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The Chameleon's Home Country

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For Melissa.
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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the author’s experiences of growing up white and gay in apartheid South Africa, this collection of personal essays explores themes of kitsch, displacement, love, sexuality, and forgiveness. A central question posed by the work is whether virtues such as love and forgiveness are worth the cost they frequently exact. These costs include, but are not limited to, denial of the self and individual perception in order to make possible a sense of profound union with other persons. In the end the dissertation concludes that it is best to accept a level of permanent and irrevocable yearning for connection and healing which human life will never entirely fulfil.
The Swazi, who live along the Drakensberg escarpment and in the rolling South African hill country where I grew up, tell how in the beginning Nkulunkulu, the Supreme Being, broke off pieces of reed from a thicket in a dry river bed and created men and women. At this time Nkulunkulu had not yet decided how long human beings were to live. After a period of reflection, he sent the chameleon with a message to the people that they could live forever. But the chameleon, slow-footed, cautious, easily distracted by bright berries and green leaves, was too slow in making progress and soon was overtaken by a lizard. This lizard bore a second, more ominous message, namely that human beings would have to die. To this day, the chameleon is not a popular animal in southern Africa, and it is frequently killed for its tardiness, its mouth stuffed with sticks, pebbles and dirt.

Ever since I heard this story – among other sources, I remember it in a book of African folk tales that I read in high school – it has always had a special resonance for me. Part of it is simply that as a child I adored chameleons, those gangly, pop-eyed, slither-tongued creatures that were forever creeping around in our back garden and that, if you tried to pick them up, would puff themselves larger until their bodies appeared to be near bursting point, their mouths open and red and their backs raised and bristling so that they looked like fiery primordial dragons. I loved to poke and flick at them just so that I could see this magical transformation into a creature out of some ancient mariner’s fantasy.

At age seventeen, reading the story of the lizard and the chameleon for the first time, death seemed foreign and distant to me, and I failed to sympathize with the people who had lost the gift of eternal life. Nevertheless, my response did go beyond one of sentimental pity for a poor, maligned reptile: I recognized in the tale a sense of spatial location that corresponded with deeply held feelings of my own about the region of the world where I lived. For in addition to Nkulunkulu’s caprice and the chameleon’s slowness, in the story
there is the powerful sense of a society simply too far from God, the implication that if the people had just lived closer to Nkulunkulu, the chameleon might have gotten to them in time and the horrors of death been averted.

The feeling that I lived far away from everything, in a place of little importance to anyone that mattered in the world, was one of the most vivid and defining emotions of my childhood. At age ten, shortly after I had learned to look up words alphabetically in the dictionary, I spent a hot summer morning during the December school holidays in my father’s air-conditioned office – he worked in the research department of a large game reserve – copying down addresses from the Pretoria telephone directory. In my neat childish hand, all careful looping l’s and perfectly formed p’s, I asked the ambassadors of Germany, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Japan and Australia to send me pictures of their countries and information about travelling and living there. In my room I put up a giant map of the world and around it stuck up Japanese cherry trees in blossom, Norwegian fjords shrouded in thick white fog, and sunset-tinted vistas of Monument Valley from the travel brochures that arrived in thick yellow envelopes. I created elaborate fantasies of lives I could lead in all these distant places, and I began to tell my parents in all seriousness that, when I grew up, I was going to be an emigrant.

I have no way of judging how common this experience is of wanting, as a child, to leave one’s home country and nation. Certainly the village where my family lived had its share of talk among the grown-ups of the attractions of Perth versus those of Toronto, and of whether it was even possible for South Africans to make happy lives for themselves abroad (“Once you’ve lived in Africa, you know, nothing else is ever quite the same…”). We were in the midst of a steadily escalating civil war; the television news was full of bomb blasts and revolutionary uprisings and terrorist incursions; and the general consensus among ordinary white South Africans was that the only two options for the future were a terrible bloodbath or an interminable and unstoppable third world decline (the second option was seen, by and large, as being far more frightening and horrible than the first). So to some extent my desire to leave may have been prompted by the general atmosphere of
gloom that pervaded the nighttime discussions around the barbecue fire, sparks shooting up into the night, beer bottles gleaming in the grown-ups’ hands and, through the dense smoke and the ruddy light, the mournful whoop of hyenas half a mile away in the darkness.

I do not think, however, that political conditions alone explain my childhood obsession with travel, escape and the outside world. For one thing, the realm of my imagination was located away from my home, in the English villages of my Enid Blyton mysteries and on the US East Coast in River Heights and Bayport with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. On the television, everyone spoke with American accents and ate hamburgers and drove enormous roaring Cadillacs. The star tennis players of the world were, by and large, Europeans and Americans: in tennis matches, my friend Kobus would always insist on being Bjorn Borg, leaving me to be the obnoxious but brilliant John McEnroe. After watching an episode of Chips or The A-Team, the acacia thorns, lions, cheetah and giraffe of the game park seemed unbearably dull compared to motorcycle gangs, California beaches and spectacular multi-lane highway pile-ups. Popular culture conspired with the surreal separations enforced by apartheid -- how could we feel connected to Africa when vast swaths of the continent, including black townships less than half an hour away, were legally and socially off-limits to us? -- to create a sense, at least in me, that I was living in an unreal world, a technicolor educational production by National Geographic, and that I was really supposed to be halfway across the globe wearing Levis and Reebok sneakers, and expecting a car of my own when I reached age sixteen, and fighting with my Mom and Dad over why I couldn’t stay out past eleven for the junior prom.

Of course the feeling that, as the title of the Milan Kundera novel puts it, “life is elsewhere,” is one of the great clichés of childhood and adolescence. People who grow up in Fresno, California, long to live in San Francisco. People who grow up on the Upper West Side wish their parents lived just a few blocks over in the East 50’s, so that they could afford a doorman and a view of Central Park. Perhaps those fantastically rich kids in their apartments filled with Rodin sculptures and priceless teapots from the courts of the Ming emperors
watch television documentaries and wish that they could go camping, as we often did, in places where lions kill impalas a hundred yards away (something that happened to me, incidentally, at age eleven; my chief memory of the incident is that my brother and sister and I were not allowed to leave our tent for several hours, until the lions had eaten their fill and fallen asleep, and that we all three wet our pants from not being able to hold it anymore, and my father had to drive us to the nearby tourist camp so we could take a shower). Certainly I have no doubt that to the black children living in rags in the dusty locations, going to sleep hungry and then watching us drive by in our ten year old minibus with its thudding exhaust, wearing our department store clothes and eating cheese and Marmite sandwiches, our lives must have seemed the very pinnacle of wealth, desirability and privilege.

Yet if existential wealth and longing are universal experiences, they are also experienced distinctively in different parts of the globe. As the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk has pointed out, the particular experience of being a resident of “the provinces of world culture” is of a “double consciousness” of both one’s own culture and the global, largely American one. This produces a feeling of “back and forth,” of pain as a result of “mentally trying to join another civilization.”¹ This experience of dislocation within the self, the feeling of having one’s soul stretched and torn, is a direct consequence of cultural and social marginalization.

Today, living in the most powerful country in the world, I am painfully self-conscious of this marginalization, the fact that where I come from does not even feature on the mental maps of most Americans. Usually the occasion for my being reminded of this is an introductory conversation that takes place with such regularity that it would be comical if it were not for what it reveals about the world as it is popularly constituted, with its clearly-visualized neighborhoods -- the American East and West Coasts, England, most of Continental Europe -- and then its wide, gaping holes, vortices of exoticism and mystery, filled, as in the maps of the ancient explorers, with half-finished

sketches of women in grass skirts, and names that have the ring of crumbling mythical kingdoms: Timbuktu, Manaus, Lhasa, Quezaltenango.

Usually the prompt for this conversation is my accent. Although when, as is frequently the case, I am in the mood to be left alone, I try not to open my mouth at all, there are occasions when it is unavoidable, such as when ordering food in a restaurant.

The person – let us say the restaurant waiter – will pause, frown, and say something to the effect of:

“Let me guess – England?”

I shake my head. At this point, if I am feeling garrulous, I might smile and listen to the long list of guesses – Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, Germany, Holland (South Africa is almost never mentioned). Or I may just say “South Africa” and attempt to return to conversation with my friends or to my book or newspaper. The problem with this strategy is that the mere fact of nationality is seldom enough to sate my interrogator’s curiosity.

“Oh, really! So where exactly are you from in South Africa?”

Regardless of the venue of conversation – restaurant or bus stop, university departmental meeting or even the lobby of a theatre hosting a Third World film festival – I can be sure that nobody will have heard of South Africa’s province of Mpumalanga. If I mention Nelspruit, the largest town in the region, one person in twenty may give a nod of recognition. If I say something about Kruger National Park, typically the response is a shrug of the shoulders and a display of the open palms, even though the Kruger Park is a wildlife conservation area the size of Israel, a growing international tourist attraction, and one of the most important natural and environmental resources on the planet.

It is not that Italians, South Africans or Argentinians are necessarily any better informed than the people of the lower 48 states. Neither do I find the questions about where I come from (“Do they speak Swahili over there?”) in themselves foolish or offensive. My own geographical knowledge does not extend very far beyond Europe, North America and southern Africa; faced with a Ukrainian or an Uruguayan, I am as ignorant as the next person. What does trouble me is the stunningly skewed nature of geographical knowledge and information, the fact that
almost anyone from Niger to New Zealand can name the largest city in Illinois, yet few can name the city of comparable population in India that is major industrial and technological hub, the capital of the state of Karnataka, and an important center of contemporary Hindu culture.

At its worst, this hierarchy of geographical location can produce in, as they used to say in the nineteenth century, the “person of obscure origins,” a deep sense of inferiority and paralysis that is reminiscent of the effects of other social hierarchies such as race, gender and sexual orientation. A student from a small south Georgia town informs me that he is ruling out the thought of majoring in television journalism because of his “strong southern accent.” On trips back to the town where I attended high school, I am told by old friends living perfectly successful lives, doing sterling work in computers or teaching or interior design, that “it’s no big deal – it’s all just in the Lowveld, you know, it’s not the same as making it in a real place.” Most disconcerting of all are the young Nelspruit rebels who become alcoholics and heroin addicts and who end up killing themselves by drinking mugfuls of bleach or ammonia or by driving their hatchback Mazdas into crocodile-infested lakes, all because the place is too small, the horizons too close and narrow, and there are too many forces, from family pressures, to lack of self-confidence, to, in the case of emigration, visa regulations, that prevent them moving somewhere else.

Visitors to the Third World, as well as to underdeveloped pockets within the industrialized world such as the rural South, often remark on the “conservatism” and “traditionalism” of the cultures that they observe. In the case of South Africa, and in particular my home region of Mpumalanga, this traditionalism also takes the form of a highly overt expression of racism and bigotry. While this prejudice can be difficult to deal with (on a recent visit a New York friend was shocked to the point of wanting to change her return flight date at the racist jokes and comments that she heard from members of my extended family), I do not believe that, as in the dominant metropolitan viewpoint, it means that the people who hold these beliefs are inferior or stupid. One of the most striking things about my family and my Mpumalanga
friends is how their attitudes can shift when faced with personal human contact: meeting a black friend, they will be models of hospitality and sincere interest; when a family member comes out as gay, this is just dealt with as “not a big deal.” One of the things that I find so fascinating about third world and underdeveloped cultures everywhere is that on the one hand, people tend to be more openly prejudiced than in the wealthier, more sophisticated first world cities; yet on the other hand, people are also much more connected and engaged with one another (this paradox is always summed up for me in the fact that the African villages near my parents’ house are both the places where, as one reads in the newspapers from time to time, independent and eccentric women are burnt to death as witches and sorcerers, but also where, on a baking summer day when my father’s minibus slid into a ditch, twenty young women and men literally came sprinting from every direction, beaming and waving, to pick our entire vehicle back up onto the road). I find it hard not to read conventional truisms, such as “those country bumpkins are so backwards,” as mere socially acceptable expressions of the old metropolitan-culture-is-better prejudice.

Yet if being identified with a third world country or an underdeveloped region has its negative side, it also has its benefits. Apart from the obvious superficial opportunities offered by an exploitation of the exotic -- one of the criticisms of third world, magical realist writers, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri, is that they are merely cashing in on the Western literary appetite for the outlandish and for the frisson of unexamined difference -- one distinct advantage to being “from nowhere” is that, paradoxically, one is much more acutely aware of exactly where it is that one is from.

To illustrate this point: recently, I returned to Florida from a trip to Spain (among other travels, I spent some time in the small villages and backwaters of the Spanish province of Aragon, southeast of Madrid and northwest of Barcelona). One of the things that struck me upon my return to the United States (I flew into Fort Myers, Florida) was the sheer blandness of so much of the architecture, the food, the shopping and the people’s style of dress. It seemed to me that I could
not see any substantial difference, other than climate, vegetation, and accent, between Fort Myers, a Miami suburb such as Coral Gables, or indeed one of the more modern housing developments in San Diego, Phoenix or Long Island. In Aragon, it is possible to buy a sandwich made with a special type of local ham, produced only in a medieval mountain village, where the pigs are fed on a particular nut that grows only in six or seven wooded valleys. By contrast, in Fort Myers or Tampa it is easy to buy precisely the same Subway sandwich, down to the thickness of the tomato slices and the brands of the oil and vinegar, that is served in Anchorage, Fort Collins, Peoria and Sacramento.

Of course, as soon as I left the southwest Florida urban sprawl, I was relieved to be back in an area with a very distinct culture and personality – the backwoods and cracker hang-outs of north Florida and the laid-back Gulf Coast. Yet my disgust with Fort Myers strip-malls, bright gaudy advertising billboards, and asphalt parking lots vast and lifeless as crusted-over lakes prompted me to pause for a moment and reflect. I cannot help remembering that just a decade ago these very Fort Myers or Tampa-style suburbs with their rosy-cheeked boys and girls in jeans and T-shirts playing flashy computer games, their family sports utility vehicles smoothly purring to holiday log cabins in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and their support for political freedom, entrepreneurship, family values, and turkey at Thanksgiving with stuffing and cranberry sauce, seemed to me the epitome of human success and desirability, the way all human beings were meant to live. Today, still, living in such a suburb, as portrayed in films and on television, is probably an aspiration for the vast mass of humanity. How to square the profound attraction to this lifestyle with (in my case) the equally strong instinct to recoil from it?

