awoke Julie was still out, lay in fact in a posture disturbingly reminiscent of a road-killed squirrel Jennifer had seen once, its tongue pressed forward of its teeth by the tires having squashed its innards. Jennifer asked one of the female nurses to keep a special eye on her. "Ya," said the nurse, in the way that could easily be a no, but Jennifer accepted it; she had to. She left the Sanatorium—not without being challenged by a guard, who demanded to see her passport before she left, to make sure she was not "that" American. He handed it back and flashed her a grin. "You must be proud."

"Proud?" Jennifer asked.

"America Number One," he said in English.

She took a taxi to the Cultural Weekly, and had it wait outside while she went in to get Julie’s things. Several of the journalists and the penjaga were at work cleaning up the damage: righting computer hutches, reaffixing white boards, putting new locks on the doors. She introduced herself, and with a
surprising lack of comment—she had figured out by now that Julie was not supposed to have guests here—they showed her upstairs.

All of Julie’s things would no longer fit into the two carpet-sided suitcases she’d brought over from the U.S. Julie had to make choices, which froze her for a few minutes, until she reminded herself that she was making all the choices for Julie now: life and death and mental state, as well as where she was to dwell.

She left the flouncier underthings and chose the practical; she abandoned the batiks and kept the clothes that looked like they’d be at home on American city streets; she left any book that looked like it could be bought new in America. Julie had apparently been accumulating dozens of Indonesia’s banned books, and those Jennifer left: the last thing a sedated and paranoid Julie would need was attention from airport security officers. She took the substantial packet of ganja and the pipe, if only to throw it away. Julie also had a collection of Javanese shadow puppets, some quite large. Jennifer squeezed two of the smaller ones in, one at the bottom of each suitcase: Hanuman, the monkey god from the Ramayana, son of the wind, who could leap over oceans to attack his enemies; and Srikandi, the warrior princess from the Mahabharata. They were Jennifer’s favorites, and she supposed she was trying to send a message to Julie, whenever Julie was rehabilitated enough to read such messages. But even Jennifer didn’t know exactly what she meant.

She found Julie’s journal and resisted the temptation to read it—or, more accurately, she flipped through it only enough to notice the handwriting that swelled bigger and bigger; in the late entries, the flourishes dwarfed the actual letters, made of the page a thicket of thorny lines. The Green Pub incident got a mention that sprawled across six pages but only consisted of twenty crude rhyming words: “Fuck you and your father you precious pile of poo; fuck you and your band Manzilla too: Fuck & Fuck you.

When she was done, she could barely lift the suitcases, and there was a pile of stuff that took up Julie’s entire bed and spilled onto the floor, including
twelve pairs of shoes that Jennifer had deemed impractical for the immediate needs of Julie’s life at the asylum and the air journey back to the U.S. She brought one of the journalists up and pointed out the things. “We’ll keep them, of course,” he said. He was quite young, perhaps no more than eighteen or nineteen.

“Someone will pick them up for her,” said Julie. “Maybe her mother.”

She noticed that he lingered and seemed somewhat moved by the mute but expressive pile of things. Looking at it afresh, trying to imagine it through his eyes, Jennifer saw that the residue, once the practical was stripped away, spoke perhaps to the image of herself that Julie had most closely identified with: sexy clothes cut from exotic patterns, suggestive draperies and sheer hangings and shoes that tapered to aggressive points, the books of a determined freethinker and radical. What Julie had invested in—maybe what everyone invested in—was so different than what was needed to survive. “Were you... close to her?” Jennifer asked.

He seemed startled by her question, and his eyes dipped towards the floor in a way that was extraordinarily attractive in its modesty. “I invited her to stay here when... when...”

“You’re a friend of Andi’s?”

“Yes.” He seemed relieved that she knew Pak Tandjung’s son.

“How is Andi?”

“He’s fine. He’s with his grandparents in Sumatra. He wanted to marry her, you know.”

“I didn’t know.”

“She laughed at him. Said he was too young to commit. But I think he already had.” He said this last with extraordinary fierceness. “She’ll go back to the United States?” Jennifer nodded. “Add a heart, then, to everything she left behind.”
It was an extraordinary line, one that belonged in a sentimental song. Jennifer wondered what trouble this young man faced because of Julie's behavior. At NFL, she again left the taxi waiting while she gathered a few things of her own—enough to last a few days, anyway. But she left her backpack and the majority of her stuff, refusing any possibility other than coming back. On her way out of the room, carrying her things in several plastic shopping bags, she noticed Joko and one of NFL's drivers sitting on the floor of the garage looking up at a car that they'd raised on blocks. Joko's face was streaked with grease and sweat, as was the driver's. "Traveling on?" Joko said.

"No," she said, not wanting to say a word about where the center of her life had now moved. To change the subject, she said, "What are you doing working this late on a Saturday?"

To her surprise, he answered in a civil, open manner. "There's a group out of Yogya that's come up with a fuel regulator; you could say we're trying to install it to see if it saves on gas mileage."

"Could say?" Jennifer asked.

"You could also say we're trying to mash our fingers in the most painful possible way, one by one, with these wrenches," he said, and smiled. The driver guffawed.

"Well, take care, then," she said. "I'll be back Monday. And I will come to your office." To her surprise, she meant it.


Saturday afternoons after prayers, the Sanatorium Darmawangsa staff band performed hits from the 1950s to an appreciative if captive audience of patients. The pharmaceuticals nurse sang Elvis. His voice was thin and irritating, but far more pleasant than the two plywood guitars that orderlies thrashed on beside him. The drummer, the chief of security, had meaty arms and
hit the drums hard. A female nurse sang backup vocals and the occasional Peggy Lee number.

Jennifer could hear the band from the street, and within the main hall the sensation was of the sheer noise crushing her head. Adding to the claustrophobia was the dance of several of the patients, lurching and bobbing through the largely immobile crowd and spilling people to the floor. Jennifer fixated for a moment on the dust falling from the ceiling, lit like gold glitter by sunbeams through the skylight. A man’s hand grabbed her left breast and he leaned forward to kiss her. She screamed—but it was lost in the noise—and hit him in the chest, knocking him to the floor, where he writhed. He was old and frail looking, and not at all frightening, and immediately she feared she’d badly hurt him.

The band stopped playing and one of the orderlies threw down his guitar and approached. He wore green scrubs the colors of the walls, and brown shoes the color of the floor tiles, and had one lazy eye, and in every respect looked like the consummate patient, or possibly someone who had graduated from the ranks of patients into a paid position. He pushed his way through the crowd, now silent and watching Jennifer except for a knot of table tennis enthusiasts in a far corner too drawn in by their game. He reached down and yanked the old man roughly to his feet. The old man’s legs jack-knifed until they caught the ground. “Play some music,” the old man said, and a grin broke out on his face. “We taught the Japs to dance, we did.”

“Bullets at their feet, eh, Goendo? You can be polite to the young American?” Only when the orderly said this did Jennifer recognize him as the door guard that had let her out.

The old man abruptly stopped jerking his feet around and he stared at Jennifer. Other people stared, too. “She’s not an American,” Goendo said. “I’ve seen Americans.”

“You’re seeing another one,” the orderly said. He wore a name tag: Zulkifli. “Say something to him in English.”
Jennifer looked at the orderly warily. "I just want to get through," she said. "Pak Zulkifli."

"Zul," he said.

"Pak Zul, I need to go see my friend."

"In English!" Zulkifli urged.

"Four score and seventeen years ago," she said. He waved her on. "Our forefathers brought forth a great nation. Conceived in liberty—"

"See? SEE?" Zul roared to the crowd. The old man looked properly cowed. "She’s from the world’s only superpower. Don’t piss her off!" Zul leaned towards her and stage-whispered. "They’re all paranoid around here. You’re safe now!"

Jennifer took advantage of the crowd’s goggle-eyed response to slip toward the hall to their room. As she left the main hall she could hear chords being struck, the drums kick in, that awful voice sing: Wise men say only fools rush in..."

That night, Jennifer called Julie’s mother again, hoping that she had already left. But she was there. "You're still there," she said.

"I'm not sure what to do. My husband won't go."

"Your daughter...I've told you about your daughter. Well, no, let me tell you more," she said. "Your daughter saw the doctor today. The doctor made no diagnosis, he did not examine your daughter, and he wrote a prescription that has had some interesting effects. It put Julie into a near-coma; I could not rouse her for hours. The nurses could not rouse her either—oh, you should hear about the nurses. They have a band. Today they cranked up the amplifiers and played Elvis songs while the lunatics who have free reign of the place took up strategic positions and howled. Your daughter slept through that very professional nursing care."

"I'm scared."
"I'm scared, too. When I left the room just now, Julie's tongue had begun protruding from her mouth and it was the darkest purple that I've ever seen human flesh become. It looked like her liver was poking out through her lips."

"Oh, God."

"And she was contorting his face trying to get her tongue back inside, she was trying to suck her own tongue back into her throat where it belonged, but she couldn't do it, it kept crawling forth of its own accord."

She listened to the rapid, shallow breathing somewhere in New York.

"I'm telling you this, which I would normally keep from any mother in the world, for a reason. Do you know the reason?"

"You want me to come right away," Mrs. Bruner said.

"In three days' time, your daughter will be alone here. I can't stay forever."

She started to sob.

"You can't imagine what it would be like for her to be alone here," Jennifer said.

"I don't know what I'd do in Indonesia."

"Ma'am? You'd rescue your daughter, ma'am." When she hung up, she felt waves of pity and disgust roll through her. And understand. And a certain sneaking pride at having carried off the consultant's role. She felt that she had really done it.

She called Bu Sri Ayu Sunday morning, after another sleepless night. Julie had stood in a corner with her tongue out until she was too tired to stand. Then she lay on her bed with her tongue out. When Jennifer touched her—and she occasionally had to touch her, to guide her out of the room to the toilet—she could feel the fibers of her muscles jumping beneath her skin. Many of the other inmates were curious about her tongue, and several of them tried to touch it. This is why Jennifer had to guide her—because if she didn't, they would succeed in
touching Julie's tongue. She dissuaded them with words and looks and occasionally, when necessary, with bodily force. The nurses stared. Jennifer was beginning to have a reputation in the Sanatorium Darmawangsa, she could tell—she was beginning to be known as someone unstable.

As the night wore on she wondered if she would crack up herself. She had exhausted her bluffs with Julie's mom; if someone didn't come soon, if she had to stay here indefinitely—unthinkable.

And so when sepulchral light spread into the Sanatorium, she called Bu Sri Ayu, and despite her fear of judgment, of consequences, she poured out the entire story of why she was there, and what had happened.

Bu Sri Ayu heard her out with extraordinary patience. When Jennifer was done, there was a silence, and then the woman said: "You do have a habit of picking up dangerous strays, don't you?"

The words struck her as so unnecessarily judgmental she nearly slammed down the phone—would have, if she hadn't been on her knees and dependent on the pharmacist to do the slamming for her. And then dial the number again for the apology.

"Julie's not a stray," she said. The tension in her voice must have been apparent; Bu Sri Ayu backtracked. "Orphans would be a better word," she said. "It's quite the caretaker personality you've developed. I only say this out loud because you have something tricky to do, and you need to have some awareness of yourself to pull it off."

Jennifer shook her head, but of course Bu Sri Ayu couldn't see that. The druggist, however, could, and he grinned at her, picking, as always, at his exaggerated thumbnail.

"Now before I say this, I also want you to know that I will help you in some ways. I will make sure your friend sees a doctor this morning, for instance. But the most important thing is something only you can do. You have to make her a home there. Be her family. Be her Indonesia."
“Her Indonesia?”

“She came here looking for something, didn’t she? From what you say, the only place she found it is with you. So you’re it.”

Jennifer found this thought so arresting that she lost track of what Bu Sri Ayu said next. She, Jennifer, someone’s Indonesia. But it was true, wasn’t it? Maybe in some ethnographic fantasy you show up blank, you form your ideas in relation to isolated natives. But in reality all you had was experience, and that was composed of time, and time was spent with whoever it was spent with.

Bu Sri Ayu kept talking. Jennifer picked up the thread at “...you have to look beyond the brain chemistry, look at what the things that are happening to her mean. She had a fantasy of universal acceptance, and now it’s a fantasy of universal enmity. You can’t change her fantasies. Any direct intervention will only excite them further. But you can the one solid thing in her life of shadows. She’ll notice the difference, and come to you.”

Jennifer was too tired to process what Bu Sri Ayu was saying.

“Listen, I’ll simplify. She’s a twin of yours. You both come to Indonesia at the same age, for the same reasons; you share stressors and many personality traits, right? So give her exactly what you came to Indonesia for. It’s the same thing: take her in, make her part of a community worth joining.”

“Bu, I can’t—”

“It’s about commitment. Be committed.”

“Bu, I don’t even like her.” There. She’d said it. “I look at her and I think: why didn’t she just go home. Do you know she hasn’t even been working in months? She’s out of money...”

“Of course you don’t like her. I said you were twins, didn’t I?” Bu Sri Ayu sounded impatient. “You never like someone who represents you and is not under your control.”

Jennifer let that one sink in, biting her lower lip.
“It’s play-acting, Jennifer, like all anthropology. Pretend you’re not really there, and ta-dah, you’re marginal and temporary and you can go home and write about it and never look back. Pretend you’re there to stay, and you have something real to give. You might think about this in relationship to yourself as well. You can’t ever go looking for a center. You just start acting like one. Commit yourself.”

Jennifer let out a bitter laugh. “I believe I more or less have.” But that was just the tiredness. Through the haze of it, she realized she had been given a gift: a key, of sorts, to open the doors which had seemed closed to her for so long. The logic was clear: if Julie and Jennifer had come seeking similar things, and Jennifer could give it to Julie, then...Jennifer could give it to Jennifer. Wasn’t she aware by now that the state of being marginal took constant intervention? When Nita urged her to stay, when a man like Adan told her even after her bear attacked him that he stood ready to embrace her if she just dropped her plans to remain an outsider to her own life. Her own life. She was no sojourner in Long Awan: she had become an indelible part of it, to some people. It would never leave her life, either.

There was a long pause during which neither of them spoke. Finally Bu Sri Ayu borke it: “You know, my son was quite taken with you. He hasn’t stopped talking about you.”

“Really?” The image that came to Jennifer’s mind was his face as she talked: the hunger. The way words seemed to form from his closed mouth.

“Yes. I think it’s not unrelated to the situations you keep finding yourself in. He’s not a stable boy. It’s been hard on him, like it was for you, falling between cultures. Will you do me a favor? I’d like you to talk to him sometime. Or, if you’d prefer, write a letter.”

Jennifer agreed. When she got to her feet she found her knees were aching.

“No more phone calls?” the pharmacist asked pleasantly.
“God, no,” she said.

By Monday morning Julie’s tongue had subsided: Bu Sri Ayu’s doctor had declared it *tardive dyskinesia*, a colorful but not surprising side effect of first-generation antipsychotics. Having a word for it made a tremendous difference; the name transformed the tongue and its terrible eruption, drawing it from the realm of the bizarre to the realm of, if not normalcy, at least the comprehensible. With new pills, her tongue subsided, other parts of her body began to tremble uncontrollably, and she broke out all over into acrid sweating. Most importantly, she could talk again, talk without that obscene phallic plug sitting in the middle of her mouth—not just talk, but talk as Julie.

“I’m finding it very pleasant to have forgotten why I’m here,” Julie said.

“Please promise not to tell me.”

“I promise.”

“So why am I here?”

Jennifer smiled.

“I’m serious. I was being sarcastic before. Do they allow the insane to be sarcastic? I’m remembering a movie I saw once. Sarcasm was a big no-no in the loony bin.”

“You know why you’re here, then.”

“Damn, when you said that I felt my stomach drop out. Jesus. I’m going to be sick. So it’s real, huh?”

“It’s real.”

Jennifer made preparations to go in to NFI, but by lunch Julie was gone again, flattening her way into the exaggerated expressions of a cartoon spy, eyeballs slit mostly shut and eyeballs jerking back and forth. She went through the things Jennifer had brought from the Cultural Weekly, ripping them from the suitcase with clawed fingers and then glaring evilly at Jennifer. She took out a piece of paper and hunched over it protectively, scribbling down a list that she
tucked into her bra. It was the same bra Jennifer had fastened on her several days ago: Julie was beginning to smell ripe, but to suggest a *manda*, or anything, while she was paranoid, was to invite disaster.

Jennifer advocated for Julie with the regular visiting doctor, established a clandestine link between the pharmacist and Bu Sri Ayu’s doctor so that other prescriptions could be tried without unnecessary delays. She had Julie talk to her mother on the phone—a short conversation. She could only hear Julie’s side: “Don’t pretend you’re coming to Indonesia, mom, that’ll just give those bastards the advantage.” At the end of it Julie ripped the phone cord so hard that the dialer sprang up and split the pharmacist’s one long nail all the way down to the flesh, which bled purple. Then Julie stalked off, and Jennifer picked up the phone—miraculously still connected—and waited patiently until Mrs. Bruner stopped crying. She felt Machiavellian, but the encounter with Julie at her psychotic worst gave the mom the last push she needed. Some kind of rescue posse was on its way. While Jennifer still held the phone, she watched Julie terrorize the ping-pong players, grabbing paddles and breaking them over her knee. “You SHUT UP!” she yelled. Jennifer didn’t intervene—figuring, in this new way that she was able to figure, that the more dangerous Julie seemed, the more authority the staff would grant Jennifer to take care of her, drugs, rules and all.

Jennifer brought in food from outside, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, Dunkin’ Donuts, all the American chains. Depending on Julie’s degree of paranoia, she volunteered to act as taster. And above all else, she talked. She told Julie story after story about Gallton, Virginia: the barber who became mayor, the way school shut down on spring days because so many hill kids ate ramps—wild leeks—that the smell became a public health threat. She dredged up the life that existed outside of and prior to ambition, proposals, grant money: the colorful Americana that both of them could laugh over. Julie would not share in return, but she sat and listened, and these were the only hours of quiet that the two of them shared—immediately afterwards, Julie was up and stalking again, or asleep,
or scribbling observations and grievances and stuffing them inside her bra. She never really trusted Jennifer, but then again: why should she? Behind her back, Jennifer coordinated embassy, doctors, her own family, immigration services, and the Sanatorium Darmawangsa staff. Julie’s paranoia had called its own feared world into action: everyone was in league together, and a mastermind hidden in plain sight controlled it all. Julie’s willpower was negated: Jennifer would keep her comfortable, and get her home.

By Tuesday night, Jennifer felt confident enough with the situation that she stepped out to keep her meeting with Mark. She would have him postpone her presentation for a week so she could recover; Julie’s mom and brother would be here on Thursday, and she’d be free. The very thought of freedom made her feel weak; Julie, as it turned out, really didn’t experience the asylum much—either the drugs or her condition seemed to erase memory—but for Jennifer it was a constant strain, an ever-present atmosphere of dread.

She spent an inordinate amount of time strategizing the food to bring: after the talk they’d had last week she felt there was a closeness between them that argued for something special: an exorbitant spread of Indian curries and relishes, possibly, or something exotic like bagels: there was a bakery in Pondok Indah that actually knew to boil them before baking. They were still too fluffy, but she thought them worth bearing to Mark on a golden platter with candles and Australian wine.

On the other hand, to bring something too special might suggest she thought their closeness was romantic. So that argued for ordinary food – prosaic sate ayam, or nasi goreng, even bakmi, just everyday basics. But that wasn’t prudent if she wanted to influence his support for her grant proposal. So she settled for some Padang food: Sumatran eggplant and chile dishes, rendang crowning the assortment, the tender beef simmered three days in a bath of -thick coconut milk and aromatic spices.
She bundled the food and herself out of the taxi, marching to Mark’s door with a feeling she recognized, suddenly, as anticipation. She had been starved for so long for sane conversation, for that American ritual of baring the soul in words: introspection, the storytelling that could only happen where privacy existed, and among people who chose to share it. Take away privacy and the individual flattens into something lenticular, an optical figure, a backdrop. Now she’d rediscovered something round, whole. She wanted to feel the words sliding around in her mouth, smooth as marbles.

She knocked and the pembantu answered, with a sour face, “Ya? Cari siapa?”

“Wah, who else? Mas Mark.”

“Bukan.”

What? Was she at the wrong house? The maid had responded, with a bizarre and unaccountable abruptness, “Nope.” But there had not been a question to which “Nope” could be the answer. Jennifer stepped back from the door and checked her surroundings. Yes, this was his house.

“I have an appointment,” she said.

The maid shook her head. “Bukan.”

This ‘no’ was categorical, refusing not so much that Jennifer had this appointment, but that the very word appointment was relevant: not “you’re mistaken” but “there is none of that thing you call appointment.”

“Is Mark here?”

“No.” A normal no, at least. But, then again, an odd no, because the appropriate thing to say was “not yet”. Unless Mark were dead, or vanished.

“Is he okay?”

“What?”

“Can I come in? To wait?”

The maid frowned at her. “It may be a long, long time. It’s better if you don’t.”
Jennifer held up her plastic bag. “I have this food – we were going to eat together. We had a date.”