I came to the perhaps rather obvious conclusion that, essentially, these places have become victims of their own success. The price of the undeniable safety, comfort and prosperity achieved by the Tampas and San Diegos of this world has been a lack of distinctiveness. In that sense, a rural peasant village in Honduras or Zimbabwe has, for all its poverty, conservatism and isolation, more character and soul than the most well-planned and gracious suburban community.
But there is another, more substantial sense in which the person from the obscure backwater has access to a more defined sense of place than people from more familiar locales -- after all, if suburban uniformity were the only hazard of not growing up in the boondocks, then the perfect spot on Earth would be downtown Manhattan, which has a strong personality of its own, yet is also pretty much at the center of contemporary global civilization. This special awareness of place has to do with yet another contradiction of the human condition: that there can be no life without death, no joy without sorrow, and, most importantly for my argument, no location without dislocation.

Salman Rushdie has written, in reference to the writer who lives as an expatriate or an exile, that the “broken mirror” of the exile’s faulty memory of home may be as valuable as the perceptions of the writer who remains at home, because:

…the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss [of the past, the universal human loss] in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact... of his being ‘elsewhere’. This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.

I believe that something similar to what Rushdie is describing is true for the person from the “provinces of world culture.” Just as every human being, according to Rushdie, is an exile because of her inability to return to the past, so, I would argue, is every person in some sense a provincial, simply by virtue of her basic human existential isolation and displacement.

The kinds of emotions that I have described in this essay -- what Pamuk calls “the sadness of being off the track... the feeling that the life lived elsewhere is more mythic, more real than your own” -- certainly belong to the inhabitant of the cultural backwater. Yet they are also, I would argue, inherent in the human condition in general. A poignant thread running through human religion and philosophy for millennia is the longing for somewhere else, a different reality, one more vivid, more “mythic” and “real” than the earthly one. The Buddhists speak of

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nirvana, the release from the endless cycle of desire; Muslims and Christians talk of heaven, the place where all contradictions shall be resolved and all struggles reach their fulfillment.

Implicit in all these notions is the idea, corresponding to the ennui of the displaced provincial, that here, Earth, is not the spiritual center of the universe - true life, experience and happiness are elsewhere. Modern cosmology is free of such mystical and moral judgments, but it contains a perhaps even more radical notion of displacement. In contemporary scientific terms, we are all inhabitants of a tiny planet orbiting a single star in a galaxy of billions of stars, which is itself just a speck in a universe of billions upon billions of galaxies. In this vision we are all -- from the corporate mogul who lives on the fiftieth floor of the Donald Trump tower, to the inhabitant of a mud hut on the banks of the Upper Congo -- “together alone,” as my friend John Griswold has written, “in the middle of nowhere.”

It is in this sense that the experience of the geographically and culturally marginalized person may be merely an intensified form of a ubiquitous human experience. Such a person may, as it were, have had modernism forced upon him or her and be more acutely in touch with a feeling that is at the heart of the contemporary condition. It certainly seems true that many of the great modernist writers, from Faulkner to Marquez, have been able to turn geographical marginality into metaphors for universal human longing and anguish.

The paradox that is at the heart of the experience of geographical marginalization is that it is the very feeling of being from nowhere that sharpens the sense of being from somewhere. The widespread denial of the validity and importance of a place only builds the loyalty and attachment to it (I never felt so strongly about being from Mpumalanga until I came to the US). More universally, it is the awareness of the earth’s minuteness that perhaps brings home most forcefully how fragile and irreplaceable it is. The consciousness of place generated in this way may be painful, tragic, and unsatisfactory,

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3 John Griswold, “Together Alone in the Middle of Nowhere” (Unpublished).
but in the boundless black depths of our obscurity, it is the only sense of location that we have.
Some of my best friends are wildlife painters. One, a confidant from my South African high school days, is today a veritable young lion of that country’s art market, with his paintings fetching thousands of dollars in the top Johannesburg galleries. From my own literary obscurity in the southern United States, I have watched his growing catalogue of prizes and exhibitions with a mixture of envy and delight. My respect for his genuinely-remarkable talent has not been diminished by my antipathy to his subject matter. His exquisitely-realized vistas of springbok grazing on oceans of golden grass make me feel warm and slightly drowsy. His impressionistic elephants, in gorgeous hues of ochre and mahogany, gamboling away in dusty desert oases above his living room sofa, make me yearn for electricity pylons, highways and smokestacks, all of the ugly and oppressive, yet strangely comforting symptoms of urban blight.

Images of African wildlife surrounded me growing up in the Kruger National Park, one of the largest game reserves in the world, where my father worked as a computer programmer. On the far wall of my parents’ lounge, in my direct line of vision from the lunch table, a herd of wildebeest kicked up dust with a silhouette of snow-capped Mount Kilomanjaro in the background. In the television room, two ephemeral kudu – in an original watercolor by Zakkie Eloff – stooped down to drink from a cool blue river. In almost every house in the village, paintings of leopards sitting on tree branches, or herds of eland gazing out over mopani scrubland, occupied pride of place above in entrance hallways or above lounge furniture. Even in the headmaster’s office at school, where you were summoned to touch your toes and get caned if you hadn’t done your homework, the curtains were a cheerful, jungly pastiche of zebra, giraffe, warthog and lions, all wandering around under a green canopy of giant banana trees.

In the evenings, in the tourist camp, grinning apronned black men summoned tourists to dinner by thumping on impala skin drums. Drinks stands made from elephant legs were for sale in the curio shop, and served as handy perches for wooden ash trays carved as hippos, with
kidney-shaped depressions in their backs. School athletics trophies for high jump and long jump featured bronze springbok leaping into clear space. Embossed leather place mats made it possible to eat rice, peas and buffalo meat stew on scenes of the Big Five lounging together, in surreal inter-species harmony, like some fulfilled Biblical prophecy, the lion lying down with the rhino, and the cheetah sharing its patch of acacia-strewn savannah with a pair of leopard.

Things were different on the occasions that real, live animals of the larger varieties appeared in the village. On the early winter morning that lions came in to lie on our school’s basketball courts, the headmaster was so terrified that his thin, bony hands trembled like tree shadows. The teachers directed us into a nearby church with thick brick walls, forming a human barrier with their bodies (children were arriving for school all the time by foot and bicycle, and it was considered unsafe to occupy the prefabricated classrooms). The younger children sobbed. The fifth grade teacher made us fall to our knees in the church and pray. When the nature conservation people arrived, they darted the lions, carted them off in a moving lorry, and did an intensive inspection, rifles and pistols at the ready, of the school grounds and the surrounding bushveld.

One summer morning, before dawn, the village long distance running coach ran into a buffalo on the golf course. The buffalo charged him; he got a curved horn through his chest which missed his heart but punctured one lung. He had to be flown by Red Cross helicopter to the Nelspruit hospital. A middle-aged game ranger, a good friend of the family, got his leg torn off by a crocodile while standing fishing in shallow water. His two fishing pals saved his life by thrusting their Swiss Army knife blades into the crocodile’s eye sockets as it tried to pull him under, but the ranger still had to have the bloody, mangled remains of his leg amputated when he got to hospital.

On one of my father’s research camping trips, a lioness charged my mother while she was urinating behind a bunch of lala palms. The only thing that saved her was my father’s quick reversal of the land rover to cut off the beast’s charge. I remember feeling the lurch of the car and then seeing just the flick of the lioness’s tail as she vanished into the long grass. Even at age ten, there was something
profoundly disturbing in realizing that everything I took for granted was really so fragile. For months I was haunted nightmares about my sweet mother, who smelled of rose perfume, and read us stories at night after tucking us under our eiderdowns, having the meat ripped off her bones and her intestines gulped down by a pride of famished lions.

The Prado museum in Madrid, Spain, houses two floors of paintings by the eighteenth century master, Francisco de Goya. On the top floor are what one might call his “public” paintings, his paintings done for broad consumption. Portraits of nobles and of the royal family are prominent here, as are pastoral scenes of shepherds tending their stock and cheerful peasants dancing in clearings in the woods. The people in these paintings are happy and smiling, and the works’ implicit world view is an upbeat one. Although the paintings are technically magnificent, and although some critics have read them ironically – there is the occasional grotesque face to be spotted in the background in his rural idylls, and Queen Maria Luisa, whom Goya did not like, inevitably manages to look frumpish and ill-tempered in her portraits – on the whole these works lack immediacy and drama. Like my friend’s wildlife paintings, they have a flat, soothing feel to them. One might very well walk past one of these works in the drawing room of a palace and give it an appreciative nod before proceeding to enjoy sherry and jamon serrano on a velvet-bedecked balcony overlooking the Pyrenees.

The same could never be said for the somber, powerful works that fill the Goya rooms on the Prado’s middle floor – paintings done for Goya’s private home in Madrid. These works have a surreal, stirring, horrifying beauty. Demons soar on magic carpets above shadowy cities of stone. People with hooked noses and ugly, jutting chins quarrel over the remains of a skeletal supper. Terrified Spanish nationalists face Napoleon’s firing squads. In one of the most famous and disturbing paintings, a Saturn with bulging eyes and bloody teeth eats his own child in an orgiastic ritual of pleasure, grinning at the spectator. These rooms are invariably among the most packed in the museum. Whole busloads of middle-class señoras from Buenos Aires pause in front of the Saturn picture, oohing and aahing, protectively clutching their children as if to ward off evil itself.
“Kitsch” is not the word that immediately springs to mind in discussing Goya’s pastoral paintings (or, for that matter, my friend’s innovative wildlife landscapes), but that is only because in the popular imagination “kitsch” is thought of as synonymous with “bad” and “tasteless.” Milan Kundera, in a famous authorial digression in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, explains that the term’s original German meaning was more profound. According to Kundera, kitsch is the metaphysical denial of shit—the denial of all that is unacceptable in life. Communist kitsch, the kind with which Kundera was most familiar, replaces the reality of bread lines and prison camps with May Day parades and smiling factory workers and red flags waving along the road to a just future. One might argue that American kitsch replaces complex American reality with the Statue of Liberty, the stars and stripes on the front lawn next to the garden gnomes, and the mindless mantra that America is the best country in the world. There are as many kitsches as there are world views, but the one thing they all share is that they are built on this foundation of wishful thinking.

Kundera sees kitsch as the enemy of art, not because of taste or technique, but for moral reasons. In the aesthetic which he defends in The Art of the Novel, he defines artistic beauty as “the suddenly kindled light of the never-before-said.” Kitsch, because it is based on denial of what is bad, cannot ever shed this “light,” cannot ever tell the whole truth. Kitsch may be attractive—Kundera in fact sees kitsch as the only possible basis for mass human solidarity—but it ultimately fails to satisfy because it isn’t true.

It is in this sense that Goya’s commercial paintings are, as far as I am concerned, kitsch. They reflect a sweet, desired reality rather than a true one. The Spain in his public pictures is the Spain of eighteenth century optimism. There may be an impoverished peasantry that starves in droughts and freezes in winter, but they are also the happiest people in the world. The king is good-looking and noble and wise. Women are thrilled to dance on the village green and then tumble into marriage and motherhood. The paintings please the eye and prompt many a viewer to sigh with pleasure, but ultimately they fail to engage in the way that Goya’s more confrontational paintings do. While the
kitsch paintings tranquilize, the latter ones stir us with the darkness that hovers at the edges of our sunlit lives, the demons that wait and growl in unexpected places, the death, cruelty, and violence that, awful as they are, at least remind us of perhaps the most important truth of our lives: that we are impermanent, insubstantial, here and gone like snow in the noonday sun.

In a police state, kitsch assumes a heightened intensity. It moves from being background noise and colour, cheerful Christmas bells on the mall’s loudspeaker system jingling away the world’s misery, to being the mode of expression par excellence for everything in public life. Giant billboards show the supreme leader, wisdom and serenity in his face, guiding the smiling masses. Stadiums of school children dressed in the colors of the national flag do synchronized movements to show the unity of the people. Cheerful contentment with the status quo becomes not just the desirable mode of being, as it is in a democracy, but necessary for an individual to avoid imprisonment, banning, censorship and intimidation. One of my own formative experiences occurred in the eleventh grade, on the day that I was bold enough to wear a yellow ribbon to school to protest South Africa’s policy of political detention without trial. The rugby lads wasted no time in telling me that if I wasn’t happy with the way things were in the country, then I should leave. To underline their point, they punched me several times in the stomach, and flushed my head in a toilet full of shit and piss.

Apartheid kitsch, the particular species of Kundera’s animal to which we in South Africa were supposed to profess loyalty, was a strange mixture of fascist, colonial, nationalist and religious kitsch. There was the Voortrekker monument, huge, square, and ugly, like an enormous stone altar, on the Pretoria foothills, with interior marble carvings of Afrikaner pioneers trekking by ox-wagon into the interior and God delivering the country over to the white man. There were the veld schools, compulsory military-style camps for white schoolchildren, where we sang happy songs about walking in the bush and breathing the fresh air of Africa, before heading out to the shooting ranges to take pot shots at cardboard cutouts of black guerilla fighters. There were
the flags and military uniforms, the armored cars everywhere, brownish-green, as large as houses, with helmeted white soldiers armed with bullets and teargas for the demonstrators, and lollipops to throw at the black children. There was the Department of Information song, aired on television while the country was collapsing into civil war, showing white, brown and black people holding each other’s hands in front of an embankment of flickering candles and singing about what joy it was to live, so many cultures alongside each other, at the southern tip of the continent.

There was something kitsch about apartheid’s confident pronouncements about race itself: the bureaucrats with their thin moustaches, sticking pencils in people’s hair to see if they fell out (if they did not, it meant that the person could not be reclassified as white), noting the results down on neat forms in triplicate, and then smiling and shaking the applicant’s hand on the way out to the door, for all the world as if what they were doing was sane and compassionate. Likewise, the neat school maps of a South Africa divided up by race and culture, one orange patch for the Zulus and another blue one for the Xhosas, represented a kitsch fantasy of cultural purity with little relation to the reality of South Africans’ lives. White suburban life, with its easy, numbing complacency, consisted almost entirely of kitsch: trips out to the drive-in to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster; backyard barbecues with the dishes left till Monday for the maid to clean; KFC, Coca-cola, JVC video recorders and Abba, all in the midst of government-engineered famines and illicit chemical warfare and poisoned bottles of wine being shipped to ANC training camps in Maputo.

And then, of course, there was wildlife painting and photography. The image of South Africa in the tourist brochures and the government information booklets was of a paradise where the sun shone three hundred days out of the year and where serene African nature was accessible without having to deal with the clogged-up toilets, potholed roads, and corrupt officials in “the rest of Africa.” Tranquil giraffe nibbled on treetops just hours from the gleaming skyscrapers of Johannesburg. Well-fed elephants ambled along tarred roads, near rest camps with safe water in their taps and Grade A steaks in their
refrigerators. The panoramic vistas of acacia-studded savannah left out the electrified fences put up to kill guerillas and Mozambican refugees. None of the assassinated activists’ bodies thrown to the crocodiles were visible in the pictures of peaceful water holes, turned rose and violet by the sunset. The trump card of apartheid kitsch was its marriage of a sanitised African splendour with an idealised Western efficiency. The world may criticise us, the brochures and propaganda pamphlets implied, but this is Africa. Where else in the world could you experience the beauty of the Dark Continent, without leaving the First World’s blessed circle of safety and light?

A commonplace among white leftists and dissidents in South Africa in the 1980s was that the only thing worse than the risk of death, torture and imprisonment as a result of taking a stand against apartheid was to return to the bosom of the white community, with its delusional self-satisfaction and blithe contentment, its chatter of how unruly and ungrateful the blacks were, even as the country went up in flames. As a military objector or a radical activist, you might have to deal with the secret police outside your house, smoking their cheap cigarettes and slitting the dog’s throat when no one was at home; you might be served a banning order, and prohibited from ever being in the company of more than one other human being at a given time; you might emerge from prison with your back broken by interrogators, as happened to a friend of mine in 1986; but one thing you did have was the feeling of walking around with your eyes open. There are times when truth is worth more than air or water.

An objection immediately arises to this idea that serious art necessarily involves a confrontation with gloom: what about all the light and joyful art? What about Huckleberry Finn, The Little Prince, and the joyful celebrations of the divinity in the world in the poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins? Are Monet’s lily pools and Seurat’s sunbathers on the banks of the Seine mere kitsch escapism? Is Picasso’s Guernica by definition profounder than his still lifes of flowers and guitars?

Clearly not all beautiful art is despairing - not even in our own pessimistic modern era. Yet I think it is useful to make a distinction
between art that expresses the kind of joy that actually depends on an awareness of the life’s darker side, and the more superficially cheerful work which tries to make all the nastiness in the world disappear.

It is a cliché, but true nevertheless, that life is never so sweet as immediately after a triumph over violence and oppression. The most exciting moment in modern South African history was neither the anti-apartheid struggle itself, nor the recent years of democracy-as-usual, with all their grinding economic and social problems, but the small window in the early 1990’s when freedom was fresh, when people were dancing on the streets, when in the pubs and shebeens people were debating everything from setting up anarchist communes under the overpasses of the M3 highway to painting murals on the walls of the Internal Revenue Service Building. Here the joy flowed not out of a denial of the problems the country faced, but the feeling that at last we were going to confront them.

Kundera believes that the ultimate unpleasant reality that kitsch tries to screen off is death, and a brush with death can, like a triumph over oppression, produce a delirious joy. After being charged by the lioness, my mother waxed eloquent for several minutes about the taste of instant coffee. Dostoevsky, after his fake execution, wrote to his brother: “I have not become downhearted or low-spirited. Life is everywhere, life in ourselves, not in what is outside us.” Recently, I myself had a near death experience when my car spun off a gravel road and overturned in the middle of the Namibian desert. The windscreen was smashed out, the car roof where my head should have been was dented to shoulder level, and my fellow passenger and I had to crawl out of the automobile wreck over glass shards and through a haze of choking dust. When, eventually, we were rescued, and after the initial stunned shock and the filling out of insurance claims and police reports, what I remember most is how vivid and beautiful everything seemed. I marveled at the roughness of tree bark, the smell of floor polish in the hotel office in the village where we were staying. Discarded fried chicken boxes, Coke cans, the squeal of lorries changing gear on the

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highway, all seemed beautiful to me. At that moment I had no need for idyllic settings or idealised realities; everything about the world, good and bad, seemed miraculous.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one reason the ride down the Mississippi is so exhilarating is because Huck and Jim are running away from such misery: in Huck’s case, his drunken, abusive father; in Jim’s, the profound horrors of slavery. It is this background of pain that casts a shadow over the novel, and that gives the river scenes their exquisite lightness. The moments of Huck and Jim lying on the raft, listening to the water and watching the steamers go by in the distance, are doubly poignant because of the floggings and chains that await Jim if he is caught, not to mention the madness of the life that Twain shows as constituting the “real world”: the scheming con artists, bloodthirsty mobs, and the like. Far from being a novel that evades unpleasant reality, *Huckleberry Finn* is about the ability of the human spirit to transcend life’s oppression and injustice.

Even the cheerful garden parties and flowery meadows of the Impressionists, which have found their way in our own time onto a million refrigerator calendars, reflect, at least in their original context, an implicit awareness of the full range of life’s experiences. Unlike Goya, whose dark paintings seem a repudiation of his cheerful ones, Monet painted gloomy pedestrians wandering through the London smog as luminously as he did sunlight on water. His bustling railway stations have the same underlying tranquility as his footbridges over garden streams. As with many of the other Impressionists, one gets the feeling that his art was chiefly about wide-ranging, promiscuous observation; in Seurat’s “Bathers at Asnieres,” the painter renders the green, summery repose of the foreground and the ugly smokestacks and factories on the horizon with identical dispassionate precision.

Why, if beatitude—or at least tranquility—is available to the human being who confronts the unacceptable reality of the world, do we all try so hard to pretend that everything is alright? Why do paintings of impala nuzzling each other sell like toffee apples in the northern Johannesburg suburbs, while pictures of hyenas gnawing at carcasses languish under layers of dust in cluttered storerooms? Why, in the face of all the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, do most
white South Africans continue to believe that the apartheid days were the "good old days"; do ordinary Americans believe that the international role their country plays is a positive one; do contemporary Communists disbelieve in the gulag; do those of us in the rich countries drift along obliviously without a thought for the fact that eleven thousand Third World people will, on any given day, starve to death?

The easy response would be to indulge in a rant against human stupidity and complacency; to side with Borges' fictional Christian heretic who proclaimed that both mirrors and parenthood are abominable because they multiply the numbers of human beings in the world. But that is less an answer than a dismissal of the question. It still leaves us wondering, why are we so blind? Why did God, or the universe, or evolution make us this way?

The ironic truth is that kitsch, the denial of shit, is not something that we human beings ultimately have any choice about. Just as we cannot do anything about the fact that we do shit – that our nature is metaphysically unacceptable – we cannot completely stop ourselves denying our own imperfection. Put differently, the fact that we fall so easily for kitsch is simply one more example of the human fallibility that kitsch tries to deny. To claim a life, politics or art that is completely free of kitsch is merely to create a new kind of kitsch, a kitsch based on the denial of kitsch itself.

If this sounds rather like the riddle of the Möbius strip, the piece of paper that simultaneously has two sides and one, that is because, as the postmodern philosophers teach us, any honest inquiry into truth will always come up against the fallacy of its own starting point: human beings do not have the ability to see with the eyes of gods. But as all the greatest art and philosophy teaches us, too, that does not necessarily diminish the value of trying. For paradoxically it is in acknowledging our own weakness and complicity, in laughing at our own wishful thinking, that we stand the only chance of transcending them.
1. MARRIAGE

When I was seventeen and attending boarding school in a small South African town, my best friend and I used to tease each other about how we were never going to get married. “No woman could ever put up with your eccentricities, Glen,” he often told me, and that seemed as impossible to dispute as it was unnecessary to point out its corollary: that James, skinny as a broom and freckled from hairline to ankle, who blushed radish red when the teachers asked him a question, and locked himself in the music room practicing scales while the other boys sat on the steps with their girlfriends, would also one day become an elderly bachelor. We would both live in cramped flats with dust on the bookshelves and stale take-aways in our refrigerators. Children in parks would point at our wrinkled clothes and unshaven faces until their parents stopped them: Not that old man, dear. You can see that life hasn’t been kind to him. Perhaps – our nightmare scenario – we would even end up like Porky, the art teacher, a ginger-bearded fortysomething who lived by himself in a flat in the boys’ hostel, had no visible friends or family, and was said to tell himself jokes and roar with laughter before he could get to the punchlines.

There was, of course, something jealous about the way James and I goaded each other about bachelorhood, something possessive and lover-like about our friendship, even though it was never physical. “Go on and leave me,” we seemed to be saying, “and see where that gets you.” Our relationship, for all its prissy adolescent sexlessness, was in many ways a perfect rehearsal for the trials and joys of adult committed relationships: living together for three years in that tiny room, with the desks that rattled when you wrote on them, keeping the other person awake unless you lodged your shoe rims under the table legs; spending weekends together hiking to waterfalls; taking joint pleasure in sunrises and art magazines and novels. We shared everything, including an unspoken solidarity that I have since come to
regard as being fundamental to emotional commitment, a sense of us versus the rest of the world.

There have been many times, in adulthood, when I have marveled that the two of us never allowed ourselves to become romantically involved — never allowed our hands to stray in sexual curiosity on those nights when we shared a bed, sleeping head to toe as our parents told us to do; never grabbed at each other’s genitals in horseplay, as the macho boys did with abandon. It is as if we sensed a boundary in each other, a red flag fluttering on the highways to our interiors, beyond which, if either of us ventured, our mental worlds would collapse. To begin with, if we had kissed and embraced, it would have been difficult to avoid articulating the unspeakable: *Yes, I think I, too, am probably a homosexual.* Beyond that — who can say? — we might even have been able to see ourselves as normal, marriageable, and to tie the knot with each other, as did so many other adolescent sweethearts among those squat granite hills and expansive green sugar cane fields of our native Lowveld.

As I get older and my life solidifies, I sometimes dream up alternative histories for myself. In one of these, James and I are living together in a tin roof farmhouse in his home village of Graskop, running a curio shop for tourists, and having lunch with our families on alternate Sundays. *Isn’t it sweet, the two of them?* people ask. *Best friends, you know, since high school; I wonder what will happen when one of them gets a girlfriend?*

Instead we both came out as gay men at university, far from our home region and from each other. James attended the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, whereas I headed for Cape Town, that green-and-white city on a bay that, exactly like its geographic and architectural carbon copy on the west coast of North America, served as a magnet for political and sexual dissidents. It took me a year or two of anguished poetry-writing, trips to the student counseling center, and awkward dates with women that never lead anywhere before I got around to admitting to myself and the world that I was gay. When I did so, I made up for lost time by embracing the radical-hedonist counterculture, queer and straight, that had arisen during the decaying years of apartheid. I cut my hair short, hennaed it a brilliant
orange, and wore thick silver earrings. I attended mock-tribal parties where, with Bob Dylan crooning in the background and the smell of woodsmoke from the bonfire wafting out over the courtyard, everyone painted mud on each other’s bodies before retreating to the bedrooms or garden to sleep, make love or meditate. I demonstrated against beach segregation and wrote editorials in support of striking maintenance workers. Needless to say, in the spirit of the times, I had loads of casual sex: mutual masturbations, redolent of sweat and semen, in airy left-wing student communes; romantic one night stands in crumbling inner-city apartments and in wine estate mansions surrounded by vineyards.

They were exuberant, exhilarating times, a breathless expansion of mental space and possibility. I remember feeling terrifically happy. People think of promiscuity as something lonely and unsatisfying, but my experience of it, at least then, right at the beginning of my adult life, was overwhelmingly positive. I was intoxicated by human existence, by the city, by racial and cultural diversity. I had an affair with a Muslim in an eighteenth-century Cape Malay bedroom decorated with a tapestry of the Kab’ah. He left me to attend midday prayers at the mosque across the street. I spent a night in an African township hostel, a house of horror and danger in the mythology of my youth, where the neighbors sang tribal hunting songs before they went to bed. Sex was my passport to my own country, and I traveled voluptuously, soaking it all up as enthusiastically as any awestruck American on the Champs-Elysees.

At that point, the last thing I thought of was that I would ever get married. Marriage was, in the prevailing view in my social circles, bourgeois and antiquated, a sexist relic unsuitable for our brave new world of fraternity and rebellion. Marriage and the nuclear family provided warmth, it was true, but we disliked the way that it kept that warmth within itself, closed and tight, like a roasted chestnut. In a way, I had neatly flipped my adolescent concept: marriage was still something distant and “other,” but this time married people, with their neurotic co-dependencies, and their oppressive gender roles which maimed and stunted them, were the ones who were abnormal and pathological. I had nothing but contempt for gay and
lesbian people who wanted to marry — sad imitation heterosexuals in their suburban houses, with washing machines and matching butch-femme outfits and cats and dogs to compensate for their conspicuous biological inability to have children.

In my own life I felt energized, complete. I had people with whom to have lunch, share a joke, talk gender-bending philosophy, and, if I ever got the money together, to buy land on the verdant slopes of the Pilanesberg and start an organic vegetable cooperative. I even felt loved and cherished: I had people I could talk to when I got depressed, and when I got tick bite fever or the flu, I had friends who would make me chicken soup and rooibos tea. At age twenty-two, in short, I already felt that I had got hold of the most important things in life — sex, work, a sense of purpose, and support and affection — and it was hard for me to imagine, in anything more than the broadest outlines, a time when my needs might be different.