Now the maid narrowed her eyes. If only Jennifer had met this maid last week, this would be so much easier.

“So where are you from?” the maid asked.

“Originally? Amerika.”

“Bukan.”

“My father’s Filipina. But I’m American.”

“But you speak Indonesian.”

“So does Mark.”

“You’re not like Mark.”

“Right. I’m black,” she said, smiling.

“Bukan.” This was apparently the maid’s favorite word. “Kuning longsat,” the maid offered. It seemed a conciliatory gesture, this naming of Jennifer’s skin the skin of a golden fruit. “Ibu....sudah berkeluarga?”

Was she a family woman? Jennifer considered, then answered yes.

The maid relaxed by several degrees, each of them visible. “You can come in,” she said. “The new missus is in the back. Sit and I’ll get her.”

Jennifer sat across from the large plastic-covered sofa. What in the world could this mean? The new missus?

She came out of the back hallway in a peasant sarong and bare feet, looking slightly less presentable than the maid: where the one had her hair back and a touch of makeup and an alert, aggressive glance, the other had tousled, oily hair that hung loose across her shoulders and lips that were slightly too full and a sleepy, indolent shuffle. They looked the same age: twenty, at the oldest. The maid withdrew, and Jennifer was alone with the new missus. “Mbak?” the woman asked.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” said Jennifer, her confusion rising to a kind of despair, “but Mark--?”
“Is he home already?” the woman asked.

“I don’t think so.” They both fell silent, and eyed each other with what Jennifer found to be utterly refreshing curiosity. Whatever else the new missus might be, she was not a woman of guile. “My name’s Jennifer.”

“Dewi.”

“Goddess,” Jennifer said, translating the new missus’ name. Dewi smiled shyly and showed no sign of comprehending English, even the English meaning of herself. Rather abruptly, Dewi sat down on the sofa, which sighed beneath her, the air puffing forth in a sigh as she sank. “Please sit down.”

Jennifer bent her knees and sat, placing the food on a low table between them. The white plastic bag listed to the right. “Padang,” explained Jennifer.

“Aduh. My favorite.” Dewi looked at Jennifer and her face was delighted as a child’s. “Do you mind if I--?”

“No, no—go ahead. Please.”

Dewi leaned forward, her full, golden breasts nearly spilling from the sarong where it wrapped around her chest. She was a small woman but had a slight pot belly that rolled rather conspicuously over her thighs when she leaned. Jennifer could not help staring as the woman pulled open the bag and rummaged, sniffing at each bundle of food. “Rendang?”


“Oh, bless you,” said Dewi. And she ran her thumbnail along the seam, cutting the tape and spreading the paper flat, with the steaming, savory beef forming a heap in the middle. She opened the next and then two others, the last being the rice. She reached one hand, a calloused, strong hand with blunt nails painted crimson, and scooped up rice and meat in her fingers. “How rude of me,” she said, glancing up. “Are you sure you don’t mind?” Jennifer shook her head. Dewi brought her scooped hand to her mouth and ate this and then several more handfuls of food, village-style, pressing her four fingers to her lips with every
mouthful. Not just English or American, but even Javanese manners seemed
unknown to the new missus

Jennifer was completely at a loss, so she simply watched as the rendang
disappeared, as the crimson fingernails flourished again and again. Dewi’s
toenails were painted the same came color, the color a go-go girl might wear, but
her calves were not those of a slim Jakarta dancer, but the square, thick pedestals
of a field worker. “It’s good,” Dewi said, still chewing on a piece of gristle.

“Which Padang place?”

“I don’t know the name—it’s near here, the one with the golden minaret.”

Dewi waved her hand as if brushing off a fly. “I don’t know anything near
here. I just moved in. We’re not even married yet,” she giggled. “Don’t tell
her.”

“Who?”

“The pembantu. She’s a haughty girl!”

“Ah.”

“Is this curry?” Dewi asked. Jennifer opened her palm and waved the
woman on. She waded through the meal meant for two, and apparently needed
little by way of conversation to spice her supper. When she was done, she settled
back on the cushions and met Jennifer’s eyes with her own, which were very
limpid and fully black and not at all shy. “Well, Mark will have to get himself
some more! I think I ate it all.”

Jennifer scrutinized the woman for some maliciousness or sarcasm, but
she saw nothing but self-satisfied good humor. Jennifer felt like she was facing a
Buddha figure or a Zen sensei—a smiling, pot-bellied, utterly confounding
mystery. A spiritual slap in the face.

“Mbak Dewi... where are you from?” Jennifer asked. It was rare she
wondered about someone’s origins before they wondered about hers.

“Wah,” she said, “My father and mommy are from Klaten. But I live with
my cousin in Depok. Lived.” She giggled again. “Now I live here.”
Jennifer had several moments of silence in which to contemplate this statement. Then the door opened and a pair of shoes flew against a wall and thudded to the ground. A moment's silence was followed by a groan. "Jennifer? God, I blew you off, didn't I?"

Jennifer watched Dewi's face, which seemed to register Mark's voice with satisfaction and even joy. Her eyes half-closed, her mouth in a half-smile, she nodded. As Mark came into view, she rose to hold his hands in hers, and said "Sayang." Dear.

Mark did not even look at her, much less extend his arms. His hair was pulled forward even more strongly than usual, so that his forehead looked half-overgrown with gray shaggy moss. His eyes were underscored by bruise-colored bags, and they stared. He seemed bent almost double, his stoop was so pronounced. "Jennifer, I'm sorry. I have had the day from hell. No, it's been a week. Four days. Three. How long has it been since I saw you?" His hand found the hair at his forehead, and pulled it to the side, where it recommenced its march to the center. "How long have you been waiting here?"

"Just a few minutes. I was late," she said.

"Well, good."

His eyes flickered sideways, in Dewi's direction, but he still did not look at her or address any words to her. He hung suspended above a chair for long seconds before all his angles and elbows collapsed into it and he came to rest with his head bent forward almost to the knees. If his neglect bothered Dewi, she did not show it; she looked on with the serenity of someone for whom words in a foreign language held no import.

"What's wrong, Mark? You look awful."

He laughed. "That's what Joko accused me of: he said everything I felt showed plainly on my face. And then he said to change my feelings!" Mark giggled, a high womanish twitter. "Yes, change my feelings, thank you that makes PERFECT SENSE!"

With the last two words he was up out of his chair
again, and seemed to hesitate there, arms windmilling, before he fell back down. A puff of dust shot out from the cushions, and he swatted it away.

“Well, so who cares what Joko says, right?” Jennifer said. “You said it yourself: he’s not someone you have to answer to.”

Mark laughed again, a laugh more awful than before. “Then you shouldn’t listen to me anymore, because I got it exactly wrong. While I wasn’t paying attention, Joko did something quite important, quite profound. He became my boss.”

“What?”

“He’s the new head of the Nature Foundation Indonesia.”

“What?” Jennifer saw her funding dry up, her best way out of her impasse disappear. “When did this happen?”

“Monday. Or, rather, Monday’s when I found out about it. Apparently it’s been in the works for a couple months, ever since the MPR passed a law requiring foreign non-governmental organizations to develop indigenous leadership. We’ve got a window of a few years, but apparently Wilson wanted to leave anyway and saw this as his great chance. He’s going to the main office in D.C.”

“Joko? Why Joko?”

“I don’t know,” said Mark. “But I’d bet anything that Joko knows, precisely, what each of them has against them. I’ll bet he made sure that Wilson knew it, too. In fact, I’m sure the main thing any of them has against them is that they were in Joko’s way.”

Mark stared at his feet in their black socks, wiggling his toes. Jennifer became uncomfortably aware that she and Dewi maintained the exact same posture, that of watching Mark with fixed attention, waiting for his word with doggish hope and a dismay kept barely in abeyance. As the glum silence wore on, the tension grew intolerable, so Jennifer said: “I’ve been sharing dinner with Dewi, here. She says you’re getting married—do I congratulate you?”
Mark let out another of his awful laughs, but did not look up. “Jennifer Hawley,” he said. “Would you take it as a compliment if I said you were an infuriatingly naïve person?”

“I don’t think I would,” said Jennifer.

“Innocent, then? Would you accept innocent?”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” she said.

He sighed and looked at her. “The other night—were you aware of a charge—I’ll call it a sexual charge—between us? I think you were.”

“I was.”

He seemed gratified by this, and spent another moment looking at his toes before he spoke again. “And were you aware of any particular motive in telling me the story about the advisor who took advantage of you?”

Jennifer thought about it. “No,” she said truthfully.

“Well, it was a well-placed accident, if it was an accident,” he said, now looking at her as if from the other side of an impossibly thick glass. “We were well on our way to sleeping together, I think.”

She took in this intelligence without agreeing or disagreeing. She honestly didn’t know. And it seemed so long ago, and herself a different person somehow.

“Do you know what being an ex-pat is, Jennifer? It’s slowly becoming the monster you thought you’d left behind when you stored all your things in your parents’ basement. And you don’t recognize it—don’t recognize you’ve become this thing that haunted your childhood in New Jersey, this specter of emptiness and corruption, because you’re living in—I don’t know what to call it. The opposite of a house of mirrors. You’re living in perpetual excitement; everything’s different, every situation is challenging and absorbing, the world throws at you every form of distraction, imaginable and unimaginable. And you’re in a place where no one knows you—no one saw you pick snot out of your nose in third grade, no one knows you were the geek at high school dances, no one can recognize your private disappointments.”
“But you know yourself, and when things get boring, you start to see the shadow you cast, and it’s the shadow of the monster. You seek bigger and bigger excitement to keep yourself distracted. So you sleep with anyone you can and relish the complications. You adopt bizarre causes, become fixated on whatever annoys and excites you, champion the absurd. What you seek grows stranger and stranger until you don’t even recognize yourself—and that’s the point. You’re always the outsider looking in.”

He looked up now at Dewi for the first time. She seemed to come to life as he looked at her, to positively glow. “But what you did, Jennifer—you held up a mirror, and it stopped me. For a moment. Long enough to drop you off. But the other thing you’d done is make me feel incredibly lonely and cynical and old—I think monsters feel that way all the time, inside—”

“You’re not a monster, Mark,” Jennifer said.

“It’s not for you to say, is it? I know what I am. So after I dropped you off I went to one of the dance clubs that I used to go to, one where—well, you know what happens at these clubs. You’re not that naïve. And as it turned out, Dewi here had been coming every night for weeks—with her father. Looking for me.”

“Because she’s—”

“Pregnant, of course.” For the second time he looked at Dewi, and his eyes, from beneath the curtain of his hair, burned for a moment with sharp resentment. Then they softened, and he brushed his hair back again, and said, “Saying.”

Dewi nodded, taking the endearment as her due tribute.

“So then what?”

“Oh, well it hasn’t happened yet,” he said, and laughed. “But I may be getting married. And converting to Islam. I’ve told you about my longstanding devotion to Mohammed, right?”

Jennifer shook her head, hesitantly.
He laughed again, delighted at her earnestness. “I can’t tell you what a relief it is to tell all this to someone like you. Someone intelligent, and caring, and open. Well, and if I was a better person, maybe I’d be marrying someone like you, right? But at least we can talk.” He lifted his hair and looked at her, his gaze a piercing question.

“Mark, you don’t have to—” she had been about to say that he didn’t have to marry Dewi. Didn’t have to be so hard on himself. But Dewi’s smile stopped her, and she didn’t know what to say. “You’re not a bad person,” she said. She felt like crying. Suddenly there was nothing in all of life that seemed as appealing as a little boredom. If she traced this night back to all the decisions that had formed it, that had put her in this living room with this Buddha and this sinner, and her mad friend back at the asylum, where would it all have started? When she adopted Oswald, and missed her plane? Would it all have gone smoothly if she had only not done that? Would she have come to Jakarta without having fallen in love with Adan, and would she have slept with Mark and gotten her funding and gone back, and remained intact as who she thought she was, just an observer? And Dewi, pregnant—would she then have remained alone to face childbirth, and brought into the world another...child such as Jennifer.

It was the most awkward imaginable farewell; neither wanted to let the other go—or more accurately, neither wanted to let go of the possibility that the other used to represent—but they had no more business together. Jennifer would return to her insane asylum, Mark would return to his home. At the doorstep, Mark first offered to continue pressing her case with Joko, then thought better of it—“I could only harm you, at this point. You have other sources of funding, right? The Asia Society?”

Jennifer turned away. All the way back to the Sanatorium Darmawangsa, she carried with her the image of Dewi’s carnal, pregnant delight in taking, and taking. Those fingers, scooping and pressing; that mouth, devouring. That smile. That half-smile.
PART THREE: SHELTER

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The plane landed hard. For a time it seemed that it had been suspended midway between sun and earth, vibrating there while its shadow alone traveled the jungle, climbing and slipping along the valleys and peaks and great dark crowns of rainforest giants. But when the plane cut, and turned, and descended, the bright uneven turf of the Long Awan soccer field shook the plane nearly to pieces and reminded the passengers that they rode only an aluminum can.

Shaken, pale, eyes wide and fingernail marks impressed onto palms, the passengers climbed down from the little Cessna, Jennifer among them. She helped the pilot unload her stuff, the others piled pack in, and the plane lumbered across the field and lifted into the sky.

Of Jennifer's friends, only Nita and Mai were there to meet the plane. "Where is everybody?" Jennifer asked, once she had given them both hugs and whirled Mai through the air.

It was unusual to find the crowd so thin on the ground when a flight came in.

"In the ladang," Nita said, pointing vaguely towards the outlying fields.

She looked older already; less than two months after Jennifer had left the village, Nita had already gone even further toward womanhood, her face wider, her high cheekbones more filled out, eyes more self-assured. "Wait," she said, holding out her hand awkwardly and swelling like an over-emotive actor. She giggled, seeming suddenly a child again. Then she said in English: "How about you? I fine."

Jennifer took the offered hand and squeezed it, grinning, answering in English as well: "Very fine, too! I'm so happy to see you again."
“Oh no, no, I can’t,” said Nita, dissolving in laughter.

Jennifer pulled her backpack onto her shoulders, picked up one of the boxes lying on the ground. Nita grabbed the other: Jennifer had come well-equipped with fresh batteries, tapes, clothes, and trade gifts of salt, monosodium glutamate, cigarettes, pencils, and hard candies. In her backpack were a renewed supply of medicines, shoes (she’d obtained her own pair of extruded-rubber soccer cleats), rain gear, and weapons in the war against mosquitoes including coils, sprays, lotions, and netting.

“So you’ve been studying English?” Jennifer asked, switching back to Indonesian.

“Ya, ya, with Bu Farida. Aduh, so much simpler now because she knows how to explain the grammar,” Nita said, then clapped a hand over her mouth realizing what she’d just said.

“That’s okay,” Jennifer said. “I speak English but it’s better have it explained by someone who had to learn it like you, as a foreign language.”

“Yes,” said Nita. “That’s it.”

Jennifer turned to look about her, staggering under the backpack. “This place is so beautiful,” she said. “I wasn’t sure I’d make it back. It’s completely different from the last time I showed up...I was so scared then, when the plane took off.” Mai slipped a hand into Jennifer’s, a gesture so sweet it made her want to cry.

Nita seemed to hesitate. “You can stay at my place, if you want,” she said.

Jennifer blinked. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t I stay in my own house?”

“Oh, ya, it’s nothing.” They set off in the direction of her house, Nita following a pace behind. Mai’s eyes were large and she was exceptionally quiet: Jennifer saw Nita give the girl a warning look when she was about to say something.
When they opened the door she could see why Nita had offered a place to stay. The front room had been transformed into a kind of bunkhouse, with five sleeping mats jammed side-by-side and bright-colored mountaineering backpacks half-spilling over in men’s underwear and prescription pill bottles and muddy shoes in Ziploc bags. Her desk was piled high with papers that weren’t hers, with a half-open laptop computer as paperweight. She recognized an information management textbook that Geoff used to own, brown-bound and with a spidery network diagram on the cover. Its very familiarity inspired in her a profound sense of displacement and distance; it did not belong in the world she had built for herself.

Nita hung around in the doorway as Jennifer pushed through to the bedroom, discovering around the edges of her own sleeping mat someone else’s things, doll-size women’s shirts and jeans stacked in neat piles, a box full of large rechargeable batteries. A thick length of black wire came in through the window and attached to a power strip. Jennifer stared at the glowing LED, which stared back like an evil little red eye.

Dismayed—but what had she expected? Her visa and permission delays meant that she was arriving in Long Awan a full two weeks after the rest of the grad student team—Jennifer emerged from the bedroom slumping, and raised her eyebrows. Nita gestured toward the near corner of the house, where Jennifer’s things had been set aside. Jennifer left everything where it lay, and stepped outside. “Well, your father found other renters,” she said.

She hadn’t meant to sound upset—this was natural enough; she had hoped that Farida and the others might stay with Pak Apuy or in the longhouse, to get the language and cultural benefits available from staying with a family—and to leave her some private space—but she was aware that the one house available for rent in the village was Pak Dayung’s. Nevertheless, she had not counted on being effectively moved out, demoted to a corner of her own living room.

“Don’t be mad,” Nita said.
“I’m not mad,” said Jennifer. But she took a long breath, taking in the musty familiar odor of what had been her home. “Oswald!” she suddenly said, nearly shouting. She dropped her backpack and box on the floor and sprinted out of the building around back. But the bear was gone, and the pen’s posts listed, the wood partially crushed, the rattan trampled. She called Oswald’s name again, but knew that he was gone—and not recently. “Nita?” she said.

Nita came around the side of the house slowly, almost as if reluctant, still toting one of Jennifer’s boxes of trade goods. Mai, who had followed her, looked up as if to make sure it was okay to talk. “He’s left,” the girl said. “Last full moon. The noise! It was very frightening.” And she bared her teeth to show how it was.

Jennifer looked to Nita for confirmation. Nita nodded.

“So he’s free? In the wild? How long?”

Nita nodded again.

“How long?”

Nita hesitated, then said: “Three weeks?”

Jennifer reached out and touched one of the posts that had been trampled or dragged partially out of the ground. The wood had faded already; when Pak Dayung had first carved the dragons and vines into it, the lines had been a rich red much like cedar. Now it was nearly gray, the rainy season and the sun conspiring to age it, erase from the spirit charms their vividness. This must have been going on before she’d left, but she hadn’t noticed.

“Was anybody hurt?” she asked.

Nita shook her head.

Jennifer stood a moment, lamenting the goodbye she’d never had a chance to say. She didn’t know if she would get along with this graduate team, but being without her house as a retreat raised the stakes. And with Farida in her bedroom—would Farida expect to stay there? Would a fight with Fanda over the space damage her relationship with not just NFI but Dr. Ashwright? Absent-mindedly,
she took Mai's hand again, and the girl gave her leg a big hug. Jennifer knelt
down and hugged back. Nita smiled down on them, and Jennifer thought about
Pak Dayung's help with Oswald. He was a man she could trust. And it would be
far more awkward to move out of her house after she'd met the graduate students.
She wouldn't be able to claim impersonal reasons.

“You're sure your father won't mind if I stay at your place for a little
while?” Jennifer said, looking up at Nita. Nita pursed her lips in a way that
reminded Jennifer of a schoolteacher, an exaggerated seriousness that she'd no
doubt learned from her father.

“We've already discussed it,” Nita said. “The two of you are welcome to
stay as long as you like. It might be hard to be among the other people after so
long apart.”

Jennifer felt tears start to form, and she gave Mai another squeeze. The
two of you. Pak Dayung and Nita apparently didn't think it was hopeless that
Oswald might come back. “Well, let's grab some things and get going.”

Jennifer sorted quickly through her pile of belongings, taking only the
necessities and enough of the trade goods to pay Pak Dayung and Nita back for
their hospitality. She left the research tapes lying there, as well as her books and
the recording apparatus.

The three of them stumbled down the steps and back across a corner of the
soccer field toward the longhouse. As they approached, voices called out to
Jennifer in excitement, and she greeted people enthusiastically by name, and felt
like she was in a known place, and among friends. Some of the feeling of
hopelessness that had chased her since Julie's breakdown and her own loss of
funding began to dissipate. She had accomplished so much here, had made such
real connections—it had been the right decision to come back, to reassure herself
that her time in Long Awan had not been one long phantasmagoria of delusion
and darkness. Pak Tiras stumped over to one end of the veranda and said,
“Sembuh!” Healed. For a second she thought he meant her, then she saw his
snakebit leg, which was wrapped in white bandages from knee to shin. "Selamat, Pak!" she said, wishing him health, wondering if he’d wounded himself in some fresh way. He looked so proud, holding in his hands a black plastic bag taped into a cylindrical shape by duct tape. "For bathing in the river!" he shouted. "Good, eh? From the Americans!"

As they prepared to climb the notched pole into the longhouse, the dogs came out to sniff at them, and then turned savagely on one another, snarling and grimacing, making short, loud runs at the chickens, which exploded away in puffs of squawking feathers. Jennifer watched them warily, and so did not at first see the group approaching from the ladang. She found them an incongruous sight, as alien as moon landers: four sweating white people clad in various shades of khaki and white, bound by the straps of their neon backpacks and fanny packs and belts and clips and high-top hiking boots and, on the two men among them, bone-handled headhunting knives in carved wooden scabbards. Their pants were drawn tight around their ankles by rubber bands, presumable to keep out leeches and ticks. Suddenly she realized just why it had been so funny to the Dayaks when she’d fallen over on the trails: she had looked just this girded up, although not as florid about the face. There were two women and three men. Pak Apuy walked next to them in a half-buttoned shirt and shorts, his head bent down politely to listen to Farida, who was dressed like the rest of the group but somehow looked stylish rather than dumpy, as if all the rest wore government-issue and she had been to her personal tailor before hitting the trails.

Farida squealed out Jennifer’s name, and Pak Apuy looked up. Jennifer turned to Nita and was startled to find the girl looking back at her with a wolfish, expectant grin, as if forty people were about to jump out of the bushes and yell "Surprise!" Jennifer shot a glance back at the group, which was closing fast, as Tim pushed blond hair out of his eyes and yelled a sunny "Hello there!"

"Hell—” she cut off her reply and stood open-mouthed as a heavyset member of the group broke into a clumsy half-jog towards her, camera bags
bouncing against his chest. Her stomach lurched and she found herself incapable of thought or speech as she recognized the ridiculous figure as Geoff. Or, rather, in her shock, not as Geoff the person, but as Geoff the idea, no more physically present in any real sense than the photo of him that she’d kept on her desk.

Perhaps he had planned to embrace her, but her evident paralysis made him draw up just in front of her. She feared she was gaping. His face, round and tending to jowls, wore a broad smile that showed inordinate pride in himself.

“Hey,” he said, standing with arms half-raised, his sandy brown hair thick as a kitchen brush rising straight from his forehead, his green eyes half-buried among crinkles of skin.

“I...I...” Jennifer’s stomach had not stopped its lurching. She looked beyond him now; saw not far behind the group the lone figure of Adan. He had his knife out and was carving at some piece of wood he held in his hands. Her reaction could not have been more unambiguous in its difference. She wanted to sweep Geoff out of the way, him and all the complications he brought, and run to Adan. But after just a moment of meeting her gaze, Adan turned partially away in apparent nonchalance. Of course he couldn’t, wouldn’t approach—with her husband here. Fictional though he knew the marriage to be.

“So you really had no idea?” Geoff said. Her gaze snapped back to his, though she found she could not meet it; she had no idea what expression was on her face, but did not trust that it would be appropriate.

She shook her head.

“Cool.”
At that she looked up, and could not keep the anger from her voice. “Is it?”

“Hey, hey,” he said. “No expectations, okay? Don’t think I came here to...”

“Just shut up,” she said. “Let me think.” Her thoughts were whirling back to life, calculations flying through her mind.
“I didn’t mean—”

“I said be quiet. It’s complicated, okay?”

He stood as dejected as a whipped puppy. The group stood a respectful distance from them, witnesses to this spectacle: a man and wife reunited after a year and a half of separation. She felt the acuteness of her situation, the way she was boxed in. The very next thing she did would determine the entire course of her relationship with Adan, because it would determine how the village would regard that relationship. Worse, many suspected (only Adan knew) that the relationship was fictional, so she couldn’t simply keep her distance and wish it away—it would confirm that she had lied all along.

“Everyone knows it’s you? That you’re the one I’m supposedly married to?” she asked in a low voice. But Nita’s look had given her the answer before she’d even recognized who he was. And so had the way that Adan lounged at a distance, studiedly casual.

“I thought about keeping it from them, but... I wasn’t sure what to do; I thought it might be awkward if—”

“Oh yeah, it’s awkward, all right. Either way. God, Geoff.” As the moment dragged on, he began to look less alien, more like the person she’d known. The unhappiness helped; it was the face he’d always shown her. She supposed long-dormant brain cells were firing, reviving memories, knitting categories together, rendering the world’s parts into meaningful relationship. Suddenly she could see it from his perspective, could imagine what he’d hoped, in his ignorance and his need. He had no idea how non-private the matter was here; although, if he merely glanced around him, he would learn. Jennifer could feel the eyes boring into her from front and behind and the veranda above.

“Can I give you a hug, at least?” he said.

In the innocence and ignorance of that question were encoded every one of the 11,000 miles separating the university where they’d known each other and this little village. Those miles were still between them, but transformed into
something much harder to cross than physical distance. Her eyes shot over to Adan, who paced a little, still half-turned away, working at the thing in his hands. She was grateful to notice that he wasn't limping anymore, at least.

Faces were all around. Some, she thought she knew. She had to lie in her feelings to protect her earlier lies.

"Okay," she said. He was her husband, after all.

She barely felt him press against her. Then she turned, trying not to make it look too obviously like running away.

"Come on, Nita," Jennifer said. "What a wonderful surprise. I need to rest now."

"We have room for the two of you," Nita repeated. Now Jennifer got it; the reference had not been to Oswald at all.

"Come on," Jennifer said, and fairly dragged the confused-looking girl from the scene.

Jennifer's reunion with Pak Dayung reminded her of why she had come to treasure his friendship: he sat down beside her after he came back from the fields, and when Jennifer thanked him, and apologized for any imposition, he said simply, "You have always been a guest in our house." She waited a couple hours inside their longhouse apartment, and she managed not to mention Geoff at all other than to say the truth, which was that she'd had no idea he was coming.

Neither Nita nor Pak Dayung pressed her on the issue, or for any personal information. They let her pretend to sleep while, eyes closed, she tried to process the various things it might mean to have Geoff here, and to have lost her house, and to have Adan keeping so very great a distance.

She should not have come back. At the same time, though, how could she keep away? The wisdom of Adan's stance back in Samarinda now came back to her in hammer blows of regret and self-recrimination.

Why don't you skip going
back to Long Awan, he’d said. You and I will play here for a while. She had dismissed his proposal without a second thought, had considered it ridiculous, irresponsible. But what in her life since then had felt right, or good, or even a little bit like play? She had careened from mess to mess to keep this certainty she had, that she’d be back, that she could make of her fate what she wanted. But what, in the end, was it worth? She felt trapped. Geoff! Of all people. Why hadn’t anyone said anything? Joko, when he’d renewed his half-sardonic offer for her to join this temporary team. Dr. Ashwright, over the phone.

Eventually, her thoughts grew so roundabout and insistent that she could no longer lie still and needed contact with other people to disrupt them. In Julie’s psychotic breakdown, Jennifer had seen too clearly how it could happen, how stress and difference and unstoppable patterns of thought could amplify themselves and destroy a mind. She worried about her own sanity. So she sat up and engaged Nita and Pak Dayung in desperate conversation, aware that her energy was manic, flyaway, like Julie’s. She talked of Jakarta and Singapore, described the tall buildings and crowded streets and crystal malls. She had Nita show her how to make the skein of beads for a baby carrier, a lesson that she’d actually started nearly a year ago, but never finished. Pak Dayung told her all about Oswald, that the bear had been in good health and increasingly strong, but never rested easily after Jennifer left, and never took a bath anymore since no one had the nerve to take him to the river. How his smell had risen to encompass the house and all around it, and how eventually he had taken down his cage and run off. “No one would kill him, Bu Jen,” Nita said. “They knew he was your child.”

Pak Dayung said: “There were other reasons as well.” When Jennifer asked him more, he shrugged. “You know the people of this village. Some argued that he couldn’t be killed; others saw signs. The one with the most reason to be angry asked that the bear not be harmed.”

“Adan.”

Pak Dayung nodded.
“How is he? I last saw him at the hospital.”

Pak Dayung assured her he was well, as Nita excused herself to go cook dinner in the communal kitchen space. The longhouse consisted of four layers: in front was the open veranda, and inside that was the gallery with its massive beams and high, airy space—the site of communal gatherings and dances. In the middle were thirty family apartments or lamin, consisting of one or two rooms, the walls of which were thin wood and which did not rise all the way to the roof, which peaked far overhead. In the back was the kitchen, which like the gallery was wide open the full two hundred yards of the longhouse’s length. Multiple hearths—one for each of the apartments—stood next to each other, each a thick clay slab laid onto the longhouse’s ironwood floors.

It was a design almost frighteningly conducive to gossip and rumor. Every coming, every going, was public, as well as every noise louder than a breath. If the human traffic weren’t business enough, there were the dogs and chickens beneath, whose racket began before dawn and went past nightfall and only ceased for an hour or so during the hottest or rainiest part of the afternoons.

Even while she and Pak Dayung talked—of the rice harvest, of the durian season, of school, of anything—Jennifer could hear and feel the whirlwind of gossip gathering, an energy rising logarithmically. Though she didn’t speak the Dayak languages well, she could guess the contents of the old women’s excited commentary with its punctuating slap and giggles. She heard Nita’s low, rich voice answering to interrogation where she squatted before the hearth. A comical exchange took place over the pronunciation of Geoff’s name, which was strange and short. One after another of the women tried it on their tongues, laughed as the single explosive syllable made them sound like—as one put it—barking dogs.

After the dinner, once it was polite to do so, Jennifer put down her plate and bent her head. “I must see him,” she said. She began to see the trick actors had: channel your strong emotions, whatever they were, into the seeming of your part.
“Of course,” Nita nodded, eyes wide, entranced as viewers of soap opera sometimes are. Jennifer made the quietest exit possible; that is to say, every eye was on her.

She stepped inside the doorway and held it open behind her, taking in the scene, which looked like a cabin at summer camp. Tim and Geoff were playing cards across Geoff’s sleeping bag (now that she knew him, she recognized the sleeping bag—and her history in it—immediately). The other male of the group, a dough-faced guy with a pretentious little goatee and steel-rimmed glasses, had his nose deep in a book. The two women seemed to be reading to each other from their field note journals. They all looked up at her.

“Oh, okay,” she said. “I want an explanation. I’m sorry I’m late, I’m sorry this is getting off to a weird start, but you’ve put me in a really shitty position.”

“Hey, hey, hold on,” said Tim. “We haven’t put you anywhere.”

“Why the hell didn’t I know Geoff was part of the team?”

One of the women, the larger one, with fair skin and broad features and the hearty red hair of an Irish heritage, stood up and made a show of sticking out her hand. “Mary,” she said. “Glad to meet you. And by the way, this is your problem. We didn’t know who he was until we were already in Samarinda.”

Jennifer looked to Geoff for confirmation. He had that look he got, half proud, half defiant. Tim said, “Yeah, no one knew. He was just the computer guy, and he had his own funding, so Dr. Ashwright took him. But it’s not a big deal, right? A few weeks, you guys pretend like you’re married—which doesn’t involve much up here, right? I mean, there are no public displays of affection? He keeps our computers running, and you consult on the cultural stuff, and it goes like we planned it.”

Geoff said, “I thought about it long and hard, Jennie. I know you don’t like surprises, but—”
Jennifer cut him off. "So Dr. Ashwright doesn’t know? When’s he coming?"

"It’s not clear," Tim said. "Soon. Just for a few days, to do some supervision, problem-solving, that kind of stuff."

"Thank God," said the other woman, who remained seated. Small and dark-haired and hatchet-faced, she looked like she rarely smiled. "I was working with him on the logistics of this, and he managed to piss off everybody he came into contact with. The man has no social skills. Therza, by the way." Jennifer nodded at her.

"And you’re...what’s your name again?" Jennifer asked.

"Cliff," said Cliff, who had already gone back to reading his book.

"Never mind him," said Mary, who still stood before her. "He’s got prelims when he gets back." They all looked familiar to her in that vague way that people you pass in academic halls grow familiar without ever having been introduced. It was a big anthropology department, fifty faculty, hundreds of students—since these guys were first or second year Master’s students, and she a Ph.D. candidate, she’d had little to do with them. Maybe they had been at the same brown bag discussions on Southeast Asia, snarfing the same free lunches from the department.

Geoff said, "You should hear these guys tearing on Ashwright. It’s like a totally different person than you’ve ever talked about, Jen."

"Yeah," Therza said. "What’s up with that? Geoff says you actually get along with the old bottom-feeder."

They all looked at her, and Jennifer felt, like a nauseating blow to the stomach, the reassertion into her life of all the old unnecessary departmental politics. Organized into a feudal structure in which the professors rewarded their followers with the spoils of grants and plum appointments, the department encouraged the worst forms of toadyism and mean-spirited competition and contempt. Dr. Ashwright represented an older, more pragmatic (critics said
more colonial") model of anthropology than many of the younger, sexier faculty. He had served several times as department chair, had established several institutes, had experimented in the direction of influencing social policy. None of this sat well with the poststructuralists, of which Therza was surely one, who regarded all forms of power with suspicion, and hated above all else to see white men wielding positions of influence.

In fact, she could go through the room and pick out already who these people's advisors were, what their likely course in academic life was. Mary, whose stance fairly shouted out her healthy self-regard, would ally herself with the self-reflexive anthropologists, a cluster of women who went into the field early in their careers and then wrote mainly about themselves. Cliff was reading Malinowski, the founding dead white man of modern ethnography; that marked him as old-school and a probable student of Ashwright's. Anyone else would simple read Malinowski's critics in order to have something pithy and dismissive to say during their defense. And Tim? Tim, actually, she couldn't peg. Maybe he was in the wrong field altogether, or the wrong era. With his pith helmet ('a sight gag', he said) and the collection of headhunting *mandau* he'd accumulated in just the two weeks here, his handsome Aryan features and of course the memory of him with Oswald's mother's skin by the river, he seemed a bit like a throwback to the old Victorian adventure seekers.

The scene exhausted her, and she wondered why, in her imaginings of what it would be like to come back as part of the team, she hadn't factored all this in. A lone person, like herself, could leave those social dynamics behind; a group inevitably brought them along. She saw with great weariness that many debates lay ahead, debates in which she would have nothing at stake except to maintain a degree of dignity. And then there was Geoff. "Geoff," she said. "We need to talk. Alone."

"Careful," said Mary, with a hint of mischief in her voice. "You know what these people will assume if they see you sneaking off somewhere alone."
“What?” said Geoff.

“That you’re married!” She laughed. He grinned. Jennifer turned and yanked violently at the door. Poor Lawé, who had apparently been right on the other side with his hand on the knob, got pulled into the room off-balance and fell in a pile of limbs onto Therza, who yelled and pushed at him in a way that only kept him off-balance and on her longer. By the time he got up his adolescent face burnt deep red with shame, and the papers he held in his hand were crumpled and dirty.

“Are you okay?” Jennifer asked.

He just held out the pile of papers to her, and she took them, and he ran off as if pursued by a thousand demons, yelling once he’d cleared a respectable distance.

Therza observed acidly, “I often have that effect on younger men.”

Mary said, “He fell for you all right.”

Cliff said, never having appeared to look up from his book, “No, I’d say he fell for Jennifer.”

The papers were invitations, and the invitations were for a dinner that started at that very moment at Pak Apuy’s. They were written in a neat hand and highly idiosyncratic English: “You present’s to be gest” and so on. The occasion was the return of Jennifer to the village, as well as the return of electricity. Jennifer was surprised by both, but soon got the explanation. Farida had arranged for an electrical engineer from an appropriate technology NGO to fly up here and repair the small hydroelectric generator that missionaries had installed some ten years ago, and which had not functioned for the last nine. “It only powers two things,” Mary said: “Our battery charger and a lamp for Pak Apuy. Gotta bribe the village head, apparently, to get things done.”

“No, you don’t,” Jennifer said. “Maybe Farida makes those kinds of assumptions, but Pak Apuy isn’t that way at all.”
“Not from what I hear. We’re apparently paying double rent, too—not just to the schoolteacher who owns this place but to Pak Apuy as well. Whatever. We can afford it—what is it, like a hundred bucks for the month for each of them?”

Jennifer hadn’t been paying anywhere near that. The question was, would the prices come down again? Or had a new level of expectation been set? There were so many ramifications she hadn’t anticipated to being part of a crowd.

They headed over to Pak Apuy’s together and sat down in the meeting hall space. At the center of the gathering was a single light bulb, which glared at the end of a brown wire looped over a roof beam. Most of the men of Long Awan were already sitting against the walls, and the women were in the kitchen. Jennifer didn’t know where to sit or quite what to make of the situation. Except for Bu Sri Ayu’s brief appearance, she had always been the only woman at these gatherings. She supposed it wouldn’t do to cross the room to get away from Geoff, so she sat next to him and he sat right in the middle of all the Westerners. A few moments later Farida and Adan walked in, very much together, and sat at the far end of the room, busily talking to each other. Jennifer could feel the social constraints around her like iron bands, each of which chafed her feelings in unique and hideous ways. Take away Geoff, and she’d still have the rest of the group to contend with. Take away them, and she had her own status to think about in the village—she still wouldn’t be able to go the one place she wanted to be, which was by Adan’s side. But Farida? Sly, effective Farida worked with Adan. Naturally they came in together—they were discussing work. And if they kept doing it while they sat, who would draw any untoward conclusions?

The evening dragged. But drag was too mild, too even a word for an evening that, more accurately characterized, bumped and rolled and ground and crashed. For one thing, all the unspoken issues with Geoff lay like a trough not only between the two of them, but all around. Geoff spoke neither Indonesian nor anthropology, and so his entire occupation was staring at her expectantly for
the moment she’d turn to meet his gaze. Then, all the people around her were the grad students, and they apparently liked conversing with each other more than with the villagers. She had to listen to an inane debate between Cliff and Therza about agency—the anthropological word for free will in the old debate between free will and predeterminism, though for anthropologists the great predeterminer was not God but social structure. Cliff argued for the notion of agency—that individuals had inner lives, subjective impressions. Therza said the whole thing was an illusion of upper-middle-class men who have the money and leisure to pay other people to do the dirty work. They turned to Jennifer for an opinion and she pissed both of them off by admitting that the whole debate felt arcane and precious now that she’d spent time with real people living real lives outside academia.

Tensions developed, too, over the issue of Pak Tiras and his leg. Mary, whose handiwork the bandages had been, noticed that they were now stained by river water and mud. She got up to go fuss over him, and the old man mugged for her shamelessly, pointing at his leg and whining about how it hurt him. When Mary came back, she made such an ostentatious show about what bad shape his leg had been in, and how good it was that the team had come when they did, that Jennifer finally lost patience and revealed that his snake bite was several years old and had already been attended to by real doctors. “It’s just going to look bad for the rest of his life.” This took away one of the team’s proudest and most concrete achievements, and was bitterly resisted by Mary. Jennifer recalled too late how she’d felt when Adan had intervened with Nenek Sunal and realized she should have kept her mouth shut no matter how annoyed she was. Certainly the bandages and antibiotic cream did no harm; in fact, Pak Tiras, who tended to a gruff and aggressive demeanor, seemed to thrive on the sympathetic attention.

Worst, though, was how savagely Jennifer reacted when Tim leaned over and asked about the bear cub. Its mother, he explained, now served as rug in his apartment in Yogyakarta, on Java, where he studied Indonesian. “It’s made for a
fantastic story,” he said, and she noticed again that nervous gesture he had of pushing the flap of blond hair out of his eyes, the gesture that had marked his forehead in blood when she saw him last. “At my housewarming a bunch of other ex-pats were so inspired by it that they got drunk and ate durian—which is supposed to kill you, that combination—and lay back in its fur and lit candles and recited spontaneous verse in preparation for the afterlife.” His blue eyes sparked with mirth and memory.

“You are an idiot,” she said, “if you think I want to hear a story like that. Jesus. So ex-pats get drunk and act like asses. They—and you—sport on the body of an innocent animal. Is that what’s special, necrophilia and bestiality? Is that the kind of cultural sensitivity you were aspiring to in coming up here early like you did?”

Tim recoiled as if slapped. “It was just a joke,” he said.

“Some joke.”

Mary broke in. “Oh, and you did such a great job,” she said. “So sensitive to culture.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You bear cub?” she said. “Do you realize how angry and scared people are? Everywhere we go in the fields they’re like, ‘that damage is from Ibu Jen’s bear.’”

“It’s escaped,” Jennifer said. “It’s gone. Besides, I kept it in a cage, so it never did that kind of damage.”

“You are an idiot,” Mary said, and Jennifer could hear the deliberate echo of her own supercilious tone, “If you think a bear that’s used to human food just goes away when it escapes.”

Jennifer shot a glance over at Pak Dayung who, despite a valorous effort signified by his raised head and eyes that followed the English-language conversation like a spectator at a ping pong match, had little idea of the meaning of anything being said. He had told her—but of course, that was exactly what he
would have told her. So as not to make her worry. Nita’s little hesitations whenever Jennifer mentioned the bear made more sense now, too. Jesus.

Jennifer looked around at the gathered company, the Americans busy jabbering away at each other, and the Indonesians largely mute, watching, eating. The tradition of solo ethnographic work had never made more sense to her: she felt caged within this group. She recalculated, mentally, what each of the people present knew about her. She had allowed herself to be fairly candid in those letters.