Of course I was wrong; we are always, at some level, wrong — the human condition is that of being wrong. Among all my memories of that time, there is one in particular that sums up for me how short-sighted I was. At a Pride March in Johannesburg, a mild-mannered man, middle-aged, balding, wearing a black business suit and tie despite the blistering heat, asked me to sign a petition to allow the legal immigration of the foreign same-sex partners of South African citizens. I picked up the sheet, hesitated, asked him whether he also supported the immigration of friends, aunts, uncles and cousins, families of choice and other “intimate connections.” When he said no, I refused him.

“Sorry,” I said, “but I’m not in favor of the privileging of romantic ties over other bonds. I’m afraid this just isn’t my issue.”

2. SEX

Perhaps if I had stayed in Cape Town, I would have remained an implacable opponent of marriage, monogamy, and all of its trappings: romantic nights in bed together watching a video; squabbles in the morning about laundry, grocery-shopping and domestic chores. Perhaps, at thirty-four, with crow’s feet in the corners of my eyes and frown
lines etched across my forehead, I would still be a hard-core rebel with spiky orange hair and at least ten different body piercings, who stayed out all night every Saturday at the clubs, and who lived in a leaky, crumbling farmhouse on the Cape Peninsula with other ex-hippies selling tie-dye T-shirts at the local flea market.

Knowing my earlier self, it is quite possible that I would have joined what my old friends tell me has become a growing trend among denizens of the former white South African counterculture, and entered an “emotional commitment ceremony” with anywhere between three and eight or so different people who wanted to publicly state their decision to be emotionally and financially intertwined. In my mind’s eye I see all of us, the old bunch of friends and comrades, gathered for a strange but touching ritual on beautiful, windswept Noordhoek Beach. It is sunset, probably on the day of the summer solstice. Several of us have, since the fall of the apartheid state, become strongly interested in New Age religion, and so these calendar dates matter more than they used to do. Ambient music plays in the background on a portable stereo; the vow-taking is facilitated by a blonde, dreadlocked white sangoma, or traditional African diviner, draped in a leopard skin cloak and wielding a zebra tail whip. When we are done, in a nod to North American Indian traditions we burn sage to chase away evil spirits; then the women in the group go home to feed their cats and water their vegetable patches, and the gay men head out for a night at the bathhouse.

In my own way I would probably have been happy with this kind of substitute family. Probably I would never have particularly wondered about the other kind of happiness, the kind that comes from letting one single human being in so close in that eventually the two of you together become what John Donne once called “the world… contracted thus” – a whole universe of feeling contracted into a single relationship. The question has become purely hypothetical. That life among an intentional community of middle-aged rebels flickers somewhere on the distant margins of my current life, a might-have-been existence as lost and inaccessible to me now as that sunlit curio shop in Graskop, where James and I take turns herding the tourists off the bus and ringing up their purchases in the cash register.
Instead, I decided to leave South Africa. Horrified and unnerved by the blood-letting and terrorism that preceded the country’s 1994 transition to democracy, and with a strong desire to see the world before I settled down into a trade or profession, I spent a few months living with my parents in the Eastern Transvaal, working as a Math tutor and saving up every rand and cent. Then, just four months before my nation’s first nonracial, democratic elections, I loaded my green backpack on a luggage conveyor belt at Johannesburg Airport, waved good-bye to family and friends from the security screening area at international departures, and climbed on a jet plane headed for John F. Kennedy Airport, New York City.

I have often wondered why I chose New York as a place to try to make a base for myself, rather than, say, London, where the majority of South African travelers and expatriates usually end up, or Tokyo, Taiwan or Saudi Arabia, where I could have made a good deal more money with my degree in English as a language teacher. No doubt part of it was that I had already visited the city for four days in the fall of 1992 to attend a human rights conference, and had immediately fallen in love with the city’s energy and vibrancy, the sweet smells of rye bread and pickles that issued from the Korean delis at four am, the exuberant and sustaining clamor of people, voices, and communities that made the metropolis feel, to me, like the capital of the world. It was also important that I actually had a friend in uptown Manhattan: an antiapartheid activist who lived on the Upper West Side and who offered to put me up in his apartment.

But beyond all this, there was another reason that New York exerted a strong appeal. This was that New York City, in my imagination, represented both the origin and the epitome of gay sexual liberation. It was the place where drag queens had once battled police in the streets of the West Village, setting off a global movement for equality and civil rights. It was also the place where, a quarter century later, you could still find more gay and bisexual men of different nationalities than anywhere else on the planet, more gay clubs, bars, bookstores and community groups, more gay-themed film festivals, literary readings, Broadway plays and political protests.
Due to an extraordinary chain of good luck, it did not take me long to establish myself in my new country. Within four months of my arrival, I managed to secure a job in an adult education program and a work permit, and soon after that, I received news that I had won the annual lottery that makes a limited number of permanent resident visas available to people born in countries that are historically underrepresented in immigration to the United States. With my new green card in hand, and with dreams of living a freer life in this, the world’s oldest democracy, I moved into a small brownstone apartment in south Brooklyn, spent a small fortune on long johns, scarves, boots, gloves and jackets, and began to set about building a new life for myself in the USA.

At first, perhaps inevitably, I tried to recreate my old existence, to seek out new friends and enemies to mirror those I had left behind on the other side of the world. That summer, I met an attractive, blonde, exiled young Greek socialist who lived just a few blocks north of my house, and who persuaded me to attend a meeting of his political group, a tiny Trotskyist sect that claimed to be in favor of all kinds of social justice, from fair wages for bike messengers to equal rights for gays and lesbians. For about a month, partly under the spell of my Greek revolutionary, I tried to rail against the American capitalist ruling class the way I had once preached against the racist apartheid government. However, after spending a Saturday or two handing out leaflets on Flatbush Avenue, and being studiously ignored by the very inner-city youths whose rights I was supposedly defending, and after my sexual overtures to my Greek god were met with apparent indifference, I decided that the workers of my new homeland could unite without my assistance, and I stayed at home and began watching cartoons on public television instead.

I began to attend meetings of various groups at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in downtown Manhattan: Black and White Men Together, which supposedly tried to foster racial reconciliation amongst gay men; gay and lesbian S/M activists, who claimed to fight for civil rights for all sexual minorities, including two I considered myself to be a member of, gay cruisers and polygamists; and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, which opposed
homophobic persecution in the third world. Somehow, though, just like the Brooklyn Trotskyists, none of these groups inspired me. Black and White Men Together seemed more of an interracial pickup joint than a political group - without the magnetic edginess of real interracial cruising spots such as the Little Potato bar on Christopher Street, where middle-class white men in collar shirts and ironed denims made eye contact with gold-toothed homeboys in skullcaps and baggy pants. The Human Rights Commission was full of earnest white American liberals who seemed to have little idea how to help their third world brothers and sisters. And as for the gay S/M activist group: I think the moment I gave up on them was when I first saw, at the home of one of its leading members, an Amnesty International report listing methods of torture used in third world prisons, such as those my erstwhile comrades had been subjected to in South Africa. When I asked him about it, he admitted that he used the report as inspiration for some of his consensual sexual scenes.

I didn’t know where to turn. With my antiapartheid credentials I didn’t even seem to fit into the movement for civil rights and racial equality: when I attended a meeting in Harlem of organizations fighting to secure the release of former Philadelphia Black Panther Abu Mumia Jamal, I was the only white person in the audience, and unlike in South Africa, where numerous people would have come up to welcome me, in Harlem I was flatly ignored. Afloat in a new country almost as large as an entire continent, living in a metropolis that contained so many communities, each with their own struggles and causes, that it sometimes seemed as though nothing could possibly focus or unify all of them, I decided that the only thing left for me to do was to use sex to try to get a grip on New York. In other words, I would sleep with as many men of as many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds as I could, in the hope of orienting myself in my new surroundings.

So I became a 1990s New York club kid, a gay Casanova and a hedonist, a New World explorer committed to discovering continents of sensual pleasure and fountains of earthly delight. During those first twelve months in New York I must have attended a different club every Friday and Saturday night. I went to parties in a three-storey discotheque built in a converted church, with stained-glass windows
surrounding the dance floor and strobe lights flashing in every color of the rainbow. I hung out in one club that squirted foam out onto the dance floor at two a.m. and that had an illuminated slide, playground-style, which allowed revelers to slip down from the “techno” level and splash, laughing, into the sea of bubbles. I frequented piano bars and cruise bars, video pubs and strip joints, bear nights and leather dungeons and parties where near-naked muscle boys dangled in cages, and offered to hand me little plastic beakers of their urine, in return for a single dollar bill stuffed into their Doc Martin boots.

I cruised for sex fanatically – with a desperate edge that I had never had in Cape Town. I had sex with a Puerto Rican gangster and a soft-spoken Polish tourist, with a Chinese student and a Senegalese shopkeeper. I had a fling with a petite young African-American who was living in a homeless shelter, and told me that his job was delivering parcels for the Italian mafia. I had a brief affair with an Indian lawyer who lived in a palatial apartment, replete with floodlit Jacuzzi and tulip-decorated balcony, and made love to a Hasidic Jew who spent the night in my apartment, and in the morning allowed me to braid his hair into slender knotted pigtails. After attending readings at the New York City “Y” in uptown Manhattan, I went for strolls in the well-known Manhattan cruising spot of the Central Park Rambles, and accompanied the strangers I met there to apartments all around the city. On the way back home from work I got off the D train at West 4th Street, where I hung out in the private booths at the back of the nearby adult video store, and made gentle love to smiling strangers with the sweet, acrid smells of tobacco smoke drifting in from the outside passageways, and the clink of coins as the other patrons fed tokens into the machines showing five minute sections of pornography.

A certain kind of promiscuity has more than a little in common with celibacy and religious vocation. In both cases, the practitioner sacrifices the ordinary appeals of love and domesticity – somebody to eat a salad with at the kitchen table, someone to fold laundry with on Sunday night, while listening to jazz together on the radio – in favor of a grand and noble pursuit. In the case of the Catholic priest, the cause that justifies such forfeiture is loyalty to church and a vocation to provide community service. For the mystic, unattached
Taoist or Sufi poet who wanders from tavern to roadside inn, the objective is to live a contemplative life close to nature – to follow what Taoists call the unpredictable, winding river of life, whose course can never be tamed or channeled.

For me, the causes warranting my sacrifice of domesticity had been twofold: first, the ethnic freedom that came from being able to connect with every culture and socio-economic class; and, second, the admittedly vague ideal of an “alternative” homosexual brotherhood which would replace the nuclear family with something freer and more satisfying. In my own way, I was as committed to these goals as any desert hermit to his morning meditation and offices; yet over the course of the next four years in New York City, they would lose their force in my life as dramatically any nineteenth-century intellectual’s loss of religious faith. Ethnic freedom and cosmopolitanism, such a difficult and important goal in apartheid South Africa, would become a simple, unremarkable and indeed unavoidable part of my life in New York, as simple as going for a walk in my Brooklyn neighborhood. I would not need promiscuous, unattached singleness for that. And as for homosexual brotherhood… the fact was, that in mid-1990s New York, the upstate hippy communes and left-wing collectives from the 1960s and 1970s had long been dismantled. Those men I met who seemed compatible with me sexually and intellectually wanted houses with picket fences in Sheepshead Bay, not polyamorous domestic arrangements on the Lower East Side. I felt like a Zoroastrian living in the era of Hellenism and Christianity, a flat-earther in the era of Copernicus and Galileo.

But I still wasn’t ready to change. Month after month, year after year as I hit the parks, clubs and bars, the loneliness grew in me, pulsing and throbbing in the core of my soul, like a wound. Year after year, my bedroom seemed to grow emptier on a Sunday morning, after a night spent out on the town: just me and the little desk with the laptop computer, the bookshelves, the view of the East River and the soundless movement of the digits on my alarm clock. Year after year, far from becoming more rooted and settled in my new country, I seemed to feel increasingly displaced, more like a creature set apart from my fellow human beings, a legal alien in a world of earthlings.
Unconsciously I knew I was ready for a revolution in my personal life, whether that meant a return to my old country or a radical adjustment in my new one. However when this transformation did arrive it happened on yet a third continent, where I least expected it, and the feelings it provoked were so powerful, bewildering and disorienting, the practical upheaval so wrenching and heart-breaking, that there were many times I wished I had never allowed it to happen to me at all.

3. LOVE

Love, romantic love, passionate love, the all-consuming sort that picks you up and shakes your insides around and leaves you unable to think of anything else, just *him*, the smell of his deodorant, the brand name of his favorite walking shoes, the kind of tea he likes and how beautiful and dark his eyes are and the gentle, lilting, musical way he speaks, dragging out his vowels and skipping lightly over his consonants - when I was twenty-nine years old, this kind of love exploded into my life one hot summer’s night with all of the force of a lifetime’s worth of missed love affairs.

I ended up in that bar on Pelayo Street, just north of downtown Madrid, in the gay district, by the purest and cleanest of coincidences. I was strolling down the street, just another lost tourist, peering at my map and trying to find a club which had had been recommended by the desk clerk at my gay pension, when I spotted the flickering neon sign in front of me that read *Cruising*. It was not the club I was looking for. Nevertheless, I thought: *The name sounds provocative. Let me just take a look.* Inside, I was more or less immediately put off by the excessively gritty seediness of the place, the porn videos playing on the screens above the bar, the plump, older men standing around in their leather jackets and chaps giving me meaningful glances. Nevertheless, here I made another casual, but fateful choice: I decided to use the restroom before leaving - a dark, smelly pit of a toilet located in the basement behind the dance floor, off a pitch black passageway that was full of men. On the way back from relieving my bladder, I paused. In that hot, stifling passageway...
I could hear men breathing, the mysterious rustle of cotton T-shirts, and the clink of loosening belt buckles. It was simultaneously frightening and erotic. Someone lit a cigarette lighter. I saw, off to my right, the ruddy glint of flame light on bald skin. Interesting, I thought. Maybe rough trade. I took a step in that direction. He moved towards me. In the infernal blackness I touched his head; he leaned forward, ran his hand gently over my face, and then kissed me. We touched and held each other for a minute or two, with other men breathing on us and trying to touch us from behind, before he leaned forward and whispered, first in Spanish, and then when I didn’t understand, in perfect English: I have a place near here. Much cooler and nicer than this. Just five minutes’ walk. Do you want to go there? I said yes.