When it seemed impossible for matters to get worse, when the weight of Geoff’s silent expectations had grown their most unbearable, Pak Apuy stood and the room grew quiet. He began his speech with a formal declarations of thanks to all who had come, and the government, and God. Then he announced that this occasion was special for two reasons—it welcomed back Ibu Jen, and it announced the engagement of his son, Alpius Dominic, to Nina Tutiani, daughter of Pak Dayung. Applause broke out, and when it didn’t stop, Datu stood. Jennifer had said a few words to him when walking in, but knew nothing from either he or Nita about the engagement. Again she regretted her current position.

Datu grinned now with surprising shyness and characteristic bravado. He thanked his father, his mother (who did not come out of the kitchen), and then he said, in that stiff and overly formal way of Indonesian speech-making, and without looking at Jennifer directly, that a great debt was owed as well to Ibu Jen, who had been a spiritual counselor and exemplary model of marriage for the two of them.

Mary began translating the interesting bits for Geoff—Jennifer had made a half-hearted start of it, then trailed off as the speech focused on her—and when Mary told him this part, emphasizing the ‘exemplary model’ of marriage, he reached over and covered her hand with his, saying, ‘how sweet.’ She snatched back her hand and said, low and angry: “Don’t touch me in public.”

“Exemplary,” he said again.
Datu went on to amplify on his theme, reminding listeners that, though Pak Dayung and his daughter had lived in Long Awan a long time, they came from elsewhere, from “downriver where Nita’s mother is buried.” And to elsewhere Nita would surely go, except that Long Awan now was a different place than it had been, less backward, less isolated. “We now have electricity again, and many guests, and classes in English,” he said. “We have radio and soon we will have ecotourism. And a great evil has been averted, in the form of transmigration which is not at all appropriate for our area. In bringing all of these changes, Ibu Jen was the forerunner.” And these, he concluded, were the changes that allowed someone like Nita to decide to stay there, to stay with someone like him, Datu, for which he would be eternally grateful and her husband.

Jennifer was stunned to hear herself given credit for all these changes, most of which could more accurately be attributed to someone else—Tim for the radio, Farida for almost everything else, Bu Sri Ayu for the fizzling of transmigration plans. She did not want the credit—did not want to be seen as responsible for the transformations, the risks that Long Awan faced into the future. She had come here to observe only, to observe and to draw some scientific inferences. That had to be clarified.

“And most importantly,” Datu said, “she has shown a model of steadfast loyalty to her husband even across great distances, and has shown us—all of us, and especially Nita—that a woman can be of the modern world and yet virtuous.”

As Datu started to sit down, voices called for Jennifer to speak. She rose reluctantly. But he abruptly rose again, and faster.

“And this is what I mean,” Datu said, his language no less formal though these were unplanned remarks. “Has any woman before risen to address us? But we have grown quite accustomed to hearing Ibu Jen’s opinion and counsel, and we are open now to the modern world and its ways.”

Jennifer thanked Datu, and his father, for the feast and for the welcome back to Awan. She congratulated Datu and Nita and spoke words in their praise.
And then she explained that she was not responsible for any of what Datu had ascribed to her, but rather had been only a student who was fortunate to have been taken in to such a wonderful community as Long Awan. People nodded approvingly, and she knew them to be taking her words as admirably humble but not at all accurate. If she protested more, all the greater would the glow of humility around her increase. Her nerves caused her to make many mistakes with the language, and she could sense Mary catch each one of them with competitive glee.

“About Geoff and I,” she said. But she had no good strategy to distance she and Geoff: the last thing she wanted was for them to be held up on a pedestal, enshrined forever as an ideal couple or indeed as any couple at all. But to disavow the marriage, in this setting, at this moment, with it serving so symbolic and personal a function for other people, would be criminal. Observer, indeed—the deceit she’d practiced in order to get access to observer status had now become a major influence on people’s entire lives. Nita was visible in the kitchen doorway, her face heartrending in its earnestness and hope, listening to every word Jennifer said. So she said, “We have indeed stayed apart a very long time, and we have much catching up to do—“ There was a low undertone of laughter, and she realized that part of her audience took her words as euphemism, which flustered her further. “And so I hope you’ll excuse us if we leave early tonight”—definite laughter now, she was blowing it, creating exactly the wrong impression—“with appropriate supervision”—now the whole room was coming apart, she was a standup comedian. She abruptly sat down, and her humiliation capped by Geoff reaching out to grab her shoulder. “What? What? What did you tell them? What did you say?” Even Mary wasn’t translating, but shaking her head back and forth in amusement. Jennifer looked in desperation and misery over to Adan, who, along with Farida, looked as amused as the rest. Jennifer groaned.
Then Pak Apuy stood again, and said, “Usually we can tell if an evening is late by looking at the oil lamps and their sputtering. Tonight, though, and all other nights, we have a light that will not wink, that will not fail. There will be those of us like the new light, who will stay and dance as long as there is dark. But there will also be those like the old light, and if they find it time to bow into the dark, let them go.” People laughed again at the wonderful simile, and again Geoff tugged at her shoulder and asked, “What?” Mary leaned in and said, “They’re all having fun thinking about the sex you and your wife will have as soon as you leave.” Jennifer could hardly stand to look at the expression of self-satisfied delight on his face. “These people,” he said. “Know how to live.”

The end result was that Jennifer stayed, and Geoff stayed, long past the point of discomfort into something like a ragged exhaustion of hope and energy. Whatever sympathy there is to be gained for celebrity couples, Jennifer gained it, smiling next to Geoff while her feelings alternately boiled and froze. She barely noticed the dancing, so busy was she hatching plots for escape, or, alternately, reconciling herself to a diminished life.

When they finally left, she maintained decorum until they’d reached her old house, where he yawned and said, “I’m bone tired.” She grabbed the back of his arm and led him out along a path in the dark, not using a flashlight. Luckily, they encountered no one, and equally luckily, Om Barnabas was not in his field hut at this time. She climbed the little ladder onto the platform, which was a ragged affair of loose thatch that farmers used to keep watch against birds and other threats to their crops. Then she drew Geoff up. “Won’t they just assume?” he said, yawning again.

“They will just assume,” she said. “They have just assumed. I wanted them to assume. I just never imagined you’d show up. We have to do something about it.”
"Should we just do what they assume?" he said. He had been drinking some of the tuak, the palm wine, which Jennifer hadn’t trusted herself to touch no matter who she offended. Even tipsy, though, he did not sound hopeful.

"No."

"Okay," he said. He drifted off towards sleep, leaving all issues unaired. If this really had been a marriage, it would have been a bad one. Then it hit her.

"Geoff," she said. "I want a divorce."

That woke him up slightly. "We don’t need one," he said. "We’re not really married, remember?"

"We have a show marriage. I want a show divorce. Soon. Tomorrow."

Now he was fully awake. "You want to go through some sort of ceremony?"

"Yes," she said, growing more sure.

"But I thought they were looking to us as some kind of model," he said.

"Wouldn’t that be bad?"

"No," she said. "It’s perfect." And she explained the issue between Datu and Nita, how she was more ambitious, and wanted higher education on the coast, and how he had to stay here. "That’s why he praised my faithfulness, get it?" she said. "He’s saying that I helped convince him it can be done. And he must have then given Nita permission, which convinced her to marry him."

"So now we shoot all that out of the water?" Geoff said.

"We make you the villain," Jennifer said. "That puts the burden on Datu, if they’re using us as a model. I remained spotless, pure, and chaste, while you—you devil—you slept with my best friend."

"How’d you know?" he asked, sounding pleased with his fictional self.

"Because..." she thought quickly now through all that she may have said about problems with Geoff. There had been the letter...what had she told Nita? Problems about a child. "You got her pregnant. She had your baby. And now she’s ready to abandon it, but you want to adopt, so you had to tell me."
“Wow,” he said. “This is high drama.”

“And I said I’d take the child but you had to be honest with me, if there were more things. And then you revealed a string of infidelities half a mile long...tonight, now, while we’re talking—”

“And so, the divorce tomorrow.”

“Yes!” She gave him a quick hug, and he laughed at the irony of it.

“So you love me again now that I’m an asshole. Women!” he said. “Why do nice guys always get the shaft.”

They talked about the details of the story, how to make it authentic, and it was fun and almost like old times, when they’d locked themselves away from the world and played silly roles with each other and ordered pizza at two in the morning. She gave him another hug in the middle of it all, spontaneously, and he said, “You’re sure you want this divorce? Because I really think you’re into me now. I can sense these things.”

That’s when she told him about Adan. “The one with Farida?” he asked. When he saw her look, he said, “I meant, the one who teaches with her?” Then he pantomimed foot-in-mouth in the dark, and fell silent. A moment later, though, he said: “Well, other stuff aside, you know she’s got half the village learning English, schoolchildren and adults? That woman is something else.”

Jennifer said nothing, only stared into the night, either sensing or imagining the presence of thousands of bats in the opaque skies. Rainy season had loosened its grip but not yet let go; no stars were visible.

“You’re comparing yourself,” Geoff said.

She admitted she was.

“It’s not a fair comparison,” he said. “I was doing the same thing at first. Then I realized: it’s got to be like a thousand times more difficult to succeed in Indonesia than the U.S. I mean, what’s their literacy rate, their university attendance rate, how good is any of the training, etc. You know, the whole third world thing. Corruption, nepotism, etc. So for someone like her, in the U.S.
she’d be lieutenant governor of a small state by now—it’s just that in an economy like this, without family connections, she’s held back and so we rub elbows with her. It would never happen in the United States—not people like us being in the same arena with people like her. We’d read her profile in an in-flight magazine.”

“That’s a depressing thought,” she said.

“But it’s right. You know it is. Even Adan, the guy you’re hung up on. I can’t even really understand him when he talks, but I can see the quality in him. He’s a hell of a lot smarter than we are. We bumble along, do the expected thing, go to college, can’t get a decent job, escape into graduate school...this guy came out of the forests and, what, nearly made it as a doctor? Became a player on a U.S. Navy expedition? How’d he do all that? Just sheer intelligence and force of personality. You know, I wasn’t sure what to expect in a little remote village like this, especially after all your letters made it sound so primitive. But it’s been humbling, to me—surprisingly so. If I didn’t have it so easy in the U.S., if my parents hadn’t given me a Commodore 64 when I was in high school, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I was born into a situation like this, I’d just be one of the farmers bumbling along. I don’t kid myself.”

Jennifer sensed the truth of what he was saying—in the positive sense, that these were people of a high caliber. There had been times in the hospital, gazing at Adan in profile, when she had been able to picture him as military commander, as professor, above all, as the doctor he’d set out to be. The negative sense—that she was by contrast more ordinary, more complacent, didn’t sit well.

Apparently not for Geoff, either. “Actually, I have to take that back. I always forget how different your background is from mine.” He paused for a long moment. “Which is probably tribute to how well you’ve pulled off your own improbable success. Coming from Gall-tan, Vir-gin-yuh. I mean, how different is this place from your hometown, really? Have you thought about that?”

“It’s pretty different,” she said. “Although I think that’s timing as much as anything else. If I’d been born in Gallton of a hundred years ago, when the
mining company still ran it and the trees were all stripped and Washington, DC was more than a days’ worth of travel away, it might have been a lot more similar. The contours of the land are the same, and even—you know those old country shacks, the ones of boards weathered gray, with the vacant-eyed kids on the porch? I guess you don’t. I get flashes sometimes here of that kind of thing. Southern Appalachia. But the Gallton I grew up in, as benighted and isolating as it was, it was still part of a prosperous country. We weren’t waiting on missionary planes; we were taking up collections to pay for them.”

“Tell me, are you finding it here, what you came for? Your Asianness?”

“I suppose I am,” she said slowly. “Because there are whole days and weeks when I forget to think about it.”

“Hey,” he said. “You remember about Hong Kong Phooey?”

“What, you mean remember my own life?” It had been the first story about her past that she’d told Geoff, when he was her TA in the intro computer science class at the university. He’d made some joke in a tutoring session about how it was the only time since he’d been in computer science that he’d been the one helping an Asian. It could have gone either way, with a comment like that: she could have shut him up with a cold look. Or she could have reached past his obvious clumsiness, taken his reaching-out in the spirit it was offered: goofy, inept, and sincere. Rather than do either, she had responded with a story.

Brad had been in first grade; she had been in fourth, and she had been sitting on top of the jungle gym with two friends trading stickers of valentines and teddy bears and jellybeans that smelled like food when you scratched them hard enough. Down below, the younger boys fought over the swing sets and dumped gravel onto the slides and generally acted like the tow-headed thugs they were. There had been a steady drift of rain, light as mist, down the mountains and kids still wore their winter flannels. Then she heard her brother’s voice, loud and on the edge of tears: “Am not!”
The sound of scuffling had broken out directly below her, and she moved her sticker binder out of the way and pressed her eye to a gap between the structure’s boards. She saw a sea of heads and shoulders thronged around her brother, who was pinned on his back. He would have been able to see her but his face was covered by hands that seemed to be prying at it. As she watched he got one hand free and tried to claw his face clear but other kids grabbed his arm and pulled it back and he yelped. “Are too!” said one boy, one of the Crahans, neighbors at the mobile home park famous for standing in front of other people’s open windows and staring (her mom’s comment, on returning one of the unrepentant Crahan boys to his mother: ‘until spittle started soaking into his shirt.’). “See!” And in that swarming melee of snotty little boys, he brushed away the other hands and with two fingers pressed at Brad’s eyes, stretching the skin down at the corners. “Me Chinee! Hong Kong Phooey!” Hong Kong Phooey, several other little boys’ voices echoed in whisper, the way they do.

Jennifer lifted her head, furious. Her friends had their faces pressed to the boards too, looking down, and when Missy Carlton looked up she had a vertical red mark across her forehead. She also had a knowing smirk to her look, the smirk that would grow to kill their friendship several years later and precipitate the torture by laughing. Jennifer’s anger only increased. She knew she looked different; she knew exactly how she looked, the coffee stain of her skin, the flyaway black hair on her high forehead, the nakedness of her eyes under her skinny eyebrows. She spent enough time at the mirror, wishing it all away so she could look normal. But she also knew that she didn’t have any Chinese eyes. And she knew Brad didn’t have any of it in him, any of the foreignness. Ignoring Missy, she dropped down the fireman’s pole at the side of the jungle gym, kicking boys out of the way, not caring who she landed on. “Get off him!” she said. She shoved first grade boys right and left, she was Linda Carter, Wonder Woman, and even if she couldn’t save her mom, she was going to save her brother from the taint of her own life. Jimmy Crahan let go of her brother and stood there like
Crahans did, like malice was their only fuel and when it ran out they had no more consciousness than stones. She hit him in the face anyway, gave him a fat bleeding lip with the heel of her hand, and said (nonsensically, since he was already down on the ground) "Get off him, you web-footed inbreed"—which was her mother's name for the Crahans.

She had stood over Brad, breathing hard. He looked up at her not with gratitude, though, but with disgust. "Leave me alone," he said, and rolled to his feet and walked away to go stand all the way at the corner of the recess yard, hands clutching the fence. Next day, she had been changing into her swimsuit when the closet door moved. When she yanked the louvers back there had been Jimmy Crahan, staring (but again, no consciousness, no person behind those eyes), and Brad beside him, red in the face and indignant before she even accused him of anything.

That was the story she had told him, and the one he reminded her of now, a story from a past that seemed ancient and left-behind. And yet she had to concede its relevance, even its preternatural relevance, sitting here, the whole village watching and perhaps judging her love life, just as Gallton had watched and judged her mother's choices in men. And the odd inversion of it: Geoff the absent husband, a man from another country just passing through, soon to be divorced and left behind. Odder still to think that what had led her here, to this small town so very like Gallton, even to the shape and ancientness of its hills, its isolation, was the current that ran deep underneath whatever it was she was doing in her life, that had as its source Gallton and had as its destination anywhere sufficiently different.

She had gone to college driven by that current, had fought her way free of all encumbrances, so much so that she had lined up on the other side from other Asian students on so many debates, had privately (and not so privately) considered them maladapts, unable to appreciate how precious was the freedom to associate, to study, to earn the respect of others just by reading books and
speaking intelligently and critically about them. She had resented the enclaves that had gathered Asian students together and excluded others and assumed knowledge and terms that she didn’t have. *Pinay,* Filipino, which she had heard as pinhead. *Hapa:* what she was, a half-Asian. She wasn’t about to escape one form of provincialism only to be captured by another.

Of all the communities at the university, only the Asian-American had judged her by the color of her skin, had made assumptions about her that she didn’t live up to. Geoff had seen immediately why she switched from pre-med to anthropology, had understood that she wanted to learn, as an outsider must learn, about the culture of another people. At the Asian-American Alliance, on the other hand, they had torn her apart, had accused her of being a neo-colonialist, a collaborator. Dr. Ashwright, who had inspired her in her first Anthro class, who had enthusiastically supported her later in her application to graduate school, who had helped her obtain funding (several times now—she must not forget that she returned to Long Awan as part of his graduate student team), the Alliance purists considered monstrous because he had reported on the positive attitudes toward Indonesian sweatshops among certain workers’ families.

“Man,” said Geoff. “When you space out, you space out hard.”

“Hey,” she said softly. “That was a really important thing you just reminded me of. I guess I did come back to Gallton, didn’t I? Just with a different cast of characters: now I’m the only American among a bunch of traditional Asians.”

He chuckled at it. “So what do you make of that?” he said.

She smiled, though he probably couldn’t see it anymore in the dark, and she threw back at him one of his favorite sayings: “No matter where you go—”

“—there you are,” he said. Maybe he was smiling too. He took her hand, and she let him.

“Hey,” she said. “Can you tell me something? Are you okay? Is it worth it to you, having come out here, even though this is how things are going?”
“Yeah, yeah, it is,” he said. “You know my life. Anything that gets me away from my dissertation work is worthwhile.” More seriously, he added: “Besides, this is the most daring thing I’ll ever do in my career. You know. I kind of recognized that, is probably the reason I came. You’re the only attachment I’ve ever had that’s strong enough to get me off my duff and make this kind of trip.” He didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then he added: “So maybe that’s why I didn’t contact you, because I knew I wanted to do this and I needed the image of you to get me here. And I needed you not to say no.”

She said, “Thanks, Geoff, for being so honest.” She hugged him again, then, and it was the truest hug yet, one in which she could feel the texture of his body against hers, could smell that he’d brought his same cheap shampoo with him from the states, wore his same old deodorant, was in fact the body she knew best in the world after her own. She wondered briefly if Adan and she would ever achieve this level of comfort, of honesty.

In the morning they stumbled back to the village, red-eyed from talking all night, to discover the place in an uproar. Oswald had been inside the village limits for the first time since his escape; several men had seen him. The pineapples near the church had been ransacked. Lawé, who told them about it, shuddered visibly. “That’s where he was found, you know,” he said. “That’s where his mother died, and his twin.” Jennifer nodded.

She knew.
CHAPTE R FOURTEEN

Bu Sri Ayu’s comment about Jennifer and dangerous strays began to take on the force and truth of prophecy. If Jennifer had hoped to quietly lay the groundwork for a return to Long Awan in her former role, that of researcher, Geoff and now Oswald had conspired against it so effectively that she no longer seemed to have any role except for very public damage control.

She first sought out Pak Dayung, who was in the classroom, an open-sided one-room shack slightly uphill from the longhouse, built of warped boards and with an inventory of educational supplies consisting of one chalkboard with the green part worn away in the middle and a box of mildewed textbooks that just about managed to cover grades K-6. He confirmed what Mary had said: Oswald had repeatedly raided villagers’ fields. What had made last night unusual was only how much damage he had done, and how close it had been to the center of Long Awan.

“So what can I do?” Jennifer asked.

He shook his head. But when she pressed him on it, he said, “You know, you cannot say anything directly, I think.” And he told her for the first time about his wife, Nita’s mother, who had died in childbirth when Nita had been only three. This was in another village, downriver. “Nita lost her only brother at the same time. It was a mistake by the midwife; a breech birth that could easily have been handled by a doctor or even a well-trained nurse. But just the year before that, the only nurse within a two-days’ walk had been driven out on suspicion of being a head-ghost. It wasn’t her fault, just an outbreak of a meningitis, I think, that caused death very suddenly and even among healthy people. But she was at the bedsides, and people drew conclusions.” Pak Dayung walked to the waist-high railing that encircled the classroom and stared out.

The early morning still clung to its shroud of mists, and the light moved through it like a painter’s brush, picking up highlights and suggesting depths. Pak
Dayung’s face, a homely, honest face of flat planes worn away at the edges, seemed burnished in silver. Jennifer stood beside him, listening. “I defended the nurse, but not wisely. I was full of my position then, a new schoolteacher, better educated than anyone around me. I dismissed people’s beliefs, argued the rational points: we needed a nurse, meningitis is a disease with a mosquito vector, all of that. People were polite; they simply declined to debate. They said ‘ya,’ then drove the nurse out anyway. And then my wife died at the hands of a midwife among those same people, who shared those same beliefs.”

“Pak Dayung, I’m sorry,” she said.

“That’s when I moved up here, which is no different. But it was an open position and I could not stay in the place where my wife had died.”

Children began to rise up through the misty morning towards the schoolroom, children barefoot and in ragged T-shirts. Jennifer looked over at Pak Dayung, and appreciated for the first time the act of courage that separated him from his own culture, the act of mind that refused superstitions enshrined as religious truths. Pak Tiras last night had been entertaining the graduate students, telling stories in a loud voice. “I shouldn’t be drinking,” he said ebulliently, “But it’s hard to be a good Christian when your grandfather was a crocodile.”

“You saved Oswald,” said Jennifer. “Didn’t you? As much as I did.”

“No,” he said. “Nita did. Nita saved both Oswald and you. She made the decision because she is your friend. I came along to protect her. Superstition or no, a bear is a dangerous animal.” Now he turned to look at her, and said, “It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.”

Jennifer stood rooted to the spot as Pak Dayung walked over to his spot in front of the classroom, assuming authority over the children of Long Awan as they straggled in, the youngest to the front benches, the oldest to the back. Her mind raced, connecting the said with the unsaid. Nita the savior of the bear—and Jennifer? And then Jennifer saw how—daughter to Pak Dayung, who had not only the practical skills to keep the bear penned and fed, but also the spiritual
status to keep him contained. Those charms on the posts. The fact that Pak Dayung carved grave markers, and thus, despite any skepticism, held power with the spirits of the dead. Yes, and Nita was fiancée to Datu, presumptive head of Long Awan, the one most obviously upset by Oswald’s presence in the village, and the one at whose word the village would either tolerate the bear or organize to kill it and expel Jennifer. But that thought raised a chilling other: was Nita now a fiancée in order to get leverage with Datu? Was it a devil’s bargain that had been struck? Datu’s words from last night haunted her anew: ‘thanks to Ibu Jen.’

Jennifer excused herself and hurried to the longhouse, which on this odd morning was full of loud voices and worried looks. The striking of a blow by the demon bear right at the foundation of the church had thrown fear into people, a fear that Jennifer understood now, with a suddenly cleared mind. Here there is, an unholy alliance of modernity and the dark old days, with Jennifer as witch threatening the tenuous stability of the present. A generation ago most of the people of Long Awan had split off and abandoned the village altogether. A generation hence and the village may be gone altogether. It stood now shored only by a faith that was a volatile compromise between alien, imported Christianity and what the villagers collectively knew about their families, the forest, the fate of those who stayed and those who went.

She found Nita’s apartment empty, and ran further, to Pak Apuy’s, where she found Nita and Bu Apuy working together at the hearth cutting pig entrails for soup for yet another ceremonial dinner tonight. “Nita,” Jennifer said. And the girl understood that Jennifer wanted to talk privately, straightened and took Jennifer’s arm and explained to Bu Apuy that Jennifer was not feeling well. The old woman clapped her hands together in delight, and Jennifer saw that her night out with Geoff had not gone unnoticed. She could already see the gossip ricocheting from this encounter, pinging off in a hundred directions, adding to an air that was already filled with shrapnel and mutter. Concerning her. How
Oblivious she had been all year! How she wished her eyes closed again, so she could find again the peace of those days in her own little house.

They walked to a far corner of the kitchen and talked. Jennifer told Nita about Julie, about learning what it was to be friend to someone who cannot take care of themselves, whose mind cannot be trusted. And then Jennifer said, "Oswald was like that for me: a madness. I see that now. I love him dearly, but he cost too much. He cost you too much, and maybe," she fought to keep her tears down, to ward off any self-pity. Maybe he has cost me everything, Jennifer was going to say. But she didn't. "Maybe he has cost the whole village too much," she said. "I think it is okay to say goodbye now."

"But he is your child."

Jennifer calmed then, and stopped talking for a moment, and regarded Nita, who regarded her evenly and without flinching. "He's a bear," Jennifer said.

Nita shook her head with finality. "You cannot ever say goodbye to a child," she said. "Ever."

Things had seemed so clear to Jennifer only moments ago. But now, faced with this unassailable conviction of Nita's, her own clarity slipped its gears and she lost whatever else it was she had been going to say. "Then what do you do?"

Nita said, "You carry him with you."

"I can't," Jennifer said. "He can't travel. There's no way out of here for him. Look," she said, "Can you... can you say something to Datu? Have him... take care of it?" And there it was. She recognized it with a chill. Growing up, she had seen herself—as all girls see themselves—in the image of Snow White. Innocent, fair, oppressed by an evil mother figure whose self-involvement made them a threat. You go away for some years—college, in her case—and then you find yourself with the power to vanquish your oppressor and her horrible mirror. But what was Jennifer doing now, what was she enacting? She had just
ordered the huntsman after the heart of her own child. Even her own mother, living not just as a sojourner but as an absolute rooted prisoner of Gallton, Virginia, had not done that. Not to Jennifer. Her mother had complained, had carped, had criticized, had named Jennifer as the burden of her existence—but she had ultimately borne up under that burden. Which was nobler, to suffer audibly through the squalor and disappointment of your own life, or to murder that which you loved and betray your commitments?

“Bu Jen?” Nita asked in alarm, for Jennifer had sunk low and now sat, dazed, in a pile of soot.

“What happens if you can’t touch your child? If you can’t go near him?” Nita said, “It happens.”

“I can’t do anything, is what you’re saying,” Jennifer said. “I just have to sit here and take it. Watch.”

Nita said, “I don’t know.”

Jennifer started crying then, not just for Oswald but for herself and for Julie and for Nita, her friend whom she had taken for granted. Nita came to her, and held her, and Jennifer rested her head against the teenager’s shoulder. “This is ridiculous,” Jennifer sobbed. “I’m the older one. I’m the one from the developed country. I should know something by now. I shouldn’t be depending on you to take care of me. I’ve made a mess of everything.” Nita just patted her back with even, firm strokes, as one would a cat or an hysteric. Or a loved one.

Mary came in and, while Jennifer rubbed at her eyes with a corner of her shirt said with obvious impatience and distaste, “Christ, we’ve been looking all over for you. Here. Sign this damn marriage license. The pastor won’t divorce you without it. Farida and Geoff have been working all morning on forging this thing. We need to get in the field like, pronto, or the day is totally lost.”

Jennifer looked over at Nita, who of course hadn’t understood Mary’s rapid-fire English. Here was another thing. Was she going to betray her friend’s confidence in her, in her marriage? And for what? Adan, who had not bothered
to speak to her since she got here? Yes, she had a husband. But he could at least have looked bothered, rather than happy to be with Farida. By the light of this morning, the fictions she’d spun so giddily with Geoff the night before seemed ludicrous and irresponsible. She froze. “Sign it!” Mary barked. “Come on, we need to get moving.”

Jennifer signed. It meant nothing yet. She would go with it to the pastor, would figure out what to do, really. Would explain to Nita. She drew a breath, and was just about to begin doing so, when the screams of children let loose from the schoolhouse echoed through the village, accompanied by a noise like falling thunder. A plane had landed.

Ashwright—to say the least—was displeased. A large man, with hands as thick as a meat handler’s, he had a face that expressed displeasure by the bluntest means possible—a deep frown that made him look like a particularly dangerous snapping turtle. It didn’t help that he had acquired a deep, even sunburn during his stopover at the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. His face—red, porous, oversized—commanded the desk and room where Jennifer used to sit quietly, the place she used to call her own. He wore a rough cotton shirt unbuttoned far enough down the chest to reveal the necklaces he wore, accumulated as gifts of personal esteem from families in various cultures he’d worked with all through the developing world: iridescent shells, rattling claws, jaguar teeth.

He spoke at length and with tireless repetition. “I show up here expecting to see some busy people out in the field. What do I see, Jennifer, what? I see the whole village’s agricultural routine disrupted; everyone’s milling about. The best hunters in the world aren’t hunting. The graduate team is sitting around on their duffs. They’ve brought highly advanced computer technology here and Farida is using it to forge legal documents for you. And you’ve even co-opted the institution of the church.”
It was all Jennifer could do not to squirm and fidget like a reprimanded child. “I didn’t know you’d have Geoff on the team,” she said. “I didn’t—”

“I didn’t have Geoff on my team,” he thundered. “I had a computer specialist. To my own regret, I didn’t suspect any deviousness on his part. And then there’s you. And the bear.” He pounded one hand into the other. “The real issue here is interference with another culture. This is a goddamn mess.”

There was a long pause while he looked at her from underneath bushy eyebrows. Even the whites of his eyes seemed red. She could feel a kind of internal storm gathering, a heavy scouring dark cloud roiling inside. Only a miracle could save her this final humiliation, that she would cry. The other grad students had gathered at Pak Apuy’s after having debriefed Ashwright as a group. She had been called individually, to answer for herself. Everyone knew what was going on.

“You’ve made a public spectacle here,” he said. “That’s counter to an anthropologist’s job, which is as delicate as a surgeon doing an exploratory biopsy: to open up, to operate, to close the skin again seamlessly, leaving the tissue as unaffected as possible. Now show me what you’ve got.”

“What?”

“The final report to the Asia Association?”
She shook her head, biting her lower lip.

“The proposal to NFI, at least.”

And then she did cry, the thunderhead within her bursting in tears of nervous exhaustion and regret and shame. She admitted that she’d made a mess of everything; she told him about Adan and the bear attack, about Julie’s insanity, about Mark Reynolds’ disgrace and fall from his position. As she spoke through her tears, she could see him soften. “Well,” he said at last. “You have had a rough time of it. That thing with Mark is a shame. I saw him, did you know? What a perfectly useless wife. What a waste of potential.” She didn’t say anything; she still didn’t know what it was she had seen in Dewi, and this
wouldn’t be the moment to defend her, not now when Ashwright was finally on her side.

He stared off over her left shoulder for a moment, and then he said in an avuncular, fatherly tone, “It’s easy to forget, not being in the field, how crazy—excuse the expression, given the context—it can become. Did I tell you about my own first trip to Borneo?” He had, but that did not stop him from telling the story again, a story that he had told in the first anthropology class she’d ever taken with him, and in many subsequent classes and moments. He settled into it as one would settle into a familiar, comforting ritual.

“I was out on a hunting trip with some Lengilo in the Krayan,” he said. “Binuang, I think—yes, because later I sent Mark there for his dissertation work. Shame, that—the boy has had no luck, no luck at all.” He did not elaborate, though Jennifer very much wanted to hear about someone else’s unlucky dissertation work under Ashwright’s mentorship.

“I was doing the Western bump and shuffle—you know, my frame is just not built for the forest. You have to be small. I remember when we’d come to large open pastures and I’d leave my companions toiling half a mile back; I remember thinking, yes, so this is what I’m built for, this is the ancestral terrain, the steppes of the Caucasus. Heavy hips, strong calves, bulked up against the cold—that was me. They were as you know them, light and agile.

“Because this was my first real hunting expedition I tried to play an equal role, learned how to shoot their homemade guns, developed quite a lip for the blowpipes. When we bagged a pig I volunteered to carry it back. They laughed at me, but I insisted. Then they got serious with me, but I insisted. Finally they unlaced a rattan carrier and strapped the pig into it, a filthy gray thing with its entrails and heart and lungs cut out and its mouth frozen in a terrible sneer. They lifted it up and set it on my back.

“I don’t know what I was thinking. Actually, I do know what I was thinking. I was thinking noble thoughts, uplifting thoughts of myself as an
anthropologist, of myself as a part of this tribe, however temporarily. The relationship between pig and man is a convoluted and deep one, with long historical precedent. In certain New Guinea tribes lactating women suckle piglets as readily as they suckle their own children. I felt myself a link in the great chain of survival.

"But I wasn't prepared for the weight. The pig settled on my shoulders like lead; the straps cut into my flesh. It smelled of iron and piss and though I couldn't see it I pictured its obscene tongue lolling at my neck. Its sweat mingled with mine. When I tried to take a step I staggered. The thing must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

"They started walking, and I tried to keep up, but with every step I could feel my bones jarring within me. It was like being ridden by a demon. Its lower trotters rested on my buttocks. Inevitably, I fell. Inevitably, I rolled. Inevitably, I crashed down the side of the ravine, the pig and I hugging each other, tumbling over and over until I landed half in the river, with the pig on top."

"I was humiliated at having to be saved, humiliated to relinquish the pig, to admit that I couldn't do what the men around me—half my size, twice or three times my age—could do with ease. But there was no getting around my failure, and the rest of the trip was in silence.

"To honor my effort, though, the village head offered me in camp that night the choicest part of the pig, which he roasted on a stick over the fire. I asked, and he confirmed, that it was the penis. This presented me with a problem. I had no intention of eating it, and yet to refuse it would, I sensed, be an insult. So I took the proffered body part—the original wienie roast, if you will—and I touched it and pantomimed being burned. In fact, it was hot. So I kept it on the stick and held it out to cool.

"What I had noticed was that the hunting dogs circled the fire looking for scraps. So I began to talk, volubly; I told them the story of what I'd just been through, how I feared for my life and thought when I fell that the pig was going to
take me straight to the underworld, the great downriver, all the way to hell. At the high point of the story I made a wild gesticulation with the stick—and the wienie flew off and, before anyone could recover it, was devoured by the dogs. I expressed my dismay along with the rest.”

He grinned at her, inviting her—as he invited hundreds of undergraduates and graduates every year at the university—to share in the humor of the story. In the past, she had. She had accepted its depiction of the natives as both earnest and gullible, and of the anthropologist as physically bumbling but clever. She had taken it as Ashwright told it, as a story about the exotic trials of being in the field.

Now, though, she saw it differently. Knowing the Dayaks as she now did, she saw that the penis would have been offered not out of some exalted idea of ‘this is an honor,’ but half-jesting, half-testing, in full awareness that an American would not be comfortable eating it (no doubt his repugnance at the pig’s smell had been duly noted, and the village had gotten many laughs out of imitating his expression as the dead thing cleaving to his back). They would also be aware of the specific challenge it represented to Ashwright’s masculinity. It would have been offered in a spirit of initiation, of hazing. She had been through that herself: in her first month in Long Awan, Datu had offered her a dripping white slab of roasted pig fat and when she recoiled, squeamish, his face had lit up and it became a game—a game of utmost seriousness. They had gone several rounds—she refusing it, she taking it from him and then comically trying to hide it behind her back, she trying to take a dainty little bite and set it on the edge of her plate. Each time, he had escalated in his insistence and the people all around had escalated in their mirth, until finally, with him practically force-feeding her, one hand at the back of her head, she had taken a large wet bite, the juices dribbling down her chin, and then, once she had gagged and swallowed the white, quivering stuff, had held up her hand like a champion. And then she had really won the game, by wiping her lips, demanding more, and insulting Datu for not producing it readily enough.
From that standpoint Ashwright’s ploy with the dogs represented a failure to connect. He maintained his dignity, perhaps, but that was synonymous with separation. He remained other. Also, on the issue of carrying the pig: okay, it was heavy. It was more difficult than he expected. But he had evidently never offered to pick up a pig again. What about his ideals, being a link in the chain? Did those ever matter anyway, since he planned to leave after a time? Were those thrown to the dogs, and did he express his dismay for that, too? In her mood now, and after so long in the field, it seemed an empty story, a sly self-congratulation for his own quick thinking. But it revealed not so much the conditions he’d lived in as an uncomfortable moment that he passed through. And wasn’t this the way of anthropologists? Herself, for instance? Hadn’t she adopted a bear with the blithe assumption that someday soon she’d be rid of it, that it would be somebody else’s problem?

Nita’s words—you cannot ever say goodbye to a child—haunted her. Dr. Ashwright, she wanted to say, what if the pig on your back was alive, and you could never put him down? But she didn’t say anything. She blotted her tears on her own shoulder and listened as for another half hour, Ashwright consoled her, and gave her advice on various academic matters. On the issue of her dissertation, he reserved judgment until she could show him something. But for the research team here and now, he had a plan. They would all go into the ladang together the next morning.

From the start they made for an unhappy group. Geoff was glum and silent. Ashwright had thoroughly chewed him out and informed him that he would be leaving the village the next day. Plus, all the competitive dynamics from the anthropology department were in place. While Tim and Cliff fusséd over the mapping technology, the Global Positioning Systems and the rest, Mary and Therza took turns grandstanding, offering their sage interpretations of this and that cultural dynamic based on all of two weeks’ observation. When Jennifer
corrected either one of them, she earned dirty looks and immense condescension. “Of course you don’t see it as random,” Therza said at one point (in reference to the distribution of a farmer’s rice fields), “You’re just listening to what they say.”

Listening to what “they” said was not a major preoccupation with the members of this group, who spent most of the time arguing among themselves in English. They happened to be looking at Om Barnabas’s fields just downriver from Long Awan, near where Jennifer and Geoff had spent the night. That meant Om Barnabas was along with them, but other than answering the questions put to him or pointing out the boundaries of what he cultivated, stayed mostly silent. Jennifer had the unhappy feeling that everyone present underestimated him. She found herself wishing that in his stooped body language and gentle face did not fit the part of simple native quite so well. Where was the Om Barnabas who knew the stories that mapped out a land and its legends? Or had sent his son to medical school? He did not seem to be in attendance. Jennifer had still not talked to him about what Adan had revealed, and this was yet another thing to regret, that they stood perched high on a field that spilled downhill towards the river and could not talk as they had on so many other expeditions. Given her own probationary status as researcher, she didn’t dare go to him and risk losing track of the group’s English-language discussion and research process. So she haplessly listened to Therza and Mary and Cliff squabbling on theoretical grounds, and watched Tim pace off quadrants and push a button until the military satellites told him where he was, and wished she had her old life in Long Awan back.

Om Barnabas’s rice stood only a foot high, the young plants jaunty and electric green and bare of any trace of fruit. For the moment, they were just oversized swords of grass emerging from burnt soil. Om Barnabas had worked several months on clearing this field, chopping down its trees and bushes, letting them dry into perfect tinder, burning it all to cinders that fertilized the soil. Lobe-shaped and stretching right up the hillside, the field abutted a dense crawl of
undergrowth and medium-sized trees, a scrubby tangle of a sort that would not be out of place in Gallton.

By midday, short tempers had frayed entirely under the heat, and a crisis of drinking water had developed; Ashwright had forgotten how demanding the equatorial sun was, or, he said with a certain ruefulness, “I’m a different, and much older, man than the last time I was here.” Farida, who would not have made this kind of logistical error, had not come along on this trip, since Jennifer had finally stepped into the shoes of cultural interlocutor. So people contributed some of their supply to Ashwright, and though Om Barnabas offered to boil some tea in his field hut, no one could bear the thought of a hot drink. Nor did Ashwright relent and let them return to the village; there was time to make up.

Vultures wheeled the sky, and thousands of fist-sized birds made the flight from the nearby trees to land in the fields and then return, over and over, as if impatient for the rice to grow. While everyone else stared at the screen of the laptop, waiting grumpily for the operating system to reboot after a change of battery, Jennifer asked Om Barnabas about any stands of large bamboo. Om Barnabas nodded. “Dekat sekali,” he said. Very near. She was surprised that he hadn’t offered to take them already.

Jennifer smiled at a memory; it had been one of the first times that she’d recognized Nita as more than just a passing acquaintance. Jennifer had been on one of her early nostalgia walks, had been scouting the trail of what eventually become her refuge in Spring, the one that followed the creek downhill. But she had been a little lost—not scarily lost, because she still knew where the village was—but she no longer knew where she stood in relation to the creek. Nita had been watching her from Pak Dayung’s fields, nearby, and when Jennifer had stood still long enough, had run up and said, “Thirsty?” Jennifer was. So Nita had taken her to a stand of large bamboo and, with her machete, had cut off a finger-width piece from a young stem of it and blown through it to clear any pith or shavings. That was the straw. Then Nita had gone to a stalk as big around at
the bottom as a two-liter soda bottle, and had carefully chopped a hole at about waist height. She stuck the straw in—which looked incongruous, an enormous bamboo with a little green straw sticking out of it—and then said, “Drink!” But Jennifer had not trusted it, had asked questions, had wanted to know if this was pure water. She had not drunk anything unboiled since arriving in Indonesia. Nita just laughed at her and said “There’s only one danger that I should warn you about. People say that if you drink the water of Long Awan, you’ll never want to leave. Awan means clouds, you know, and the water from the clouds all collects here.” Nita had stared at her then, a mischievous grin on her face, waiting to see what Jennifer would do. Jennifer recognized the look from the pig-fat incident with Datu, and, never losing eye contact with Nita, she had bent down and put her lips to the straw and drawn from the heart of the bamboo the sweetest, purest water she had ever tasted. “There,” Jennifer had said. “I did it. I drank the water of Long Awan.”

Nita had laughed long and hard. “What do you think you’ve been drinking ever since you came here? It’s all Long Awan water!”

This bamboo water was what Jennifer thought of now, and she proposed to the group that Om Barnabas lead them to it—they could drink their fill from one of the large sections of bamboo and come back for the hour or two it would take to finish the work. Being in the shade, beneath trees, would do them some good, too. Everyone was intrigued by the idea, so Jennifer explained to Om Barnabas what they would be doing. He nodded. “Ya,” he said without enthusiasm. He went back to his field hut for his blowgun, which Ashwright admired.