The rest, as they say, is history. On that five minute walk back to Alejandro’s apartment – for that was the name of my plump and balding, not shaven-headed, stranger – I managed to establish that he was one year older than I was, that he worked as a painter and graphic designer, and that he liked reading many of the same authors and listening to the same composers that I did. I also learned that he had recently broken up with the only man he’d ever had a serious relationship with, a fifty-year-old alcoholic aristocrat. In Alejandro’s beautifully decorated apartment, among the photographs of his grandparents who fought in the Spanish Civil War, his own art photographs, paintings and homemade furniture, and his vast collection of smiling ceramic owls, I let him make me Twinings Earl Grey as we talked about Gaudí’s architectural innovations and Goya’s series of dark and light paintings in the Prado. After talking nonstop about art, history, literature and politics until the early hours of the morning, we finally fell into bed. I was deeply moved by his gentleness, the way he touched my body lightly and respectfully, as he were touching an artwork, the way he embraced me with such fierce and spontaneous joy and planted dozens of kisses on my hair and on the nape of my neck, like a child greeting a parent after a prolonged absence.

Tolstoy wrote that all happy families, and by extension all happy relationships, are alike. Perhaps these are the experiences that make them so: an easy, relaxed pleasure in each other’s company; common
interests; a spontaneous, happy expression of mutual consideration and affection, which in turn inspires a profound and peace-bequeathing trust. Although I had only known Alejandro a few hours, I had never, since those early days of living with James in the boarding-school bedroom, experienced such a level of instinctive comfort and tranquility in the company of another human being. Certainly I had never felt such consolation descend on me so quickly and instantaneously: a miracle, like sudden rain; a peace welling up in me deep and unfathomable as pain. That night I slept the happy sleep of the contented, held in my new friend’s arms until the sunlight crept through the slots in the metal blinds and awoke us.

That afternoon he joined me to go shopping for gifts in the famous Rastro flea market in downtown Madrid. When I discovered that I had left my cash in the hotel room, he loaned me $100 without hesitating. Afterwards we had lunch together, lay on the grass in the park and talked about friends and family. We bought ice creams. We went for a stroll along the lake. Without really planning to do so we were already in some way behaving like newlyweds. He invited me to spend the rest of my time in Madrid with him. We went together to my hotel room to pick up my luggage. I moved into his little apartment in the gay party district. The next day when he got off work we went together to see the medieval city of Toledo just south of Madrid. When I had to leave that Tuesday afternoon, I left him an American coin and a note saying that I hoped that that lucky penny would draw us together again. He in fact surprised me at the bus station, showing up among the passengers and suitcases like an unexpected guardian angel to help me find my correct gate and show my ticket to the bus conductor.

At this stage we both agreed that, given the practical realities of our lives, this could not be anything long-term. However, neither of our sensible resolutions lasted very long. When I arrived back in Florida, I had an email waiting for me on my webmail address, saying how much he had enjoyed meeting me and wishing me luck with my classes and in finding a new house. I wrote back the same day. Before I knew it I was checking my email several times a day, waiting on tenterhooks for those messages full of sweet thoughts and wishes, and counting the
days until the weekends when we could talk for hours at affordable phone rates.

In December, he spent a month with me in Tallahassee. We went camping in the Appalachian foothills, huddled up in the icy mornings in a single sleeping bag, and laughed together at cheesy song lyrics on country radio stations. We talked about our childhoods, and we spent days comparing South African and Spanish culture. On Christmas Eve, half a globe away from our respective biological families, we got a small Christmas tree and ate roast turkey and vegetables by candlelight. It was unbearably romantic. Days later, when I said good-bye to him at the airport, the sense of aloneness was so abrupt and shattering that against all my English-speaking, South African, stiff-upper-lip instincts I burst into tears, a distraught telenovela lover, when he disappeared through the security checkpoint and into the crowd.

Love’s notorious short-sightedness exists, like the side-effects of any drug, in direct proportion to its intensity. This intensity, in turn, is related to how much its practitioners need, want and desire love, how much they long for it in their souls. Alejandro and I, each of us for our own reasons impoverished in adult love, each of us deprived of the kind of everyday and nourishing romance that most people take for granted in their teens and twenties, were famished for each other, starving beyond rational thought. We thought only of each other, of the joy that we felt in being together; long-term practical issues, such as what kind of future our relationship could have under homophobic immigration laws, were distant and alien to us.

As a graduate student, with my summers free and access to near limitless amounts of federally-subsidized student loans, I could, of course, take off for lengthy summers if I wanted to – even for places as far afield as the Iberian peninsula. That summer, I spent three months living with Alejandro in Madrid - three months of more or less unadulterated happiness, underwritten by the U.S. Department of Education. It was like a childhood fantasy of domestic bliss. We cooked our favorite recipes for each other, hung and folded laundry together, went shopping at Mediterranean markets loaded-up with fruits, vegetables, cheeses, olives and meats. I met his siblings and parents,
who spoke a rapidfire Spanish that I found hard to understand, but who made it perfectly clear to me, with smiles, gestures and touches, that they considered me part of the family. I even, like an adoring 1950s housewife, fell in love with Alejandro’s domestic flaws and idiosyncrasies, the way he would leave clothes on every one of his seventeen designer chairs, which I would have to fold and put away in the closet, how he would come back to the apartment in a bad mood after a stressful day in the office, and melt when he saw me, smiling gently as he ruffled my hair. Menos mal que estas aquí, he’d tell me. Life is more bearable when you’re here with me.

I felt as if I had been a fool, a blind man, a wayward infant. I had been drifting through my life, looking for contentment in sex, politics and work, turning up my nose all the time at this, the deep, joyful security that came from being wanted and needed by another person. During the day, when I took breaks from my chores and from my reading and writing, I strolled through the gay district of Madrid, laughing at the man in Spandex cycling shorts and skin-hugging T-shirt who tried to pick me up at the Berkana bookstore, passing the entrances to the gay saunas and sex clubs feeling simply lucky and blessed with what I had, and not in the least bit tempted to throw it away by going back to my old bad habits.

At the end of those three months we did the inevitable: we made plans to try to extend this idyllic honeymoon for the long-term, which meant that one of us would have to leave his current life, and move continents to be with the other person. As a creative writer in the middle of an English Ph.D. and unable to speak Spanish, it was hard to imagine how I could get a work and residency permit in Spain. Alejandro, on the other hand, as a graphic designer, could conceivably find a job in the American hi-tech boom economy of the late 1990s − the miraculous, never-ending expansion that was going to defy all previous economic laws, and continue generating wealth and employment as long as our generation was alive. That August, as I returned to Tallahassee to take courses on social and literary theory and Renaissance Literature, he resigned his lucrative graphic design job, vacated his rent control apartment in prime downtown Madrid, and bought a plane ticket to Florida to start a new life with me.
4. MARRIAGE

He arrived on a hot, humid summer’s day in September of 2000. I remember that he exclaimed in shock as we exited through the sliding glass doors of Tallahassee Regional Airport. The air was thick with heat, a veritable wall of warmth, and the cicadas were screeching in the swamps of the neighboring Apalachicola National Forest. There he was, in his European tweeds and his long brown corduroys, his elegant, urbane wheeled suitcase and his small round spectacles, about to face down a continent of palmetto trees and diamond-backed rattlers, of Indian reservations and wooden barbecue shacks, of the bottom line and the information superhighway and endless sprawling strip malls, freeways and suburbs.

We investigated his immigration options. Obtaining a student visa was out of the question, because neither of us had the $25,000 to deposit in his bank account in order to show adequate means. So, too, was finding a woman for him to marry: I didn’t know any willing single straight women or lesbians, and a lawyer friend advised us that the risks would be enormous – up to a $ 500,000 fine, five years in jail and permanent deportation. That left the route by which I had come to the country six years earlier: finding a job, a temporary work permit and then either a green card in the lottery or a rare and almost-as-difficult-to-obtain employment-based immigrant visa.

He sent out his resume, circled newspaper ads and dropped by all the places listed under “Design” in the Yellow Pages. At first he got no responses. Then, slowly, the calls started coming in. He interviewed and was turned down for a position designing sports and academic trophies for local high schools: sculptures of farmboys in baseball gear wrestling brass alligators, presumably symbols of their inner vices; brass replicas of oval-shaped footfalls and crossed, elongated hockey sticks. He tried to get a job laying out promotional literature for a downtown art museum. Finally, just weeks before his tourist visa was to run out, he got a job offer designing web pages for a software company that provided educational applications, and a promise of sponsorship for a work permit.
We were ecstatic. We celebrated by driving out to a nearby lake and drinking a whole bottle of California champagne between ourselves, watched only by the anhingas perched on their skeletal cypress trees and the shrieking, invisible cicadas. We ate strawberries and blueberries, and drank toasts to the life we would share together. Until death or divorce us do part, I remember joking with Alejandro, but thoughts of both death and divorce were far from our minds, that crisp winter afternoon in the sunlight, beneath a clear blue sky and wispy white clouds. We had loved and fought; we had overcome obstacles, and now it was time, like in the novels and the movies, for the two of us to live happily ever after.

He left to wait for the processing of his paperwork back in Madrid, which ended up taking much longer than the two months we expected. Then, in early March, the dot com bubble burst. The letter from Infinity Software, in its neat little white envelope, left in my blue plastic mailbox next to the gray little garden gate that creaked when you opened it, was polite and regretful, but firm. Sorry, it said, but circumstances have changed, and unfortunately we have to withdraw the job offer made in our previous communication with you.

We were back at the beginning. Alejandro now had no choice but to look for another graphic design job in Madrid, and to live with his parents while he looked for an apartment to replace the one he’d given up. Fortunately, within a few weeks of his setbacks, he found new employment, albeit work less interesting and less well-paid than his previous job. Then he found an apartment to rent. Scared of uprooting my life and moving halfway across the planet, I contemplated ending the relationship, breaking off ties and saying in my own courteous, remorseful way, Sorry. We tried, but it just wasn’t meant to be. But by this time he had become a part of me. I was about as eager to cut him loose as I was to tear out a piece of muscle out of my own chest. Moreover, I was adamant that, having at last found love and marriage, I was not going to be deprived of it by the American government’s homophobic policies. So, at the end of 2001, when I was getting ready to pass my Ph.D. examinations and begin writing my dissertation, I decided to relocate to Spain, with a view to beginning yet another life for myself there, this one at the side of my chosen partner.
Three continents, three epochs of my own life, two moves across half the earth's surface to pursue some dream relating to sex, love and marriage. The first of these relocations was an attempt to irrevocably escape from marriage, to get as far away as I could from that acacia-strewn, church-going world of my childhood where the only meaningful and obligatory thing in life was to get married to a girl, raise kids, and grow old together eating rusks and biltong in front of the television. Now, eight years later, I was moving to a new continent in order to pursue the very thing I had once run away from. I was attempting to create a family and a sense of domesticity for myself among the towering apartment buildings of Madrid, the corner fruit and vegetable markets, the living-rooms, and balconies in which Spaniards of different generations gathered to eat tapas and drink red wine.

Like wily tricksters, places and countries at first glance always manage to be what we want them to be. We mould them with our dreams and fantasies, and they willingly comply. It is only later that they exert themselves on us, with merciless force, as they really are. Just as New York had at first lived up to my dream of being a free-spirited, hedonistic paradise, so, for the first six months or so, while I worked on my dissertation and attended Spanish classes at the university, Madrid indeed seemed precisely the kind of beautiful, cultured, happy Mediterranean city where I might live forever with my chosen love. We would visit the in-laws on Sunday afternoons for fun, laughter and tortilla de patata. We would attend exhibitions at the Prado and the Reina Sofia, and get together with friends in one of the city's seemingly countless charming restaurants. Excited about my prospects, I talked to my professors about possibly getting a university teaching job, and moonlighting on the weekends as a tour guide for English-speaking tourists. Alejandro and I fantasized together about buying a house in the mountains on the outskirts of Madrid and turning it into a bed-and-breakfast.

In time, though, problems began to arise. The first of these, predictably enough, was immigration. If in the USA it was difficult to get a work permit, in Spain it was next to impossible: trying to deal with the fourteen percent unemployment rate, the government had just announced that it would be issuing no work permits at all for the
foreseeable future. I could maintain a student visa fairly easily, but needless to say, I could not be a student for the rest of my life without earning any money: Alejandro’s income alone was not nearly enough to cover our monthly expenses. My anxiety grew.

As Alejandro had done in Spain, I sent out my CV everywhere, and in time, an opportunity of sorts presented itself: I could become an adjunct lecturer at NYU’s Madrid Study Abroad center, one class a semester, a four month contract at a time. The payment would be in the region of $2000 a class, providing me with an annual income of around $4000 a year. I could supplement this income by working illegally as an English Second Language Instructor at a Language Academy, where, like any undocumented alien, I would be making rock-bottom wages of anywhere from $5 to $10 an hour, without sick leave, paid vacation, pension or Social Security deductions, or any form of health insurance beyond the basic kind provided by the Spanish state for all citizens and residents within its borders. This was in a city with a cost-of-living similar to that of the U.S.

Unable to marry Alejandro and obtain legal residency through family reunification, I seemed sentenced to live a hand-to-mouth existence on the economic margins of the society, much like cleaners or migrant laborers in the U.S. As I was moving closer to finishing my degree, all those student loans, run up largely on long-distance phone calls, money paid to support Alejandro while he looked for a job in Florida, and all those months of living in Europe without working, were coming due, to the tune of $300 a month, or almost my entire official salary. Once we moved out of Alejandro’s father’s place, it would be hard to find any rental or mortgage for less than $800 a month, or most of Alejandro’s $1100 monthly wage as a graphic designer. Food, electricity, water and transport would cost another $600 for the two of us, or all of Alejandro’s and my remaining income. How on earth would we even have money for shoes and clothes, let alone movies, vacations, retirement savings or visits to the dentist?