“Over six feet long and the bore through the center perfectly straight,” he said. “Aged ironwood. Slick with hand grease. I bet this old gun has some stories to it.”

*He could tell you,* Jennifer wanted to say, but Ashwright seemed more into the weapon itself. He slid it through his hands, sighted down it to make sure it
was empty, and then gave it a couple experimental puffs. "I got pretty good at these things, did I tell you that?"

"There's that one slide you always show," Tim reminded him. "Where you're aiming at an orangutan."

"Staged, that one," said Ashwright. "A gag. No one shoots orangutans anymore. Those Victorian explorers, though. *Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam*, nineteen sweet-faced orange-shag monkeys dead and shipped back to Holland or England for inspection: are these things in the human family? They thought of that as the way to find out. Shoot first, let the experts sort it out later."

The group toiled back up the rice field, sending the small birds flurrying like black ashes into the sky. They cut through a small opening, a red-clay path overgrown with rattan that pulled at their clothes and skin. Om Barnabas led. Jennifer was at the rear, behind Therza, semi-hypnotized by the quick, nervous rhythm of the woman's feet, the prints her boots left of three parallel slashes and four diamonds at the heel, over and over, through mud and dust. Jennifer couldn't figure out at first what caught her attention about the prints, and then she realized they could only have been made by brand new boots: no wear to their treads. That made her look up and down the line, and she noticed all the new gear that people carried, the new fanny packs and the compasses on belt clips and the floppy-brimmed waterproof sun hats and of course Geoff's ultra-padded laptop backpack and GPS holster. We come into this place as aliens, Jennifer thought. We suit up against the elements.

They reached the bamboo and Om Barnabas opened two holes in a large section and put in two straws that stuck out like erect nipples, at about nipple height. An unspoken hilarity gripped the group as, two by two, they bent to suck the cool water from the plant. It tasted grassy this time. Jennifer drank at the same time as Tim, and he rolled his eyes at her to show his discomfort.

Ashwright was ecstatic about the bamboo trick, and he asked Om Barnabas if he might give it a try with the machete. Om Barnabas handed it to
him, and the big man took a swing at the bamboo. The machete didn’t penetrate at first; a second blow got it stuck so hard that it squealed when he worked it out; the third made the entire forty-foot stalk shudder and start to split. Water spilled down the blade, onto Ashwright’s hand and then the ground. He said only, “Harder than it looks. Mind if I try again?”

But just then Om Barnabas shifted into an alert stance, held up a hand for quiet. The group went still, the last sound being Mary’s half-whined complaint “…but I don’t want to read Sapir for prelims.” Om Barnabas reached for his mandau, which Ashwright handed to him silently. And then the old man pointed upwards.

Jennifer heard Tim say “Wow” before she found an angle where she could see through the brush the mass of limbs and dried brush in the high crotch of a tree only forty yards away. And even once she saw the nest, she had to squat slightly before she could make out the dark, curious head peering down from it. A sun bear. Her heart leapt in her chest: joy, terror, she didn’t know what she felt. She squinted. It might be Oswald; it was hard to tell with the mixture of diffuse glare and deep shadow beneath the crowns of the trees. “Is that--?”

Om Barnabas said, “Iya, Nak Jen.”

Oswald’s eyesight would be terrible during the day, but he could sniff, and he must have gotten a whiff of something that either frightened or excited him enough to rouse him from his nocturnal schedule. He came out of the nest, turning his large hindquarters to them and scoring the tree trunk with his claws. They had grown immense, Jennifer noticed, the long curved ebony nails like spears. And he was bigger, half again at least. The forest was full of the sound of bark falling like litter to the ground in a circular pattern that she’d seen before but never been able to attribute to any particular living thing. Then Oswald moaned, and it was him, his voice as familiar to her and as deeply imprinted in her affection as if he had been a human child.
He came down the tree in a series of humping scrapes, and froze halfway down to listen and sniff some more. Cliff said to no one in particular, “Should we be nervous? This is the thing that put Adan in the hospital?” The bear came scrabbling down and stood with its hind legs on the ground and its forelegs still gripping the tree.

Ashwright had been framing shots, and from the level of his excitement he thought there had been many good ones. He had his fingers stretched in an ‘L’, and he kept the bear within the corner of it. “I don’t think it would take one of these Dayaks five minutes to use a blowgun and get rid of this bear,” he said, with a kind of leading-man casualness. “I don’t see what the problem is.” He turned to Om Barnabas and said in clumsy Indonesian, “Cannot you kill?”

“Ya,” said Om Barnabas, and didn’t move.

A chill went through Jennifer. Was Ashwright determined to destroy the bear because of her, because her adoption of it had disrupted his plans? “Sun bears are endangered,” Jennifer said. “Don’t forget that NFI—”

Ashwright said impatiently. “It’s a nuisance bear, far too comfortable with people to be safe. And certainly NFI doesn’t want to initiate its relationship with Long Awan by forbidding them to eliminate an agricultural pest.” But that wasn’t what was going on, Jennifer wanted to object. Om Barnabas was showing restraint. Only Ashwright wanted the kill.

Oswald’s front dropped down now to the ground, and he took a few of his pigeon-toed steps and then wheeled. He was pacing, anxiously approaching the group then darting away. Jennifer wanted to call out to him—but would he come, with these strangers around? Did she want him to? What would she do with him if he did? What would they do with him? “Om Barnabas,” she started to say. But at the sound of her voice Oswald grew violently agitated, running straight towards her, then—as Mary and Therza and Cliff and Tim started to scramble away—sidled into some bushes and started pacing some more. He moaned again.
“Pak,” said Ashwright, and the sound of his voice brought Oswald up onto his hind legs, squinting at them. “I think kill now.”

Jennifer did not dare speak again, although to remain silent and to see, as a result, Oswald’s death was intolerable. She looked at Om Barnabas, who watched the bear intently but did not seem particularly alarmed. That helped: if he did not judge it to be a dangerous situation, then it wasn’t. Jennifer let herself breathe.

“Pak?” Ashwright prodded.

“Ya,” said Om Barnabas.

Ashwright clearly found this answer infuriating. His big hands opened and closed. When Om Barnabas made no move, Ashwright said with a kind of forced politeness, “May I try?” and held out his hand. Om Barnabas hesitated. Then he looked at the bear, and at Jennifer. She shook her head, which brought a disapproving glare and a lecture from Ashwright.

“What are you here for?” Ashwright asked, staring at Om Barnabas until the old man placed the blowgun in his hands. “Are you here for this bear, or here for other purposes? Because the one clouds the other.” He held out his hand towards Om Barnabas, who untied the bamboo quiver that held the darts from his waist, and opened it, and took out one long thin needle. Ashwright took it carefully by the plug end and inserted it into the smooth bore of the blowgun.

“Not only that, but I believe there’s a humanitarian project involved. This bear is a threat to the welfare of the people.” He sighted Oswald along the gun’s length and in one convulsive movement sucked in breath and blew an explosive blast down the shaft as a trumpet player might blare one loud staccato note. The missile moved in wobbly fashion through the air and fell short.

Ashwright held out a palm impatiently. “Two this time,” he said. Om Barnabas hesitated, then drew two darts from the quiver, handing one to Ashwright and placing the other very carefully by his feet. The first one took flight, but vanished somewhere into the brush near Oswald. The second one dribbled out the end of the gun. Jennifer could hold back no longer: unsafe
though it might be, she had to say something. She just wished she could think of something that wouldn’t destroy her career. “Dr. Ashwright,” she said, as the professor took a couple steps forward to retrieve the spent dart. “Stewart. I—”

At the sound of her voice, the bear charged again. Ashwright snatched up the dart and took a couple steps back and then tripped and went over. It all happened fast: the bear broke off the charge again and went back to his pacing. Meanwhile, Ashwright pulled himself up onto one knee and let out a harsh, surprised laugh. “Oh good God,” he said. “Oh sweet Jesus.” He was covered with welts and scratches from the rattan he’d fallen into; for a second, Jennifer thought that was the problem. Then he reached with one shaky hand and plucked the blowgun dart from the round little hole it had made in his white forearm, at the intersection of two blue veins, as if he was a junkie and had just shot up. He chuckled again, but trailed off. Then he rose and roared and hopped, swinging his fists at the air so fearsomely that Oswald the bear turned tail and fled decisively into the brush. “Tidak apa-apa,” Om Barnabas said soothingly, over and over. No big deal, no big deal.

When Ashwright was done yelling and cursing he was right in Om Barnabas’s face and he said in Indonesian “I don’t have time for all that pasrah bullshit,” naming the Indonesian attitude of acceptance of whatever fate decreed, which did seem to be Om Barnabas’s message. Then Ashwright stalked over to the tree that had held Oswald and he sat on a small ledge formed by a buttressed root and he said with almost supernatural calm, “I need a pen and paper. Who has a pen and paper.” Geoff rushed up, unzipping his backpack.

“Shouldn’t we call someone? Farida? The radio?”

Ashwright shook his head. “It ends here for me. Antiaris toxicaria. Cardiac glycosides. I don’t want to waste my time running around. I’ve got a letter to compose to my wife.” He turned to Jennifer. “That is a goddamned cursed bear. What the hell. Fuck you.”
The graduate students approached again. “Stewart,” said Mary. “Don’t be an idiot. Come on, we’ll get you out of here.”

“I’m not arguing,” said Ashwright. “I’m writing this letter. Even the Bapak over there doesn’t know how quickly I’ll die. I have some things I need to set down.” He bent his head and applied pen to paper, using the arm that had the dart hole, from which welled up a thick purple head of blood. Jennifer, who along with Om Barnabas had been drawn in Ashwright’s wake and stood close by, watched it rise and then start to flow off his forearm. It would stain the paper he wrote on, soon.

The graduate students argued. Tim was all for dragging Dr. Ashwright off with or without his consent; Therza said they should send Om Barnabas running back to get help. “What help?” Tim insisted. “All they’ll do is drag him back to the village. We can do that now.” Ashwright threw back his head and let out a long sob, broken at the end as if fluid was already settling in his lungs. He kept writing, the movements of his wrist forming big, spiked letters on the page.

“Should we suck the poison from his wound, like you would a snake?” Cliff asked.

Jennifer recognized the feeling she’d had since seeing Oswald climb from the nest; it was the same feeling she’d had at the river crossing with Datu the day she adopted the bear. Frozen, regressed, childish, unable to move or think. This was worse, of course: she was a murderer now, by her actions and inactions.

She went to squat next to Om Barnabas, as much for the comfort of being near him as for anything he might say. He seemed peculiarly untroubled by all the commotion. In fact, he asked her what Ashwright was doing. “I think he’s writing a letter to his wife,” Jennifer said.

“Ah,” said Om Barnabas. There was a silence while the graduate student argument escalated, as did Ashwright’s concentration upon the page. “Then he’s married.”
Jennifer looked at Om Barnabas sharply. But the old man’s face was mild. For a moment she had expected to see something vindictive there—why, she didn’t know. But then a better explanation for Om Barnabas’s nonchalance occurred to her. “They weren’t poisoned?”

Om Barnabas shook his head. “Oh no, not for that one. A child shoots more certainly.”

Then Jennifer rolled onto the ground and started laughing. It was laughter worthy of Julie, Dewi, and all the jokes that this land had played on her since she first showed up with the very dangerous conviction that she knew something. She laughed until tears streamed out of her eyes, and until the other graduate students stood over her and looked ready to stuff her in a straitjacket if she didn’t show signs of sanity. Even Dr. Ashwright stopped writing and looked her way. “I’m—I’m sorry,” she stammered. “They weren’t poisoned. Om Barnabas was looking out for you.”

The other graduate students fell silent, and Ashwright stood, spots of color rising into his face, which had gone entirely ashen during the crisis. He flung down the paper pad and pen and stalked off. “Then how the hell was I ever going to kill that thing! God!”
The next day’s plane removed by an operation of its wings not only Geoff and Ashwright, but in all probability Jennifer’s career as an anthropologist. When your major professor is nearly fatally poisoned due to a bear that you’ve adopted, your only hope might be that he’d have a sense of humor about it. Ashwright had none; in fact, his identification of Jennifer with the bear was total, exceeding perhaps even the superstitions of the villagers. She sat meekly beside him in the hours of meetings he had with Farida, and endured at periodic intervals verbal jabs at the situation she’d created. When he referred to the “filthy beast” and the “consummate unprofessional behavior” it was not at all certain that by the former he meant the bear or by the latter Jennifer.

Fanda created the situation she thrived in. Laptop humming atop her legs, she typed into the plastic clamshell thorough notes on everything Ashwright said, and then she showed him what she could do by way of organizing and displaying it. Productivity software that she’d brought with her saved the team’s schedule. By assigning each of the grad team members a signature color and then tweaking the tasks until each day blossomed in rainbows on the screen, she showed Ashwright how it could all work. It was astonishing to see the diminutive facilitator in the shadow of the hulking professor and to speculated as to which of them ran the show, or whether in fact they were engaged in the same show at all.

Soon after Ashwright left, highly impressed by Farida’s work and promising to find some university money for her to get a graduate degree in the U.S., Farida got on the radio and tracked down the German film crew in the Apo Kayan. Just hours later Farida, without bothering to inform anyone of her plans, was airborne as well, leaving behind the brightly colored print-outs, already curling from the humidity. “That bitch,” said Mary, as the team stood yet again in the broad sunlight of the soccer field, watching Farida’s hand wave from inside the little Cessna as it taxied. Tim said, “She doesn’t miss an opportunity, does she?”
Jennifer couldn’t help saying to Therza, “She’s pretty much the best argument for agency that you’ll ever see.” Cliff nodded.

The children had never seen such a holiday: two planes in one day, four in one week. Even the adults took it as a tremendously positive sign, harbinger of the riches down the road with NFI. More of the opportunity that Jennifer brought into their lives, whether she wanted to or not. Coming soon: Long Awan international airport. She would cut the ribbon.

Jennifer stood next to Pak Apuy as the plane took off; the old man gushed with enthusiasm for the new ecotourism that Long Awan would soon experience. “We need more dancing in this village,” he said. “Ibu Farida said that tourists like to see traditional dance. We’ll have to learn some more, get costumes from the city. Maybe Nita can copy them. Do you still have that book with the pictures?” Jennifer had showed the village the color photographs in her tourist guidebook when she’d first shown up; people had greatly admired the shot of the sultanate at Kutai, all the Dayak tribute dancers filling a stage wearing dyed feathers and rhinestone-studded dance outfits. Now that she had seen in person what the Kutai ceremony was about, she was no longer eager to show Pak Apuy the photo, but she agreed to help him anyway.

Adan had arrived at the soccer field in Farida’s company; now he stood between Datu and Nita, saying something to them in a low voice that made both of them laugh and glance over in Jennifer’s direction. The story of her relationship with Adan now seemed to Jennifer a sorry and confused affair, one in which she had played a fool’s role. Now they had even regressed to the point where he made fun of her openly again.

She needed some serious alone time; she had been trapped among the other graduate students and in the relationship to Geoff ever since she got back; before that, she had been in an insane asylum, and before that, in the grips of her own ambition. Now, with the death of her career, came a certain freedom, but she did not know what to do with it. Go back to the states? Stick around here? Talk
to Adan? She had to do that. But she needed to think first. There was only one place she knew she could be alone, and that was the bridge up by the old village.

"Hey, Jennifer," Tim called her over. "Lawé here says your bear cub is a ghost." Jennifer excused herself with Apuy and walked over, deliberately not looking at Adan as she passed in front of him.

"Is that what you say?" Jennifer asked.

"Oh yes," Lawé said. "You know. It rose from the dead right under the church."

"So we couldn't have killed it even if we wanted to, then," Tim said.

Lawé shook his head. "Kill him in that form and he'd only come back in another."

Jennifer knew these kinds of ideas were prevalent in the village, but she had not expected to hear them spoken out loud this baldly. Lawé seemed swelled with the importance of his role, standing in boyish imitation of his father's stance during ceremonial occasions. It occurred to Jennifer that in a few years, if NFI organized Long Awan as the center of a nature reserve, and if he kept up his English, Lawé would be one of its most effective guides. Son of the village chief, brother to the next village chief, smart as a whip and charismatic besides.

"Well, what if I told you I don't believe in ghosts?" Tim said, waggling his eyebrows.

"I could show you one!" said Lawé hotly.

"Besides the bear?" Tim said. "I saw that and it just looked like a bear to me."

"Oh, more than the bear," Lawé said. And he explained what Datu had explained to Jennifer so many months before, about the headhunter who always appeared at one end of the bridge to the old village of Long Awan exactly at twilight, the one with the half-shrunken head and the unappeased spirit. Inwardly, Jennifer groaned. The last thing she needed was to have her one private spot taken away.
“Well, let’s go,” said Tim. “I want to see that ghost tonight.”

“But you’ll die,” said Lawé.

“Oh no I won’t,” said Tim. “Somebody’s seen this ghost and lived, otherwise you wouldn’t be able to tell me what it looked like. And if somebody can live through it, then why not me?”

“He’s right,” said Mary, squatting next to Lawé. Jennifer could read in his face the conflicting emotions—he recognized in her posture that she was treating him as a child, lowering herself to his level, but at the same time, the presence of a redhead Western beauty flattered him. “Why shouldn’t he survive it if he has a courageous buddy like you along to show him the way?”

“I want to see a ghost,” Tim said. “I’ve never seen one.”

Lawé looked about him for aid, and Datu and Adan and Nita came over. “Ya, you won’t see a ghost there,” Datu said to Tim and Mary.

“Why not?” said Tim.

Datu shrugged. “Lawé was wrong.”

“Are there ghosts we can see?”

“Nah,” Datu said.

Tim looked from Lawé to Datu and back again. “So you’re saying there aren’t any ghosts, and you’re saying there are?”

“Oh, no,” said Lawé. “No ghosts.”

Tim flicked his hair out of his eyes and appeared to be frustrated. “How about Jennifer’s bear, then. Is that bear not a ghost?”

Lawé seemed to recognize he was stuck, and turned to Datu to answer the question. Jennifer was curious how he’d answer. But just as Datu started to answer, Adan interrupted. “Ask Jennifer,” he said. “It’s her bear. And she knows us by now. She has studied us. She knows our ghosts.”

Now they all looked at her. It was like a dissertation defense. What have you found, he was asking. What have you learned. A thousand half-formed thoughts swam to mind, thoughts about ghosts as embodiments of collective
memory. As cultural ownership, a way for a people to say to the blank features of
the land, you are ours, purchased with our lives. As protective figures, that
warned you to stay alert, to see more than the surface meanings of a landscape, a
haunt. She started to say something about all of this, but then remembered, in this
collection about dead things, that her own career could be counted dead as
well. She didn’t have to defend anything. She could just live by her own
priorities. And right now, those meant working her own act of protection, and
keeping the bridge to herself. So she said, “You were asking about the ghost by
the bridge, Tim. There are two possibilities here. First is that there is no ghost,
but your insisting on that does violence to their beliefs. Second is that there is a
ghost, and it will kill you, and they care about you so much that they’ll lie through
their teeth to keep you out of harm’s way. Either way, I don’t think you should
consider going.”

Before Tim could react, Mary said, with considerable annoyance, “You
keep playing this holier-than-thou role of culturally sensitive. But you avoided
the question. What about the bear. Was that doing violence to ‘their beliefs’? It
did violence to their bodies and crops. Poor Adan, here.”

Everyone looked at Adan, who looked back with perfect neutrality.
Jennifer said, “The problems with Oswald come from him being alive, not dead.
If some people would rather name him a ghost than acknowledge his place here, it
is only because he wanted what he wanted, and grew as he grew, and lived far
longer than those people expected.”

There was silence. Then Nita surprised her by speaking up, in this mixed
company. “May we all become such ghosts,” she said.

In the late afternoon the clouds came. After several days of dry weather it
was easy to forget how suddenly this happened, this massing of thunderheads and
the casting of shadows across the earth. Jennifer washed in the river in the rain,
appreciating the blackness of the sky, the slight quickening of the river. She put
on her gear and went out alone into sheets of rain so thick that every breath drew water from her lips into her mouth, as if she were drinking the air.

The violent tossing of trees and bushes did not last long; the wind front of the storm passed, taking down with it tree limbs and at least two large trees: she could hear the cracks and wooden screams that reverberated afterwards even through the blanket of rainfall. At the edge of the soccer field a single gray swallow came tumbling down from the sky and landed, splayed and dead, at her feet. She laughed out loud: if she had been looking for signs to turn back, she had them in abundance, signs both natural and ominous. But she wasn’t looking for such signs, nor was she prepared to be dissuaded.

By the time she reached the edge of the agricultural fields the wind had passed and all things bowed under the sheer dead weight of the water coming down on them. This was weather to turn living things to stone; this was the way the rainy season lifted from the earth.

Paths turned to rivulets and the creek overflowed its bank in a wide muddy course that took down the plants which normally the water nurtured, flattened them again and again into the water, a continual baptism. The river, once she descended to the path by its banks, had turned loud as it pushed against its rocks.

She reached the bridge and sat where she always sat, a natural ledge to the riverbank soil above cascades that normally soothed but now roared. The rain came down in a steady drizzle that occasionally pooled in the folds of her hood and then poured across her cheek and down her neck and between her breasts, quick and cool, like a snake poking its head towards warmth. She hugged her knees, her face deep within its cowl. The cold and dark made it less like winter than like early spring, which was, in fact, the season in the states. She had come here to sit and contemplate her position between worlds: nice that they coincided, for the moment at least.

But she did not think so much as drift, her mind like a great whirlpool from which figures emerged only momentarily before being dragged back down.
At some dim remove, she recognized that she was looking not just for who she was, but for a place to be, and finding no certain ground, she did not move. The one thing she said out loud, over the course of hours, was a question in the form of a statement. “I’ll go back to Virginia.” It was the only thing that made sense. She could not stay here, and school was over, she did not have money to start up in a new city. But it did not make sense when she pronounced it, and her own voice startled and dismayed her with its cracked, hollow lack of conviction. Was this her moment? Ever since she had seen Julie go over the edge, she had known herself drawn to the same place. If there had been a bathroom light nearby, perhaps she, too, would have made it her path to the god of escape.

But the dark did not lift, only changed quality, as the storm ebbed and nightfall began. The rain had soaked through her socks, and she reached down to inspect her pant cuffs. Rolling her fingers along her boots, she encountered the sticky black back of a leech stretched needle-thin from the ground up towards one of the lower eyelets of her laces. She took out her pocket knife and cut the thing into thirds on the ground, squinting through the dark to watch the pieces wriggle. Everywhere, things arose to suck at your living blood.

Suddenly she sensed something move behind her and she pushed to her feet. But a strong hand was at her shoulder and sat her back down. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of a machete leaving its wooden sheath. My God, it’s a headhunter, she thought. And she remembered—she had not thought of it in two months—the ghost of the not-quite-cured head. “No!” she screamed, because she was not going to die here, and she tried again to pull forward, but the hand did not let her move. She heard the blade whistling through the air—her senses so acute that in retrospect she would swear she heard individual rains drops split and scattered by the razor edge—and buried, with a deep thunking sound, into the living flesh of a tree next to her.
“You shouldn’t be out here alone with the ghosts,” said a mild, pleasant voice, and Adan squatted next to her. “Not to mention the rain, or the cold. You’ll get sick.”

She let out a sob that was close to a scream, and pushed away from him, and fell on her side, her chest heaving, her face pressed to the earth. For long minutes she did not say anything while her heart slowed back down to normal and her gasping stopped. Adan maintained his own silence. She pushed herself up from the muck, knowing that half her face was covered in mud, and possibly leeches were at her neck this very moment.

All of her instincts seemed wrong as to what to say: ‘you scared me’ was pointless, because he had so clearly meant to do it. ‘What the hell was that about’ would never get a straight answer. ‘You bastard’ was inadequate. She opened her raincoat and pulled up a damp corner of her shirt and wiped at the mud on her face.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” was what she finally said. Adan clucked his tongue disapprovingly. They sat next to each other, facing the same darkness. She could just make out enough of his face to know that he was highly amused. “I do believe in dangerous human beings, but I didn’t think that I had to worry about them out here.” When he didn’t say anything, she added: “And I would have thought you’d have learned not to surprise me like that.” Then she winced at the memory that invoked.

He held his silence for more minutes, and then sighed.

“Ah, well, you know, this is the spot to worry about dangerous people. When this was the old village, and the bridge was up that was before this one, the jungle came right down to here, and in the jungle lurked the headhunters. You see how easy it is to sneak up on someone here.”

She nodded.

“You didn’t hear me.”

She nodded again.
“And yet you could have died instantly, and disappeared, and never even
known that your head was severed from your body, that something had killed you.
I imagine a head has time for a last thought as it flies through the air—or maybe
even several—but I doubt they’re much more complicated than feeling dizzy at
the way the horizon is moving up strangely.”

She bent her head to rest it on her knees, which she hugged. Her bottom
was getting wet. Her neck felt tremendously exposed.

“You don’t need to believe in ghosts to suddenly become one,” he said.

He wore what he had worn the first time she had seen him: black bands at
his calves, and old worn shorts, and a hooded jacket. This time she noticed the
lettering, in white, at the sleeve: “NAMRU.” The naval medical research unit.

“You know, I saw you here before,” Jennifer said. “When you first came back to
the village from Malaysia, I was sitting here looking out at the bridge and you
floated across. I thought that, if there ever was a ghost here, you were it.”

Adan laughed and said, “Or maybe it’s you. I was just the innocent
traveler passing by; you’re the one who lurks here in the dark.”

“Not for long,” she said. “You’ll find this place quite empty of me very
soon.”

He turned to look at her. She realized that she’d been fishing again for
some sort of reassurance, and she was about to apologize, when he said: “That’s
when it will be haunted. For me.”

Although his voice was soft, the sincere edge to his words caught at and
unlocked the whirlpool, and to her horror, it drained through her body and came
out as tears that she was helpless to stop. She sobbed in deep shuddering gulps,
sometimes letting herself fall against him, sometimes pushing him away, fighting
up off him like a baby learning to stand fights against gravity. Finally she just
collapsed, and added her tears to the rain that beaded up on his jacket. She had
never been this kind of girl or woman, never experienced anything like this near-
daily ritual of crying. She had refused tears as a child, had stared back at her
mother and at all of Gallton dry-eyed. Somehow in growing up she had grown weaker. Or had taken on too much, and broken. Like her mother. That was what she had heard on the phone when she had finally called, from a hotel in Singapore. It had been no conversation at all, just a series of disconnected illogical rants from her mother, totaling yet again the calumnies that Jennifer subjected her to, first by being born, then by abandoning her for some “dreamy-dipshit father thing.” Do you want me or do you not, Jennifer had asked, posing the question that, though never posed, seemed always to explode through the heart of their conversations. And then she’d heard it, heard the break, as clearly as if a train had jumped its rails—only this was a train on a circular track, and it always jumped its rails at the same point, so that the rail-jumping had become just part of its regular functioning. Her mother started talking church, and forgiveness, and sin, and Reverend Lawes with his health issues and tireless service, going over each of her familiar points like a Catholic going through their rosary, so that by the end she was calm and in a mood to end the phone call on a sentimental, plaintive note. But Jennifer had not let it end as ritual proscribed; something had occurred to her, and she asked, “Is Reverend Lawes Brad’s father?” This set off a torrent of abuse that lasted longer than Jennifer could easily stand, so she held the phone away from her ear and listened to it squawk like something in a cartoon. When she’d brought it back, the line was dead, a clean, pure silence.

That silence was what Jennifer now lapsed into, and perhaps the world, too, for the rain stopped and throughout the forest was only a dripping quieter than no sound at all. And then a mosquito that got in between her hood and her ear so that its tiny voice seemed an overwhelming assault. She whipped off her hood and swatted it away. Adan pulled his back, too, and they looked at each other. Up above the clouds somewhere must have been a near-full moon, because they could see each other. “I have a question,” she said.

“Yes?”
"As a medical person, what do you do about malaria? You can’t take prophylactics forever, can you? It’s expensive, for one thing. And there are side effects. I get this terrible vertigo from the mefloquine."

This clearly had not been the question he was expecting; he blinked his eyes several times as if to say, what do I make of someone like you. But he answered her straightforwardly enough. "I don’t do anything about it, just sweat out the fevers when they come."

"You have malaria?"

"Jennifer, what do you expect? I live here, right? It’s endemic. *Falciparum*, *vivax*, you get them when you’re a kid and you live or you don’t. The protozoa take up residence in your liver, and every once in a while take an excursion through your bloodstream."

"And you don’t do anything about it. As a doctor."

"What would be the point?"

"To preserve yourself?"

"Who can do that?" he asked. "Nobody ever has. Look, Jennifer, you can choose your risks, right? In this world, everyplace you go is a bath of pathogens: the air, the water, the land. For that matter, every place is a tangle of history and ghosts and bad blood and tensions. Most people are sunk deep inside all that. You’re in this really enviable situation; you pick up and go where you want. You’re like a coconut in its husk, hunkered down, ready to survive the oceans. Someday you might see a place where you want to open to it, take risks along with somebody else, but meanwhile, what you’re doing is just preserving yourself. But it doesn’t work. You’ll die, too. You’ll just die adrift."

Jennifer was stunned at the note of bitterness in his voice, and hurt. "Hey," she said, wanting to say something gentle, but what came out was more of a professional question. "I thought you were a nomad, too."

He looked at her and even in the dark she could read his incredulity. "That’s what you think a nomad is? Someone who stands apart? We are just the
opposite. Nobody is part of the land like we're part of the land; we die and are absorbed into it, and we live in it without walls. We move because it makes us move; the sago palm in an area is exhausted at a certain season, we go seeking elsewhere. Jennifer, have you learned anything?"

"I think I haven't," she said.

"Look, there's a creek upriver from here called 'Rotting body.' That's because back when the Lun Dayeh were still headhunting, they ambushed a man that was great uncle to my father, and they killed him, and took his head and left the body to decompose in the stream. Above there it forks, and the fork is called 'Two women pulling hair' because of a fight that took place between my mother's mother and her sister. On the ridge above that is the tree called 'grandfather' because it's the largest of all the poison trees. It has so many notches in it from people gathering poison that its skin looks as wrinkled and puckered as a very old man's, that's how it got the name."

She felt the conversation had moved very far away from where she wished it would go. That teacherly tone he got.

"It's not that we move our house from place to place. It's all one great long house."

"Where were you when I was doing my research," she said, trying to make it a joke but showing a bit too much of her real irritation.

"You could interview me," he said.

"That's a laugh."

"What do you mean?"

"Adan, you didn't tell me anything. You didn't even tell me about your mother. I had to hear it when you told Farida about her."

He laughed. "You're jealous."

"Jealous! No! I've been eaten up inside by your betrayal and contempt," she said.
He reached out and touched her cheek. She pushed it away. "I came back here for you and you haven't even talked to me."

"Jennifer," he said. "Honesty, please. You're the one who broke us up in Samarinda. You're the one maintaining the fictional marriage. Why? For your career."

She was silent. Then: "Farida is more... effective."

He laughed again, a loud, surprised laugh, not like a Punan laugh at all. "Go on," he said. And she listed his offenses, beginning most recently and extending back to when she'd first met him, including those which she had not brought up in the hospital in Samarinda because she was too nervous about the state of their relationship. Neglect, insult, taking a professorial tone, inattention, betrayal... he made no defense of himself, but did object to that last, and said that there had been nothing between he and Farida. "She's the type to take things," he said. "Do you really think I'm the type to be taken?" Then he said, "And inattention. You have never had less than my full attention. Too much attention, for a married woman."

"Divorced," she said. "For your sake."

"For mine."

"For mine. So I could be with you."

She had scooted around to face him now, and he said, "Let me tell you why I came back to Long Awan from Malaysia. We'll have the real interview later, but this won't be on it."

"Okay," she said.

"Okay," he said, and he leaned forward and his lips were warm and they crushed hers against her teeth and she leaned into it to be closer to his face. When they broke off, some minutes later, she was all the way inside his raincoat and it sheltered her like wings. Then he spoke his reasons and she tore away from him and he did not attempt to draw her to him again. "I came back to marry Nita," he said.
Against and into her disbelief he explained it, the logic of it: his father's wish that he return to Long Awan, and the old man's understanding that Nita, once grown up, would be his match for intelligence, education and strength. Om Barnabas had sent a messenger to Adan, and he had come both to honor his father and because he remembered, though he had known her only when she was a child, the quality person she was. "But what happened in the meantime," he said, "Was that your arrival really sparked her to grow—she's so much more than she was—and Datu, rather than be complacent and assume she'd have to settle for him, actually started to work for her." By the time Adan had shown up and seen the way things were working out, he had decided (against some initial doubts) that he really did want to marry Nita and stay in Long Awan. Thus his early behavior towards Jennifer, which he admitted reflected some hostility. "The rest of it you know," he said.

"No, I don't," she said. "Unless you mean that I became your consolation prize."

He said, "You have a strong sense of your direction, don't you? A picture of how you want things to work out? Why deny me the same? It took a while to let everything change. Don't forget I had just ended a relationship with Susan, another American, who taught me an incredible amount but who no more considered me a life partner than she'd consider an orangutan a life partner. I wasn't about to get into all that again—or that was my attitude."

"When did you realize I would be different?" she asked.

"When are you going to start being different?" he said. The words struck her like a cold slap in the face.

She scrambled up from the ground. "You think that's how I think about you? An orangutan?"

"You think of me as a kind of side effect of the next grant you get," he said. "Long Awan, isn't that nice, a warm body to sleep with. A bear, an Adan,
great! Then I’ll go to Jakarta and get my real nourishment. Then I’ll go home and figure out my real life.”

“Go to hell,” she said. She stalked away along the path, flashlight out, the light bobbing crazily in front of her. She knew it was overdramatic even as she did it. After a few minutes, she could even admit to herself that there was truth in what he’d said. But she couldn’t bring herself to turn around and tell him. And though she was convinced he would catch up to her, slow as she moved through the forest at night, he let her go back alone.

The interview began the next morning when Jennifer got back from a morning dip in the river. Adan waited with Pak Dayung and with Nita in their little apartment, and had brought with him her tape recorder, a full box of batteries, and a shrink-wrapped brick of tapes. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Your research,” he said. He put batteries in the machine, and spoke the time, date, and place into the microphone. Then he held down the pause button with an index finger and said, “Ask me.”

Jennifer looked over at Nita, who watched with sleepy eyes in which Jennifer perceived no hint of any extra energy towards Adan. Nor did Adan seem to be anything but cordial towards Nita. “Tell me,” Jennifer said.

He laughed then gave a short cough. “When we move, we Punan, we will not say out loud, ‘I am moving from here to there.’ Traditionally, this is because evil spirits will hear you and will do what they can to frustrate your plans by leading snakes to cross your path, or causing rivers to flood, or even death to strike. But what I believe—this is my own belief, and is being spoken right now to the whirling pieces of this machine and to the beautiful researcher nearby—is that no spirits are involved at all; it is just a bad idea to assume that your plans will happen exactly the way you envision them.”

Jennifer said, “Flattery is not an approved interviewing technique.”

“I speak only truth.”
At that, Nita giggled and Pak Dayung turned away to fiddle at repairing a fish trap. Jennifer wondered what Adan had told them, if anything, while she bathed. “Also, you don’t need to offer rational interpretations. Remember that we anthropologists like to study primitive people, and it upsets us when they fail to act sufficiently simple.”

Adan bent his head in a mock bow. “What else?”

“You’re telling the truth now?”

“Yes.”

“What about Oswald? What is your opinion, as a Punan man, about the bear.”

Adan said, “We Punan don’t believe in eating domesticated animals, or killing pets. So I am not in favor of Oswald dying. But it is a problem now, because Oswald does not believe in leaving this village, nor does he believe in abstaining from eating and destroying food in farmers’ fields.”

“What would a beautiful researcher do, if she were responsible?”

“A beautiful researcher would organize a trip into the forest of many days’ duration, and release the bear there, and hope he did not come back once she was back in America. Pak Dayung?”

“iva,” the schoolteacher said. He rose, then, and said that he and Nita must be going out to the fields. Jennifer pressed pause. She wondered if Adan’s suggestion had made him uncomfortable. Perhaps he thought that he would be requested to attend such a trip? Or Nita? Or he disagreed altogether? Or he simply needed to go out to the fields. Part of understanding this place, perhaps, was understanding what you would never understand.

Adan and she moved out onto the veranda of the longhouse, waved them goodbye, and then sat looking out at the broad sweep of the Long Awan soccer field as it tucked into the river hundreds of yards away among trees. The sky was the kind of blue that gives the atmosphere depths like the ocean. Dogs scrabbled...
beneath them, and chickens squawked, and a few people still straggled past them on the way to the fields.

“Tell me this,” Jennifer said, who had spent much of last night awake and thinking about what to say the next time she saw him—but never imagining it would go this way. “If an American researcher who refuses to open up is like a coconut, what is a Punan like who refuses to trust her?”

He grinned. “I like your interviewing technique,” he said. “And the answer is that he’s like a durian—heavy and hard-edged, with thorns sticking out all around that can deeply wound and, untreated, lead to infections. But inside is something delicious, for those who like it. And though his outside is intimidating, at a certain point of ripeness the rind splits open with just the touch of the fingers to two or three places.”

“Should I touch those places?” Jennifer asked, her eyes on his.

He held her gaze for a moment. “You should touch them...on the trip to take Oswald back to the forest. You should keep trying them, to check the ripeness.”

This was the painful part, that she could not lean into him here. There was much that she could be willing to give up, to sit here with him under a sky this cerulean, held in the circle of his arms as they looked out upon the community.

“Also,” he said. “You should call him nangi jinan. It reminds him that the act of leaving has already happened, is always happening. It helps him not fear so much the actual act of leaving.”

“Nangi jinan,” she said.

He pressed stop on the tape recorder. “Now it’s recorded.”

But the interview did not end there; it spilled over from conversation to conversation for days. It started up at meals, in public places and private ones.
They talked about NFI, about the nature reserve, about bird signs and genealogy. It was never clear who was interviewing whom.

Adan pulled from Jennifer’s corner tapes of his father’s voice, and put them into the tape recorder to see what it was Jennifer had been gathering during the year before he’d arrived. Jennifer cringed as she heard the fakeness in her voice, the formal, stilted questions that produced reluctant and equally stilted answers. “Is there anything that might make you leave Long Awan to be nomadic again,” was the question that Adan played first, and Om Barnabas’s voice, with the river noise behind it making it thin and flat said, “If I am called grandfather; that’s the only way. I’m too used to farming now.” And he went on to talk about how he chose what to plant his first year of trying to grow his food in that way, and how he used to sneak out of the village to gather sago late at night so no one would know what a bad farmer he was and that he didn’t have enough to eat.

“Do you get that?” Adan said. “The grandfather part?”

“If it’s different than what it seems to be, no.”

“It means if Bu Lejeng dies or if I die. Because both of us refer to him in his capacity as father, if he lost one of us it would be too painful to keep referring to himself that way. And he would feel older, closer to death himself. So from then on, until he got married again or had another child, he would be grandfather. No one—no Punan, anyway—would call him father when they knew it would raise his sense of grief.”

“Why wouldn’t he just have told me that? Why the misleading thing about grandfather?”

“My father would never refer to the death of someone close to him. You do not raise that kind of possibility if you do not want to see it fulfilled.”

Adan rewound the tape, listening to Jennifer’s earliest questions. “Why did you settle rather than remain a nomad.” Om Barnabas answered with a lengthy speech about history, and the government, and the sense that a life in the
forest had no future. Adan listened to the whole thing with an incredulous smile. At the end, he shook his head, and Jennifer asked what he heard.

Adan said, "Those aren't his words. Those are my mother's words. I can tell you why he's still here—he said it himself: Bu Lejeng and I."

"And who is Bu Lejeng, exactly?" Jennifer asked.

He blinked in surprise. "My mother's sister. Didn't you know that?"

Jennifer opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it. Adan saw her expression of discomfort and laughed until tears came from his eyes. "I know," he said. "Yes, of course I know. They're married now. It's okay."

The interviews become more like symposia; people gathered around, threw in their own comments. Datu and Nita became regulars, and Jennifer was relieved to find that dynamics among them and Adan and she were natural and unstrained, though the fact of her relationship with Adan was, though never spoken of directly, highly apparent to everyone. At one point she asked Datu and Nita, on tape, about their views on Long Awan's future, and their own. She was relieved to find them optimistic: her fear, ever since she realized that she had played a role in their union, was that somehow she had delivered Nita into a situation of diminished possibilities with Datu. But she found that quite the opposite was true: Nita had made Datu her project, one she was glad to work on.

"This is what we're going to do," said Datu. "Unless Nita's changed it again. We're going to the coast, and she's going to get a college education while I work. Then we're coming back, having children, and opening up Long Awan's first guesthouse. Right?" he asked.

Nita said, "That's if all the ecotourism that Farida promised shows up."

"Right."

"If it doesn't, if Adan is right and this whole village falls apart"—this spoken as a dig, but not a serious one, Adan ducking his head sheepishly—"then
I'll become a teacher, and Datu will get some training in conservation forestry, and we'll figure out the rest. Actually, he'll get that training anyway.”

“But I thought you said—”

Favorite moments from the symposia became popular entertainments, and Jennifer was asked to play back tapes to crowded rooms. Bu Nardo’s comical argument with Nita about birth control: “I don’t want you young people to wait, or hold back. I want to hold those babies in my hands, like litters of warm puppies” had people in stitches of laughter. Pak Apuy telling the beautiful, haunting story of his grandfather, who was thrown in jail for headhunting by the Dutch colonial government, and who came back to preach Christianity and peace. Pak Kaget’s unintentionally progressive statement on marriage: “Ya, the man is the commander of his house, and the woman has to obey him utterly as long as he is good and goes along with her intentions.”