My sense of myself as a viable, economically self-sufficient adult human being was imploding. I now had love in my life, it was true, but chiefly as a result of not being able to legally marry that love, it seemed that I would have to sacrifice everything else I had come to
take for granted as an educated, middle-class American: financial security, career, basic social and political enfranchisement, the ability to control my own destiny. The thought filled me with a blind, cold terror that prevented me from sleeping at night in that cozy little apartment with all the paintings, photographs and ceramic owls. At two a.m. I lay next to Alejandro, my heart palpitating in my rib cage like a skittish rabbit, the sweat pouring off my body as all the ifs, buts and maybes flew around in my brain, terrifying and tormenting me. In the mornings, when I was supposed to be sitting at my computer writing, the despair and exhaustion weighed on me, and I sat, listless and unfocused, staring out the window at the busses and pedestrians, and clutching my tense, knotted stomach.

Once again, I knew that my life didn’t fit me anymore – that it had tilted off balance as surely as, years before in New York, it had been unbalanced when it consisted just of casual sex. Before, my life had been empty of romance; now, in a sense it was empty of myself – I had sacrificed absolutely everything in my life but love, in order to have love. But as before, I still didn’t yet have the courage to change. As I lost more than twenty pounds due to my anxiety, and as Alejandro’s and my relationship suffered when I began to work longer and longer nights at the local language academy, I continued trudging along, depressed but still committed to the decisions I had made, determined to continue until I simply could not anymore.

Then one day it happened. We were sitting on the chairs in the study, on Sunday afternoon, talking about the same old problems: where were we going to move once Alejandro’s father needed to sell the apartment, whether or not we could afford to buy a place, how we were going to pay the electricity, when suddenly Alejandro’s eyes flashed into the distance.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him. I had a sinking feeling inside. I had seen this vaguely-distracted, sheepish expression in his face before, and it was almost always when he had a secret he needed to spit out – precious money he had been spending, without telling me, on antiques, glass sculptures or artwork; bad news about a request for a raise that had been denied or a setback in his mother’s health.
“I have got something I have to tell you,” he said. “You know how you were always worried that you would be unfaithful to me? You know, because of how you were before you met me? And how I always said that if you did that it would be worse than for me than anything in the world?”

“Yes,” I said. Somewhere at the back of my mind I could sense what was coming, although it still didn’t seem real to me – not possible from this sweet, kind man with his bald patch and his soft, beautiful hands, his love of architecture and painting and his promises, whispered to me in the early hours of the morning when I was most afraid, that he would always be by my side and loyal to me.

“Well, I have been the one who has been cheating on you, Glen. On these nights when you’ve been teaching, I’ve been cruising in some places that I knew downtown. I don’t know why I’ve been doing it. Just a way of coping with all of these problems, I suppose – a way of letting off steam. I wouldn’t have told you, except that I’ve picked up some crab lice. The doctor said we should both use disinfectant shampoo and wash our clothes in hot water. Perhaps I’m the real slut here, after all.” He began to cry.

I held him, kissed on him on his forehead, told him that of course I would forgive him – I, of all people, who knew about the inability to resist sexual temptation. But in the end this was the proverbial final straw. I still loved him, but I could not deal with a crumbling relationship on top of a collapsing life. Three weeks later I told him I was going back to Florida. Four weeks after that I was in a plane heading back to Tallahassee, and several months later, when his further attempts to immigrate to the U.S. proved unsuccessful, the two of us agreed that it would be best if we went our separate ways.

5. LOVE

There are times, in the aftermath of having discovered great love and then lost it, that I think back to my homeland, South Africa, and I remember that middle-aged man in a business suit who wanted me to sign that petition to allow same-sex marriage for immigration purposes. I wonder: did he, too, have a loved one prevented from joining him due to
discriminatory immigration laws? Did the law get changed in time, as a result of the late 1990s lawsuit that changed government immigration policy in that country, for their relationship to survive? If so, it was no thanks to me, but fortunately the world is full of wiser spirits than I was at the time, and I have no doubt that others helped him out on that dry, sweltering afternoon.

After all of these experiences, I remain strongly committed to the ideal of same-sex committed unions, and to the struggle for the legal rights and privileges that will make those marriages legally-recognized and sustainable in the real world. Love cannot, it is true, be the only purpose of life, but it is a valid, valuable pursuit, a fundamental part of the pursuit of happiness enshrined as a self-evident right in this nation’s Declaration of Independence. Gays, lesbians and bisexuals, in my view, have as much right to it as any other citizens of the planet.

Along with all the other lost lives I carry around in my head, I now have one more. In it Alejandro and I are living in a village in rural Asturias, our favorite province in Spain, and one where we went on holiday together when I first arrived in the country. We live in one of the slate-roofed cottages overlooking the sea that dot that verdant, unspoiled landscape below the towering, snow-capped Cordillera Cantábrica. We chop our own wood, tend a vegetable garden, look after a family of dogs. We have grown old together, retired; the table in the living-room is piled up with photo albums. I now spend my days reading books and going for walks, and he spends his puttering about in the shed with his furniture and paintings. Occasionally the phone rings: friends calling to say hi from South Africa, America or Europe. At night we hold hands just like in the old days. We eat fish stew for supper, followed by steaming mugs of milk.
THE KARMA OF VIOLENCE

When I was twelve years old and skinny as a grasslands cheetah, my parents sent me away to boarding-school. They had no choice in the matter. We lived in a staff village in a game park more than an hour away from the nearest secondary school, so boarding-school was both an unavoidable and unremarkable rite of passage for all of those entering Standard Six (Form One, in the British system, or eighth grade in the American). One baking hot, glaring Monday afternoon in January 1983, the day before the start of the school year, they drove me to Nelspruit, a shady farming town on the main road between Johannesburg and Mozambique. Here, they dropped me off at a complex of red brick buildings in a newly-built first-floor dormitory still smelling of concrete dust, builders' tape and paint, and lined with metal lockers and identical blue-and-white-quilted beds.

It didn’t take me very long to get into trouble at my new school. That very first afternoon, after the parents had left, all of us had to stand, according to boarding-school tradition, in the downstairs showers and wait for our two seventeen-year-old dormitory prefects to finish soaping and rinsing themselves. After a minute or two one of them, a skinny blond muscular boy named Sean, with bright red acne all over his face, whom I would later learn was head of the school’s military cadets program, announced an initiation ritual which involved dropping our towels, placing our hands on our heads, and singing an athletics song while jumping up and down in the nude. I was fascinated by his cock, which was tumescent from watching us, and by his tuft of bright blond pubic hair, which was the first pubic hair of any color I’d seen in my life. At some point in this exercise he caught me looking at his groin.

“You,” he said, beckoning me to come to the front.

He asked my name, then told me to bend over. From somewhere he produced a cricket bat. He proceeded to give me six hard strokes on my bum. I remember that he put tremendous force into them, swinging back on his strokes so that the cracks echoed through that stark concrete bathroom, sounding like tree branches breaking, and that the pain on my
buttocks was absolutely extraordinary – a fierce, searing agony that caused my throat to contract and harden and my eyes to mist up with hot tears. I was so afraid that my knees and hands shook, and I found it difficult to breathe.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Standard Six," he said when he was finished. "We are fighting a war in this country, and there isn’t any room here for queers and weaklings. Our job, as your matrics and prefects, is to make you into men that your parents and teachers can be proud of. So my advice to you is to learn the rules, toughen up, and learn how to treat your seniors with more respect – and that includes not looking at their dicks in the shower."

That was the beginning of it all. Over the next ten months, and especially during the first three of them, when Sean lived in the Standard Six dormitory with us, I, along with to varying extents the other Standard Sixes in the dormitory, had to face a veritable avalanche of sexual violence and torture. In the bathrooms, I was made to stand with one shoulder against the wall before being punched on the other arm by different matrics (Sixth-formers or twelfth-graders), so hard that it left purple bruises from my shoulder down to my elbow. For bringing back the wrong cigarettes from the supermarket across the street, I was slugged in the stomach so that the air popped out of my lungs and I crumpled on the ground, rolling around in agony. I was given hidings with a cricket bat, sometimes as many as two or three times a day, for walking past candy wrappers lying on the floor, for not greeting a matric energetically enough when I saw him, for tying my shoelaces with double instead of single bows, for tying them with single instead of double bows, for smiling when I should have been looking serious, for looking serious when I should have been smiling. In short, I was beaten for anything and everything that could serve as a handy excuse.

I had to participate in intricate and sadistic initiation rituals: games reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade and 120 Days of Sodom, of Another Country and Lord of the Flies. One afternoon Sean built a “cock shock machine” out of a relay of flashlight batteries connected by copper wire. Starting with the uncircumcised boys, because their glanses were the most sensitive, Sean tried to run an
electric current between our penises and testicles. When the batteries did not produce enough voltage, he had the brilliant idea of hooking us up to one of those telephone levers that South Africans used to summon the operator. This worked a good deal better; after his first victim, he had to gag the subsequent ones for fear of having their screeches summon one of the teachers.

Another night, the other matrics called a meeting in their toilets. Sean was away, but the rest of us were forced to gather in their bathrooms, which smelled of mildew and chlorinated water. Several of my peers were stripped, tied up, blindfolded and made to stand on desks. First they burned their penises with cigarette lighters. Then they tied nooses around their necks with freshly-laundered white sheets, and tied the tops of the nooses to the crossbeam over the shower cubicle. "We have the death penalty here for Standard Sixes," said one older boy, whose narrow smirking face and dark hair combed in a side parting I still remember perfectly, but whose name I have forgotten. Then they kicked out the desks, catching the falling bodies only at the last moment, before the necks could snap.

I had never been so afraid. At times, I seriously wondered if I was going to die. I learned to hide, to melt into crowds, to not draw attention to myself, to disappear. It did not always help. One night I woke up to find Sean clobbering me with a pillowslip full of athletics shoes. "RETFIEF!" I remember him shouting, as if he were cheering for a sports team. For a crazy, sleepy-headed moment I thought he wanted me to tackle him, rugby-style. But I still wasn’t sure what to do. "YOU BASTARD!" Then he hit me six or seven more times on my back. I was frozen with shock. Only when I continued to not respond at all, and just took the beating like a dead body, did he turn around and start beating my neighbor. Later, I realized that I had bleeding cuts all over my skin from the spikes at the bottom of the shoes.

Another time, a matric – not Sean, another one – called me into his bedroom. He held out a pillowslip for me and told me that I had to fuck it as if it were a girl’s vagina. I refused – good Christian that I was, I believed that sex before marriage was a sin, and I had no
intention of simulating it. He gave me six on the behind for that, with a slender cane that he pulled out of his clothes closet. Later I learned that the pillowslip had been lubricated with Vaseline and Tobasco sauce, and that the boy who had agreed to do it had screamed and jumped up and down, clutching his genitals and trying to cool them down under the bathroom taps, to all-round laughter from the matrics.

One hot afternoon when I had done something to annoy Sean he devised an elaborate punishment that consisted of forcing me to lie under a pile of ten or more blankets on an afternoon when the temperature in the shade was more than a hundred degrees, I would be confined to my bed under a pile of blankets, with the rest of the Standard Sixes forbidden from bringing me water. Regularly, I would be deprived of food. By the end of that calendar year – easily the worst year of my life to date, and certainly my closest brush with the kind of oppression that society usually meets out to those on its furthest margins – I would be gaunt and skeletal as a stray dog; so petrified, fragile and shell-shocked that I would spend afternoons hidden away in the toilets, lying with my head on my hands and listening to the water drip into the septic tank rather than venture into the open; and touched, for the first time in my life, with a kind of existential sadness and loneliness that has never quite left me, a sense that something was fundamentally out-of-kilter both with myself and the larger world, and that whatever this thing was, it wouldn’t be easy to restore to balance again or put right.

These memories are hard to summon up in the daylight. They lurk, somewhere in the shadows of my mind, as much a part of me as the freckles on my arms or the oval-shaped birthmark on my left thigh, but in some mysterious way they also seem separate from me, disassociated film clippings of things that happened to a twelve-year-old sharing my last name, two decades and half a planet away. On rose-tinted South Florida mornings, when I get up early and cycle to work so I can write in my small office at the private high school where I teach English and Language Arts, and I see the tranquil school buildings surrounded by the banyans and poinsettias, the lawns and the sports fields and the neat little wooden benches where the students sit at break and eat.
their sandwiches and chocolate croissants, the thought that crosses my mind is: *None of that was real.* All of that porn-flick, Abu Ghraib-style stuff, the mock hangings and genital burnings with cigarette lights and forced masturbations into pillow slips lined with petroleum jelly and hot chilli sauce – all of that was just a bad dream, a cruel and elaborate hallucination.

In my daily sequence of classes, there is little to remind me of my past. At this school, which is attended mostly by the ultra-wealthy sons and daughters of investment bankers and mogul land developers, a strict anti-bullying policy makes even the slightest suggestion of physical violence or intimidation punishable by detention, suspension or expulsion. All over campus, in hallways, classes and locker rooms, rectangular brass and steel plaques remind students of their contractual obligation to report all instances of hostile teasing to the administration. According to my tenth-grade class, students here settle their differences either through conversation, or through threats, humorous or actual, to contact their fathers' hot-shot lawyers. "If one student really bullied another here, there'd be a lawsuit before you could dial 911," they tell me, and I believe them.

There are times, watching my students, that I pity them for living such blissfully sheltered and comfortable lives, for the invisible cocoons of safety that seem to surround them, invisible yet stronger than brick or steel: the gleaming SUVs that they arrive in every morning at 7:45, which seem designed to keep every hint of poverty and suffering at bay; the small army of lawyers, school counselors and teachers that are called to their disposal every time they get a failing grade. On weekday nights these kids talk to thoughtful, sympathetic therapists about their innermost feelings and vulnerabilities; when spring break comes around, those who don’t head for Mykonos or Rio de Janeiro to party it up in a country without vigorous enforcement of underage drinking-laws attend seminars designed to help them choose careers that will actualize their abilities and interests. Mostly, though, I simply envy them all of this attention and support, the love and commitment from a team of adults single-mindedly focused on their healthy development. When I contrast this to my own experiences as a twelve-year-old for the first time in
boarding school, in that sun-blanced, acacia-shaded town surrounded by squat granite hills, the pain in me is so intense as to be almost physical: a dull, throbbing ache in my chest, just to the left of my heart muscle; an emptiness more profound than hunger or thirst.