It became a kind of radio, the airwaves of which were full of voices that the Dayaks had never been taught to value, their own. And in fact, the idea of forming an actual radio station occurred to Adan, and he urged it on Jennifer. “All the communities of Dayaks, all the way through the highlands, live in isolated pockets or, like the Punan, out on the trails. They’re split in three parts by national boundaries, saturated by government messages hostile to their style of living, put on exhibit for outsiders’ consumption—but they have no way of connecting with each other. But every village has at least one or two little transistor radios. You could get together some resources, maybe put the station in Brunei or Malaysia, wherever the political repression is slightly less, and you could start tying together people that have been separated by forest and mountains and suspicion and blood for all history.”

The idea appealed to Jennifer, though the “putting together some resources,” about which he was so casual, struck her as a nearly insurmountable challenge. Still, ‘Dayak radio’ and what it would put on the air became grounds for excited discussion among villagers. Within a day they had a full lineup of
sapé music and gamelan and oral histories from the elders and children’s choruses, with a rotating lineup of broadcasters drawn from every ethnic group. Invisible, all-pervasive voices offering advice for those who had the ability to tune in; she offered the theory that this spoke, like MAF airplanes did, to the deeply ingrained Dayak reliance on messages from the spirits in the form of birds. Adan laughed at her; he was always laughing.

The night before the trip back into the forest with Oswald, Jennifer and Adan sat among the graduate students in her old house. The group was preparing to leave, having completed their work without much regard to her, and without any regard to Farida’s schedule. In the days since Ashwright’s departure they had experienced the breakdown of their computer software, large methodological problems that threw the validity of the information they’d gathered into doubt, and interpersonal tensions that caused them to work much more individually than had been planned. More than that, they had seen how a personality dominant and impressive in the halls of academia could prove disastrously ill-suited for the actual work of anthropology, and to some extent it had humbled them although Therza maintained that the kind of arrogance and insensitivity Ashwright had displayed was a property unique (and intrinsic) to white men. What the changes meant was that they had settled into a routine far more like traditional ethnography and far more characterized by its twin rituals of failure and serendipity. “It’s in Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Geertz and his Balinese cockfight...” Cliff argued. “Failure is the highest and most powerful of tools for dispelling easy assumptions.” Mary sarcastically observed that he could tell that to her dissertation committee at her defense. But as this went on, some of the tensions between the group and Jennifer ebbed, as they saw from their own experience how elusive truth and genuine relationships were across cultural boundaries. Little by little, they became drawn to the symposia, which were, after all, the only form of entertainment available most nights, and at which they...
occasionally shone, with multiple voices spilling from primary material to interpretation, mixing freely, going back and forth.

This last night that they would be together, Tim turned a question on Jennifer, asked about how her own Asian heritage played into her decision to be here and how she saw these people. This had been much on her mind—the prospect of marrying Adan, of becoming part of Asia as her mother had so feared, or of bringing him back to the U.S. and, in a sense, doubling and cementing an ethnic identity which for her had always been something problematic and minimized. So she spoke about it, openly and at length, on tape—seeing this as a kind of journal, a way of working through. About her mother’s brief marriage, and about Gallton, Virginia and growing up there, about college and how she had refused all the identity politics because her own identity was so problematic to her, and about how Ashwright’s kind of anthropology had seemed to represent a safe way to approach the other, the exotic, which she supposed was also a way to approach a side to herself.

Cliff, who typically read a book, nevertheless had followed the discussion as carefully as usual, and when Jennifer was done he asked, “How old are you?” She told him. “And you said your parents were married before you were born...in Virginia?”

“Norfolk,” she said. “Why?”

“And how visibly Asian was your father? Dark?”

“Ye-es,” she said. “Can I ask why?”

“I’m just pursuing a line of questioning,” he said.

“Here comes the jurist,” Mary said sarcastically. “You should have stayed in law school.”

“Well, that’s it exactly,” Cliff said. “There’s a case. Loving versus Virginia.”

“Loving versus Virginia? What—she can sue the state for emotional damage? I’m frigid and it’s your fault?” Mary said.
“Quit it, Mary,” Tim said.

Cliff ignored her. “Loving versus Virginia was the Supreme Court decision that struck down Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws. But that was 1967, the year after you were born. Your parents could no more have been married in a Virginia city than they could have reached the moon in 1966.”

Jennifer stared, feeling a strange sense of elation at the sheer awfulness of what he was saying. “You’re sure?”

“Of course, of course! Loving was this black guy who married a white woman. They did the ceremony in DC and when they moved back to Virginia, they got slapped with criminal charges and a jail term, so they fled back to DC and brought the court case. You didn’t ever study American history? They teach this stuff to high schoolers.”

“Not in Virginia, I bet,” said Mary.

Jennifer only half-heard the rest, her thoughts crashing down on her like a demolished edifice, noise and dust. She had gotten used to the indeterminacy of truth in Long Awan, the way you had to stand ready for events to undercut whatever you thought you knew. But the process had now leaped its wall of containment and begun to tear down the reality she’d grown up with.

At the same time, she recognized that she had always known about her mother’s deceit, in the same way she had known the hypocrisy of her mother’s religion, and Reverend Lawes’ complicity for that matter. That photo. Her mother’s story about it. “I’ll not lie to you, Jennifer, he and his friends had taken a bet that he could get at least one white woman to dance with him. What he didn’t count on, Mr. Charlie Kamora, was falling in love. But that’s just what he did.” Strip away that fairy tale (for it was just a fairy tale) and strip away what Jennifer had looked for her entire life: traces of the woman who had been liberal and brave enough to marry outside her kind and against her family’s wishes. What was left was the unthinkable shame of having been the woman drunk and careless enough to be the dupe for a sailors’ bragging bet, and a racist and callous
bet at that. The photo was not the only surviving record of a marriage. It was exactly what it looked like, a drunken encounter of strangers. Perhaps a moment of recklessness, or perhaps a date rape. Perhaps her mother had not even known her father’s real name, or nationality—for a time when Jennifer was young her mother had called him “Chamorro” instead of Kamora, until Jennifer had looked it up and told her mother that Chamorro meant someone from Guam. “Kamora, then. That’s right. Charlie Kamora. I don’t like thinking about it.”

Her mother would have come home pregnant and possibly traumatized from Norfolk, and on her own or on the counsel of friends or parents or Reverend Lawes have concocted the story of the brief marriage. Maybe she hadn’t expected Jennifer to look so other, or maybe she had feared the sin of abortion, or the risk of it: in a land that still outlawed congress between peoples, a safe and legal abortion would not be available. Knowing her mother and her capacity for desperate, horrible faith, by the time Jennifer was born she would have believed in her own story, that it would have saved her—if only Jennifer had not looked like she had, so alien. A continual reminder. Suddenly Jennifer knew the exact size and shape and mechanics of her mother’s brokenness. She could put her finger right on the flaw.

Jennifer got up and pressed stop on the tape and walked out the door. The fruit bats swarmed silently through the darkness, silhouetted by a fringe of green in the western sky. She knew now that she never would find her father or anything about him, in this world or any other.

After a while, Adan came out and sat beside her, and she had to explain it all to him in Indonesian, and as she did so—with tears, of course, what moment was complete without them these days?—she realized that a shadow had lifted from her future. Somewhere in her mind, however irrationally, had been the conviction that she would have to answer to him, to her father, for what she had done and not done to be part of him, his culture, his memory. Perhaps she had built this conviction out of simple resentment, an imagined alliance with him
against her mother, whom she had “known” to be at fault all along—for who could live with her mother? But now as she dispelled him, that ghost, her father, the future opened up exhilaratingly clear. She was perfectly free to go anywhere she wanted and be with anybody at all. That was the comedy of the tragedy of her birth: reduce it to its simplest elements, take away the mystery of why her father had left, and what was left was that a woman got pregnant with a baby she didn’t want. There was, literally, nothing to it. “Let’s get married,” she said to Adan. Suddenly she wanted to tear through his clothes and even his flesh and be all the way inside.

He remained immobile even as her hot hands roamed his shoulders, his chest, touching, seeking a way in. Her movements were urgent, reckless, needy. If he had shown the slightest inclination to reciprocate he could have ripped off her clothes and had her right there. But he held himself perfectly still until the tears came again, harder, and she lay on her back and rolled herself back and forth, back and forth, watching the stars burning in their cradles in heaven.

“Won’t you marry me?” she said.

“I will,” he answered. “…next time you ask.”

Next morning, early, Om Barnabas led Jennifer and Adan and Bu Lejeng from the village. The mist was still hard on the ground; they kicked it up, passing through, and it drifted atop their hair and swirled at their backs. They passed among the rice granaries, which loomed like woolly prehistoric beasts.

They rose out of the bottomlands into the fields, and could see the brassy light of morning on the distant hills. At the edge of a garden patch, they stopped and picked yellow cucumbers and long beans for the journey, distributing them among the backpacks. As always, Jennifer’s backpack was lightest. As always, Om Barnabas insisted that her burden would be heaviest: it was she who would lead the bear forward, on a leash.
Apparently the bear had returned to its nesting site even after the incident with the graduate team. "And did you know that Oswald was there when you led us to the bamboo?" Jennifer asked Om Barnabas.

Adan answered for him: "Do you think he would have taken you there?"

"But it's strange, isn't it, that he was on the land of the person he attacked?" Om Barnabas said, in a tone that showed he meant to deliver a mild rebuke to Adan, "I led the bear to that place with some jackfruit, after he escaped his cage."

Jennifer enjoyed seeing Adan's consternation that he did not know everything after all. Om Barnabas shrugged. "Of all the farmers here, our field is the least important. What it doesn't provide in rice we can make up in sago palm."

"So why did you let us come so near him?" Jennifer asked.

"He slept. I did not know that Pak Ashwright was so loud a man."

They walked uphill along narrow agricultural paths, tearing the dew-spattered webs of dozens of black horned spiders. Om Barnabas paused occasionally to pick snails from the leaves of the young rice plants, and they all helped.

When they reached the edge of the forest the sun was level with their gaze and directly behind them, so that fingers of light poked far into the forest, and their shadows were the shadows of giants. They strode through all the brilliant trees. Jennifer knew in an abstract way, in the way of people who are on the mailing lists of environmental organizations, that a few acres of Borneo rainforest contained more species of trees than existed in all of North America, but it was only now, as the light discovered the textures and the ruddy colors and the scales of bark and leaf, that she began to feel what it was to be amongst all of that difference.
They were prepared with various means of defense and offense, prepared to spend days trying to trap him or to knock him unconscious with a sublethal dose of fish poison. But in fact Oswald responded to their presence as if it was a wake-up call that he himself had ordered. The others stood back, and when she called him, he squealed in happy recognition and climbed down rump first.

The others approached singly, leaving many minutes for the bear to become comfortable again around people. Adan came out of the bushes last, but Oswald showed him no particular hostility, nor even any recognition. "Good thing it's not holding a grudge," Adan said, scratching gently at the bear's wrinkled forehead. "Or maybe it doesn't realize that I got the girl after all."

Traveling was another matter. Oswald was balky and irritable within half an hour, whining and trying to turn back to his nest. Although he had consented to the rattan collar (invisible though it was within the bulk and coarseness of the hair at his neck), a contest of strength or will would have negative and possibly dangerous consequences. So Om Barnabas said simply, "We camp here."

But that's ridiculous, Jennifer wanted to say. We're less than an hour's walk from the village. We'll practically hear people whistling when they're out working the fields. But she held her tongue, except to say, "Om Barnabas's journeys are always longer going than coming home." He grinned at her.

Adan and Om Barnabas cut seventy or more small trees and bound them into a platform, lashing it to a half-dozen standing trunks at a height of four feet off the ground. They whittled and notched the tops of these standing trunks and placed crossbeams to support a roof of palm fronds. Then they completed the structure by digging clay to insulate a corner of the platform for a hearth.

That would have been enough for the humans—enough of a shelter to live in for weeks or months. For the bear, they braided a thick length of rattan chain and anchored it at the base of a standing trunk underneath the platform. This would be the place of the bear.
During the two hours that the men worked, Jennifer petted Oswald and talked to him, trying to soothe some of the wildness from him, at least for the space of the journey. He was sleepy enough that for the most part he just lay, panting, his back against her crossed legs. His face was wholly animal now; whatever intelligence nature gives young things had been nearly expended in him, and he was now and would forever be a bear.

Bu Lejeng recounted her experiences with a monkey, a macaque that she had kept as a pet when she was a child. "He could spot evil spirits before I did," she said, "And snakes, too. He would climb trees and throw down the fruit for us to eat. Naughty thing! He would try to fool us sometimes with the unripe nuts. When we moved I carried him on my shoulder." Many cultural moments would go by on this trip, and Jennifer would record none of them except in the way that meaningful things get recorded, as memory. As story. The tape recorder was extra weight that none of them needed.

When the shelter was ready they roused Oswald enough to half-drag, half-persuade him to go under it. He seemed content enough to sleep there, and Om Barnabas said, "We will try for a day or two, see if he can get used to living with humans again." Rather than use the rattan chain, Om Barnabas said that he and Bu Lejeng would go back and destroy Oswald’s nest, and then see if he would naturally return to their shelter at daybreak.

While they were gone, and Oswald slept, Adan and Jennifer made sweet, leisurely love on the platform he’d built, and then rested, drawing circles on each other’s bodies with fingertips. "You’re not worried about being discovered?" she asked, and he shook his head no. Later she discovered why: a hornbill call came from out of the forest, and at its signal Adan gently pulled her upright and straightened his own shirt. A few minutes later Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng entered the clearing looking a little too casual. "Make that sound again," she said to Om Barnabas, and he laughed and did.
Then it was all out in the open, and the pattern of the days of the trip was the same: laze away the hours of brightest sunlight, and then hike for three hours, then build a new shelter before it got too dark to see. At night Oswald roamed free, and in the morning he came back. It seemed to Jennifer that they were getting nowhere, but nowhere was pretty fine, as a place. Adan showed her some of the skills of living in the forest: how to weave mats and make fish traps, as well as less useful things that a child might pick up, such as how to set a whole line of ants chasing a false trail and where to find fungus that glows in the dark. Every afternoon Om Barnabas and Bu Lejeng contrived to make themselves scarce, and Jennifer practiced her talent at opening the spiny-husked durian with whom she traveled.

At first she was impatient with the pace, the brute repetition of the same work every night: trees felled, platform raised, fire built, greens gathered and boiled in Bu Lejeng’s little pot. She made jokes of her annoyance, saying, “This is the way to do a conservation expedition, kill seven hundred small trees along a trail!” But then something clicked in her, and she could set aside the part of her that wanted to be quit of one thing and moved on to the next. She began to see how you really could just live in the forest, anywhere you wanted to, and it would be an easygoing thing. If they could go like this for a week, they could do it for a month or a year. And why not? The further they got away from the village the more docile and loyal Oswald became; forest creature though he was, this was not territory or a subsistence style that he knew.

In the hour before dawn Jennifer could feel the shelter shudder as he crept beneath it, slumping against its supports. It took Jennifer by surprise, then, when as they were preparing to camp high on a ridge above a knife-cut river valley, Om Barnabas announced that they would be leaving the bear the next day. “Asleep, you mean?” she asked. “Just steal away?”

Om Barnabas nodded. “We’ve got him used to a pattern of a little movement every day. Tomorrow we will walk all day along a river, crossing and
recrossing so that our scent vanishes, and traveling much farther than he’s used to. That way we have our best chance of him losing us.” After a moment he added, “You should say your goodbyes tonight.”

“I don’t know how to say goodbye,” Jennifer said, feeling something constrict at the base of her ribs. She should have prepared for this moment. She had allowed herself to be lulled.

No one said anything. Bu Lejeng fed small sticks into the fire she was building on the hearth, and the light leapt up and cast her face in warm, dramatic tones that hid the wrinkles and made her seem young. “I lost two children,” she said finally. “Malaria, one of them, and the other, a full-grown, beautiful man, to an accident in the logging camps. I have been Uyung and I have been Sadi”—the death-names of a mother who has lost her first-born and her second-born children. “There is no such thing as goodbye.” She looked over at Om Barnabas as if afraid of being accused of disloyalty. “You cannot prepare yourself.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jennifer said. “And I’m sorry to have brought it up so foolishly. It is not the same thing. This is just about an animal. You can’t compare it to your children.”

Bu Lejeng said sharply, “If that were true there would be no need of this trip.”

Jennifer was surprised at her unusual tone, and wasn’t sure what to say. Then Om Barnabas said, “Do you know, Nak Jen, we’re now at the border with Malaysia?”

She blinked. “You mean it’s the place—”

“Yes,” he said. “I promised I would take you.” His words were accented with an odd heaviness.

Adan remained silent through the discussion, which was also unusual. Realizing that Oswald would likely grow restless soon and begin his nocturnal ramblings, Jennifer lowered herself off the edge of the platform. She stood looking in at the bear, or rather at the dark shape, like an indistinct shadow, that
I curled beneath the forest shelter. A moment later she heard a grunt and Adan stood beside her. “I didn’t meant to upset Bu Lejeng,” she said.

Adan said, “You didn’t upset her,” he said. “She has her own concerns. Tonight, we all do.”

“What do you mean?”

But just then the bear came out from beneath the platform, visible mainly by the patch of yellow at his chest, which seemed to float, disembodied, when he was at a distance of only a few feet. He circled the two of them and wedged himself between, sitting on Jennifer’s feet. Both of them reached down and scratched his ears. He stayed long enough for their clothes and skin to take on his musky scent; then he began rubbing his neck against first Jennifer’s, then Adan’s legs. Adan understood it first. “The collar,” he said. Jennifer borrowed from him his carving knife and, kneeling down and cutting as much by feel as by vision, she cut Oswald free, noticing how the hair had been worn away in patches that looked sickly white. When she touched one such patch, and scratched it gently, he let out a small mewling sound. Then he got up and walked into the forest without looking back.

“He’s not much like a ghost, is he?” Adan said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s pretty amazing that he just took the problem of goodbyes into his own hands.”

Adan smiled sadly. “His end of the problem, anyway.”

That last comment was the one that stuck with her long after everyone else had fallen asleep. Puzzling over it, she finally understood the mood of the evening: it was not just her time of saying goodbye to a bear; all three of them were saying goodbye to her. The turning point of this trip was the turning point of the movement that had brought all of their lives together; now that same movement would pull them apart. In a day or two they’d be back in Long Awan, and soon after that, she would need to fly out.

As always, she’d understood too late. Tears welled up in her eyes as she heard and felt Oswald return, touching base before leaving again to his night...
explorations. For a brief time, in their little forest shelters, they had been something like a family: she, Adan, Oswald-as-child, even her in-laws. They had cooked rice together and shared stories and laughter. Now it would be over, and Adan would be the first to remind her—if his behavior tonight hadn’t already reminded her—that it may never be this way again.

She thought about Oswald waking up tomorrow bereft of the people he’d known, doubly bereft because he’d lost two mothers. She supposed that he might track their scent for a while, but she believed Om Barnabas knew what he was doing, and Oswald could not follow. He might try other directions, but if nothing better turned up, he may well stay where they had put him.

How does one live like that, tossed up on a hillside not of your choosing or wish, like a Noah cast adrift on the surface of the earth but without a God, without a purpose? Or even if it was your own wish that you were following, and you had many tries to get it right, there were many lands, many possibilities. How does one decide this is it, this is the place where I emerge from the ark, gamy and on legs made bowlegged and tentative through long being accustomed to water?

Her right arm had fallen asleep. She drew it from under Adan’s head and nursed it back to life through the pins and needles of dead flesh reawakening. Then she snuggled closer to him. Half-conscious, he mumbled, “Do you want to roll the mats over?” and was asleep again before she could answer, before she could even know if he was offering to help her stay warm or was suggesting sex through some Dayak euphemism.

What would it mean to wake up one morning high on a hillside, like she would wake on this hillside tomorrow, and know that your life started from right that moment? Everything else washed away. Except, of course, nothing got washed away. You took your history, your self, with you, even into your dreams. Look at Noah: the world held not a jot less sin despite his millennial journey. The before and after pictures were the same, though the names had changed.
And there really wasn’t any choice in the matter, either—not for Oswald, not for her. You were always waking up somewhere, until one day you didn’t wake up at all. That day would not be the one to prepare for: why bother? And the other days—could you prepare for them? Or did you close your eyes and wish for the best, and perform every night the same brute repetition of hope, and sleep.

Hope, and sleep.

Tomorrow night she’d be on a different hillside, or a river basin. The night after that another. In a week she’d be in the United States, congratulating Deirdre and Brad on their marriage. Announcing her own? In a month she might be back in school; in a year she might be right back in Long Awan, or anywhere else.

Different chambers of the same long house.

She nudged Adan awake. “What is it?” he asked.

She had been about to call to him in his own language of affection: nangi jinan. But the night was already saturated in feelings of high sadness and departure without her adding to them. And when it came right down to it, she wasn’t that Asian anyway. She asked him the honest question on her mind. “Do you think you’d ever endure a Boston winter?”