For there literally was no one in that hot long-ago summer of 1983: no one to notice what was happening under the very noses of the teachers and administrators, in bathrooms with doors left unlocked and open, in dormitories with glass windows open to the clouds and birds. There was no one to snap pictures of our grinning and jaunty tormentors as they laughed and threw up their thumbs, and to slip the pictures to the media. There were no parents; or at least if there were parents, they stayed far away and out of sight, keeping their judgments discreet and private, working behind our backs to try to protect us for fear of making things worse. My own parents did not even feel free to openly pass judgment on what was happening; later, my mother would tell me that they did want to make me even more depressed and negative. When, at that year's final honors assembly, Sean received the award for community service and moral leadership as a result of his efforts making sandwiches for the neighboring old age home - everyone in the audience rising to applaud, Sean standing in the amber-colored spotlight, smiling his aw-shucks grin, holding up his trophy for the school photographer - there was no one to heckle from the back rows and shout out: "Pervert! Sadist! Hypocrite!"

The memories of the abuse may be lost to me now, mere bits and pieces of horror strewn in the sands of time, but the recollections of abandonment some of the most vivid and coherent of my childhood. In one, which dates from a few days after the first beating in the shower, it is late afternoon. The sun is a luminous blood-red, the color of the hostel bricks. I stand at a wooden door, the entrance to the apartment of the teacher-on-duty. The teacher answers it, a ruddy-faced man with ginger hair and thick, stocky arms full of blonde hairs and freckles. I try to explain to him that Sean has been beating me several times a day ever since I arrived, for everything from walking past an empty Coke bottle left on the landing to not folding the corners of his bed hospital-style, the way he likes it. In my mouth these jumbled complaints transmute into a mangled story about the fact
that I need to cover my textbooks and Sean won’t let me do this during study hall because he wants all the Standard Sixes to go to a dance the next evening. Sometime during this jeremiad I begin to sob, and ask if I can call my parents from his phone. The teacher touches me on the arm, firmly but not unkindly.

"You tell Sean that I say he needs to let you cover your textbooks," he says. "Be strong now. Boys don't cry and sniffle like that. You'll be OK, I promise you." He never says anything to me about it again, and if he mentions the incident to his superiors, I am unaware of it.

Or here is another one: another late afternoon, just before sunset. In this group of memories it is always somehow an hour or two before dusk, the quality of light heavy-red and golden, the air imbued with an implacable sadness. I am in my parents' car driving back to the game reserve, the first weekend I have been permitted to go back home – along with the other boarders, I am required to stay in the hostel and cheer at sports events when the school is playing one of our neighbors. I have contacted my parents several times since the abuse began, mostly from my aunt's office in the newsroom of a community newspaper across the street from the school: I have been stealing away, unseen, after lunch, and spending entire afternoons sitting on piles of phone books and stacks of returned tabloids. My father shifts the vehicle into third gear to go up a hill. Then he sighs, a sigh deeper than any I have heard him issue before, a moan that seems pregnant with a grief that is far beyond my twelve-year-old comprehension.

"The thing is, it's not true, Glen," he says. "I know it isn't. You're not a sissy or a nancy boy, or another of the other things they're calling you. This is what makes it all so unfair." Perhaps the tremble that starts on his lip also indicates that he is angry with them; his shoulders and neck tense up. Is he also angry at me?

He says: "Some of these young guys just act like walking penises." I don't understand what he means. He never, to my recollection, says the words that I in retrospect so long to hear him say, the words that will touch my inner ache: This is not your fault. This has absolutely nothing to do with you. The fact that this is happening at a high
school is a moral abomination, a deep and unacceptable violation, and I will do everything, I mean everything, my son, to protect you from it.

Or here, at last, is the most painful memory. It is late one afternoon at school – I think the afternoon after Sean made me lie under a pile of blankets and forbade the others from bringing me water, and I feared I were going to die from dehydration. Somehow I have made my way to the top of the school, to the fourth storey of the building we called the East Wing, with the view over rolling green hills covered with citrus orchards and the ribbon of tarred road leading to Johannesburg, the outside world. I can see the little toy houses where my grandparents live, on an orange farm ten minutes' drive away: these are the grandparents whom I have begged my parents to let me live with, but they have refused, saying that it won't be good for me because my grandmother, whom I love dearly, spoils me and is overprotective. I lean over the railing, the top half of my body precipitously hanging above the hard ground, and death’s release that already, at age twelve, exerts a strong attraction on me. I pray: "Please, if I jump now, Lord Jesus, send your angels and carry me over there, to Granny and Grandpa, and make it so that I don't ever have to come back here."

But there are no angels, at least none that I believe in enough to risk my fate. I feel abandoned by God and my fellow human beings. Yet something stops me from embracing death. I cry softly to myself, and do not jump.

A significant part of my adult life has been spent trying to come to terms with the sheer depth and brutality of these childhood experiences: the fact that before I was old enough to know how to masturbate, fill out a job application or knot a necktie, I was subjected to conduct that would have been illegal under the Geneva Conventions if directed at battle-hardened, adult soldiers. But it is easier to gloss over the past than to accept the seriousness of the torture that I was subjected to. The words "I am a survivor of rape and torture" stick in the throat like fruit pits; they clang hollow and untrue, sound like self-pity, victimology, unwarranted provocations. I long to distance myself from them, forget them, spit them away from me – even though, reading through the incidents listed in reports by Human
Rights Watch and Amnesty International, or viewing the pictures that have surfaced from Abu Ghraib prison, it is hard to see how the actions of Sean and his friends back in 1983 could not have qualified as war crimes.

Denial is complex and multi-faceted, universal, pernicious. To confront it means not just to challenge the multiple lies and half-truths embedded in the self, but also to face loved-ones and personal anchors, family and friends, the communities that nourish a person, provide structure, identity, life itself. It is to painfully shed illusions and to refuse the easy comfort of accepted truths. It is a long and difficult journey, probably impossible to complete entirely in a single lifetime.

For instance until age twenty-four, when I first arrived in New York City as a new immigrant and expatriate, I truly had no idea that there was even anything strange or exceptional in the story of my own early adolescence. All of my life I had simply thought of myself as unlucky for having been hit “harder” than the average Standard, because of being visibly homosexual. Being stripped naked, though, and forced to masturbate in public; being punched and clobbered for no reason and being attacked, humiliated, and called names: all of this I took for granted as a regular part of growing up. When, after three months of Sean’s degradations, my parents managed to persuade the school authorities to transfer him to another passage – an action that they took without telling me, for fear I would give away the secret and become more of a target – the abuses continued, albeit at a reduced intensity, and they continued throughout high school, in front of teachers, sometimes directed at me and sometimes directed at younger boys. My father was not wrong in telling me that these things happened to “everyone.” A 2001 report of the South African Human Rights Commission, commissioned by the new democratic parliament, found that such abuses were widespread and accepted in schools “within an institutional culture of authoritarianism and bullying.”

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It took several years, and the utterly anguished, horrified expressions on the faces of friends of several different nationalities – American, Swiss, Spanish, Brazilian and Chinese – for me to realize that being stripped and made to drill for water with one’s genitalia on a rugby field in the middle of the night, and having one’s head shoved in a tiny wooden mailbox while being caned with a three-foot hockey stick were not universal coming-of-age rituals across cultures and continents. Even then, I was reluctant to acknowledge that my childhood wasn’t “normal,” “happy” and “safe.”

“Compared to what the blacks experienced, I was lucky,” I insisted. “At least I had a school to go to with a library, electricity and running water.”

In talking to my family over the years, it has been hard to share this newfound international perspective. My parents, when I raise this uncomfortable topic, tend to be sympathetic, yet guarded. “We did the best we can,” says my father, when I ask him why they did not allow me to board for a year with my aunt and uncle, or with my grandparents. “In those days, that’s the way things were done.” It is all but impossible to communicate frankly with my former teachers who still live and work in the town where I grew up. Recently, when I suggested to one of my old Math teachers that school discipline may have been abusive and arbitrary in the old days, she proceeded to regale me with a diatribe about how, under democracy, academic standards have collapsed and the blacks have brought drugs, laziness and knife fights into previous citadels of white thrift, order and diligence. “Yours was the last generation,” she tells me, “to be educated in safety.”

At the political level, the denial of the rape, abuse and torture of young white male preadolescents under apartheid is a glaring absence in the national discourse about reconciliation, healing, and the building of the so-called “rainbow nation.” Existing narratives of the apartheid era rely heavily on notions of white aggression and black victimhood. Under the influence of feminists, to these have been added the concepts of general male aggression and female victimhood. Entirely missing from this world view is any sense of white males themselves as dual victims and perpetrators, stuck in a veritable karma
of hatred, oppression and violence, doing unto others as was once done unto them.

And yet in the universe of apartheid, this is exactly what happened, year after year, decade after decade, with all the regularity of pistons moving in an engine. At countless institutions like my boarding school, spread across the African veld like red-brick blisters on the earth’s skin, prepubescent boys without hair on their bodies and voices still high-pitched and girlish were sexually abused, tortured and treated like members of a subservient race. As the years went by, these boys, with all the verve of understudies stepping into stage roles, went on to bully the juniors under them: sexually abusing, humiliating, and, at times, raping them; dishing out the same punishments, jokes and insults. When the time came for them to be conscripted into the South African Defence Force, they were once again punched, tortured, made to do push-ups over mud puddles until their arms collapsed, and forced to have sexual intercourse with female prostitutes to prove their masculinity. If they showed signs of gentleness or effeminacy they were made to endure punishments ranging from having their genitalia rubbed with shoe polish and inspected by whole platoons to being treated with psychiatric drugs and electric shocks to make them tougher and more “masculine.”

In white male South African society, the final step on this ladder of suffering and oppression was to become a soldier or officer entrusted with the task of maintaining white supremacy. In this final role, there were few limits or restraints on the exercise of brute power. Villagers suspected of harboring terrorists were massacred. Herero and Ovambo women on the Namibian border were beaten and gang-raped. Captured freedom fighters were fried alive on the engines of armored cars. At the higher levels of military command, white men who looked and spoke just like Sean and his friends, just like me and my classmates, gave orders for the engineering of civil wars and famines that would claim millions of lives. Like so many mad Kurtzes, many

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6For examples of such violations within the SADF, see Van Zyl, Mikki, et al., *The aVersion Project: Human rights abuses of gays and lesbians in the SADF by health workers during the apartheid era.* (Simply Said and Done: Cape Town, 1999).
white men seemed to lose all sense of themselves, to become intoxicated with power and cruelty, and to have no qualms about destroying individuals, families and nations. By time it all came to an end, the damage done beggared the imagination. A whole generation of orphans in Mozambique had had their arms and legs blasted away by anti-personnel mines. A proliferation of guns had made southern Africa the most dangerous place in the world, in terms of violent crime, after Colombia and Chechnya. And an AIDS epidemic, caused largely by a genocidal government apathy and neglect – I remember Sean telling me, in 1983, how he hoped a disease would come along to wipe out all the blacks – is now predicted to wipe out a third of the adult population by 2015.

Perhaps I was either too gentle or too tough a soul to ever succumb completely to the karma of violence. Perhaps, back in those humid summer days when Sean was standing over my bed, with his smell of Clearasil facewash and his ironed black boxer shorts, trying to plant in me the spiritual kernel of what he was – perhaps on one of those another seed managed to blow into my soul. Perhaps it was a whiff of tender pollen on an afternoon breeze: even on the hottest afternoons in the dormitory, at five or so in the afternoon, a breath of air would come in through the open windows, bringing the scent of honeysuckle. Perhaps this seed came from my parents, who, for all their reluctance to show open outrage and fury, for all their abandonment of me to a darkness deeper than any I should have had to face at that age, kept saying to me: We love you. Keep believing in yourself. You will get through this.

When I myself reached Standard Ten, I never participated in the torture and abuse of the younger boys. I never, like two of my fellow students who were stationed in the Standard Six passage, made the little kids jump up and down in the nude and play dick-and-ball touch rugby in the passageways. I never punched them full-force in the chest or struck them with canes and athletics spikes; I never seized them and thrust them up into corners and threatened to bash out all the teeth in their mouth. But I cannot claim to be a hero. I never reported or spoke out against any abuse or bullying. I never looked at the juniors while they were being tormented, never offered them as much as a
commiserating shake of the head. On one occasion, so as not to appear a weakling in front of my peers, I did make a Standard Seven in my passage bend over for being disrespectful to me, and I hit him as hard as I could with a cricket bat, until he began to sob and beg me to stop. I remember that when I was done I went to the toilets and, with the door shut behind me, threw up the remains of that evening’s supper.

I never joined the South African Defence Force. At age nineteen, a student at the University of Cape Town, I joined the End Conscription Campaign and declared that I was a conscientious objector, that I would not fight for the supremacy of the white race. Along with many thousands of white men of my generation, I decided simply to ignore the call-up papers, to not show up at one of those train or bus stations where we supposed to shave our heads, heave our duffel bags onto our shoulders, and be transformed into killers. The penalties for refusing military service were six years’ prison, if they caught you. By that time, though, the laws had become virtually unenforceable.

I have said that the karma of violence was repetitious and unchanging, but that is not strictly true. By the time I reached matric, the so-called initiation rituals in my school were already markedly reduced in intensity, and soon after that, under the leadership of a new school principal, they were forbidden. After the transition to democracy in 1994, all forms of corporal punishment and bullying were outlawed in South African schools. The rest of the story of the South African transformation is well-known. Despite serious lingering problems, my nation is now, for the most part, at peace with itself. It is growing steadily more unified and prosperous, and the liveliest wars it fights now are those fought on the soccer fields, cricket pitches and rugby stadiums.

As I write this, summer has once again descended on Miami. Days so scalding that when I leave the air conditioning it feels like I have stepped into the mouth of a furnace give way to cool, fresh evenings lit up by thunderstorms. The poinciana trees are all in red, fiery bloom: another memory of home. My students are all on summer vacation. Before leaving, one of my favorite students ran up to me early one morning and told me excitedly how she had not only managed, with the help of a peer counselor, to resolve an argument she had been having
with a classmate, but that she had joined the local Amnesty
International club, and would be working next year to secure the
release of political prisoners in Cuba and the Middle East. Unlike on
earlier occasions, her open, innocent face, full of youthful
exuberance, did not provoke any jealousy in me. Instead, it inspired
hope.
Eight weeks, two days and approximately three hours after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I became an American citizen. Along with thirty other adults in a North Florida courtroom, I renounced all allegiance to my home country, swore to obey the U.S. laws and constitution, and promised to defend my new nation against all her enemies. The judge congratulated us on having struck a symbolic blow against Osama bin Laden. Choosing to become U.S. citizens when Al-Qaeda and the Taleban wanted Americans dead was in itself a powerful statement, he told us, an act of defiance. Rosy-cheeked, all-American-looking elementary schoolchildren, there because their teacher wanted them to see a positive image of U.S. citizenship after all the agony on the television screens, gave us hand-painted "Welcome to America" cards decorated with silver stars, of the kind given for good scores on a spelling test.

After the ceremony, everyone took photographs. The Daughters of the American Revolution had organized cookies and lemonade on the courtyard steps. A Syrian-American family, its wives and daughters all dressed in black full-length burqa, snapped pictures of a uniformed young Arab Marine holding up a paper stars-and-stripes. An old Korean couple filmed their daughter on camcorder singing an off-key version "The Star-Spangled Banner." Behind me, two older white men with thick Southern accents remarked on how sweet and poignant all of this was. America needed people like us with ties to the rest of the world, they agreed, to spread the message that America was a good country and not the decadent, infidel empire portrayed in the speeches of the radical imams.

I did not stay for longer than enough time to wave everyone good-bye, pick up a voter registration card, and mumble something about needing to feed a parking meter. I was all wound up inside, needing to get away and reflect on what had happened. The truth was that I had not expected to feel anything much at all during the ceremony, since my reasons for applying for citizenship were pragmatic rather than
idealistic and ideological. While I did not have any qualms with promising to abide by the democratic norms of the US constitution and legal system, my chief desire in obtaining a US passport was less to show my support for the American national civic philosophy than to achieve certain specific rights and privileges that were important to me: to be able to vote in elections, to be free of the threat of deportation if I ever had the misfortune to be charged with a crime, and, above all, to have the right to come and go as I pleased without risking being denied re-entry by a skeptical immigration officer.

Now, however, having gone through with this act of transformation, I found myself see-sawing between exhilaration and guilt, pride and shame, joy and a strange, inexplicable remorse. Walking back to my car past neat sprinkler-fed lawns, shady live oak trees and cute Southern-style clapboard houses and porches, I experienced a whole gamut of bewildering emotions. One moment I found myself exchanging greetings with an elderly black woman in her garden—curlers still in her hair, humming to herself and pruning a neat green hedge—and thinking: I absolutely love this country. Where else in the world can you find such cultural diversity, diligence, peace, warmth and kindness? The next moment I found myself remembering my home country, its gravel desert roads with its creaking windmills, its heartbreaking hope and political idealism, and the utter elation of that afternoon in 1990, when, a twenty-year-old anti-apartheid activist doing a summer job in Johannesburg, I walked out onto the street for my lunch break to find people crying, laughing and dancing, and I saw the newspaper headlines announcing the beginning of constitutional negotiations and the release of Nelson Mandela. How could I ever give up allegiance to all of that?

The rest of that day, I continued to ponder the fact that I was now officially a dual citizen of the USA and South Africa. It occurred to me that this legally and politically ambiguous position—the only reason that I am even allowed to simultaneously hold both passports is that both governments are willing to ignore my citizenship in the other’s country—in fact generated some mixed emotions on not just the act of naturalization itself, but on a range of issues and events. In particular, as I recalled what the judge and the spectators had said
about my becoming a citizen so soon after the September 11 attacks, I recalled the complex ambiguities and contradictions of my reaction on that awful day when America first woke up to the fact that it was at war.

It gave me some pain to admit it to myself, especially when I glanced down at my new crisp green Certificate of Naturalization with its fancy gold lettering, but my emotions on that clear September morning when I turned on the television in my living-room and heard the television anchorman about the crashes into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon had not been exactly those of a loyal, patriotic American citizen. My very first impulse had in fact been to feel a stunned admiration for the military audacity of the operation, as well for the brilliant symbolism of the chosen targets, which, as an erstwhile third world nationalist, I immediately recognized as the key emblems of US financial and military dominance. Although nothing as crass and offensive as “America deserved this” crossed my mind, I do remember thinking that there was something just and appropriate, if upsetting, about the fact that America now, too, was feeling the suffering of the rest of the world. Now America has become just like South Africa, I remember thinking. Now your home country has arrived in your adopted one.

As that morning passed, and as I watched people dive to their deaths from the top floors of the burning towers, saw the towers collapse on courageous firemen, and heard about the terrified passengers calling their loved ones from the hijacked flights, my mood did change. Now, along with all my American friends with whom I spoke by phone, I felt intense horror, fury and outrage, and no admiration or justice to speak of. How could they do this to us, I asked my friends, and the question genuinely puzzled me in a way that I never had been confused by the restaurant bombs or limpet mines of the African National Congress’s armed struggle, which were clearly directed at obtaining civil rights. During the days and weeks following the attacks, I joined my American colleagues in a candlelight vigil for the dead, commiserated by phone with old New York friends from the early 90s, when I lived in the city, and generally shared with everyone
around me in the anguish of trying to come to terms with how our lives had changed.

Even then, though, there was a part of me that stayed separate from the community of which I found myself a part. It was not just I felt attacked when, a few days after the attacks, one graduate student in the program where I was studying blamed the events on the fact that the country was so open to immigrants, including those with anti-American attitudes and beliefs. Nor was it just that I, unlike everyone else I knew, had to deal with telephone calls from my former comrades in the anti-apartheid struggle who informed me that 9/11 was a nothing less than a noble blow against oppression and injustice, and that the casualties were utterly trivial and insignificant next to the numbers dead, wounded and tortured with US collusion in Guatemala, Palestine, Lebanon, and Vietnam. More than any of these factors, I think my sense of separation derived from a continuing experience of dual vision or perspective, of watching everything through two lenses at the same time: as both a South African and an American, both an insider and an outsider.

Thus, as I watched the replays of the police and media helicopters whirring around in the Manhattan sky, on the one hand I found myself pained to see the skyline that had once graced my Brooklyn bedroom window so brutally transformed. On the other hand, though, I found myself taken back to the days of war in the African townships, when helicopters circled the burning barricades, and policemen and journalists snapped pictures of the rioters from the air. When I read in the newspapers about the bodies being pulled out of the rubble, charred, unrecognizable, faces and chests crushed in, I thought both about my walks down that area of Wall Street, stopping to buy pastrami sandwiches in the Korean deli, and also about apartheid's assassins taking Truth and Reconciliation Commission officials to burned out car wrecks in gorges off lonely farm roads, sifting through the mud and ash for their victims' remains. When I saw George W. Bush proclaim that the United States was a "beacon of freedom," and that this is why Al-Qaeda had chosen to attack us, I both felt as if, at some level, this could be true, but also as if I could have been listening to that old white-supremacist fox P.W. Botha telling me that the fight between his
government and Mandela's African National Congress was a battle between Western democracy and Marxist totalitarianism, between the forces of light and goodness and those of an unimaginable darkness.

Finally, as the war on terror devolved into the PATRIOT act, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the detentions without trial and torture at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, I increasingly began to feel that life and time were playing tricks with me, and that having fled one violence-ridden colonial police state, I now found myself in another. The more I looked at the America of John Ashcroft, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, the more parallels I saw to the culture I grew up in: there was the same religiosity, the same fanatical moral certitude, the same cavalier disregard for dark-skinned lives and property on the one hand and for the United Nations, international law and global opinion on the other. Even the pictures of Abu Ghraib powerfully evoked my childhood: I was reminded both of the stories that detainees told after being released from jail, and of my own experiences in a militaristic government boarding school, where torture was practiced as a way of hardening young boys and preparing them for military service. However, even in the midst of all these recollections of the past, I was well aware that there was one major difference between my new country and my old one. While the old apartheid leaders had enough financial and military power to ruin an entire region of the world, and, by promoting civil wars in neighboring states, largely succeeded in doing so, America under George W. Bush had enough military and economic firepower to end all civilized human life as we knew it.

There is, of course, a high degree of risk in viewing one cultural and historical situation in terms of another. Especially when one or both sets of circumstances weigh heavily on one’s heart, there is a danger of making false comparisons and generalizations, of falling prey to traumatic but unrealistic fears, of concluding the worst simply because one has already seen and lived through immense horror – of imagining, the way that many Holocaust survivors do, that Auschwitz is forever closely upon us. On the other hand, survivors of war, totalitarianism and terrorism also offer unique insights not readily accessible to those who have grown up, in the memorable phrase from Conrad’s *Heart of
Darkness, "moored with two good addresses... with a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another." Salman Rushdie, in his essay "Imaginary Homelands," compares the expatriate vision to the fragmented and limited, yet strangely revealing, image in a broken mirror shard. To extend this metaphor, perhaps the perspective of a migrant who is also a refugee from war and violence is like a reflection in a fragment of one of those trick looking-glasses found in funhouses. On the face of it, this vision is highly distorted, yet sometimes in its craziness it may reveal disturbing truths, as when we look at ourselves in a play mirror and notice our subtle yet real physical flaws.

It is hard to overstate the horror of racial civil war and its consequences that lies buried, to greater or lesser extents, in the psyches of all South Africans of my generation and the one which preceded it. This awareness is, as the psychologists say is the case with any trauma, written at some level onto our very bodies: a tight, stubborn knot in the pit of our abdomens, spasms of tension knotted into the musculature of our shoulder blades. It is a realization born of the fact that all but the very youngest of us have lived our formative years under the threat of what most political analysts and commentators considered, until the miraculous transition of 1990-94, one of the most brutal and destructive conflagrations on the planet. In my own case, the awareness is hard to articulate, but swirls around my mind in a hodge-podge of vivid memories from childhood: the corpses of Mozambican refugees, half-devoured by lions, found by game rangers in the national park where I grew up; the television images of white people trussed-up, with gasoline-soaked tire bands around their necks, slowly burning to death in paroxysms of agony, having been unfortunate enough to be caught in a black township after the police shot protesting schoolchildren; the knowledge that the peaceful green, crocodile-infested river that flowed near my parents’ house had acted as a police morgue for human rights’ activists’ bodies.

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Initially, when I arrived in New York City on that snowy Saturday afternoon in January 1994, with my big green backpack on my shoulders and my tourist visa stamped in my passport, I was struck by how different everything seemed from what I was used to: how culturally harmonious and tranquil, how safe and orderly. Back in Cape Town and Johannesburg at the time, people were dying every weekend in mysterious anonymous “third force” attacks aimed at wrecking the constitutional negotiations. Invisible machine guns opened fire on downtown bus stops from passing minibuses. Hooded assailants burst into pubs and churches and tossed in hand grenades, leaving the congregants’ blood, brains and intestines plastered all over the walls. Armed gangs stepped onto train carriages and hacked all the passengers to death; it was impossible, in those days, to step on a train in Johannesburg or Pretoria without feeling a vague spasm of fear, a faint pang of nausea.

By contrast, New York City, and by extension America itself, seemed to me, in those halcyon pre-September 11 days, a veritable refuge of preternatural safety and security. Here was a major city where I could walk around the center of town after clubbing in the early hours of the morning and not have to worry about getting a knife in my back on the steps of the 14th Street subway station. Here was a metropolis of eight million people, many of them poor and desperate, where, in summer, I could sleep in my bedroom of my Brooklyn brownstone with the windows open, listening to the chirping of crickets from the yard, without having to be concerned about burglars swinging a hammer into my skull so as to be able to make off with the television and the few dollars in cash stashed in my bedside drawer.

It took much longer for me to begin to see the similarities between my new country and my old one – especially the similarities which were not self-evident to begin with, like the international hiphop fashions in places like Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant and the history of racial segregation in the American South. The first thing I remember noticing, in this respect, was the staggering lack of international news coverage on US television. In South Africa, where every political and economic development in Europe, Asia or the US had a direct impact on our own economy, news about what happened in foreign places frequently dominated the nightly broadcasts. By contrast, I
found that the major US networks focused mostly on robberies, rescued pets, fires and celebrity dramas.

At first, I found this difference refreshing. My American friends and colleagues, some of whom had traveled abroad and observed this same phenomenon, were inclined to see this in terms of American exceptionalism: America was, they observed, a nation founded on an isolationist ideal, and, blessed by ample resources and surrounded by two expansive oceans, it had had, apart from the occasional venture into foreign military interventions, the luxury for of being able to ignore the rest of the world’s troubles. I was willing to accept this explanation, and in the beginning I immersed myself with gusto in the narrow but novel world of the personal: a life where eating leisurely breakfasts with friends and reading novels and poetry could be as important as fighting hatred and injustice; a social context in which meditating, going for walks and studying creative writing could feel as legitimate as protesting beach segregation or mass forced removals.

In time a new thought occurred to me, though. Was the blackout of the rest of the world — the sense, whenever I turned on the television, that I was living on a moonbase, with the rest of the planet incomprehensibly foreign territory that did not deserve much scrutiny — really so different to apartheid South Africa? One of the most striking things about the old South Africa was how insulated it was, not from Europe or North America, but from the rest of Africa, whether the Africa that pulsed and thrived in the townships, shantytowns and villages that surrounded the white farms and suburbs or the countries that lay to the north of the country’s borders. While it was true that South African newspapers and television were full of stories about America, Western Europe, Japan and China, events in places like Zambia, Botswana and Khayelitsha went all but unreported.

In the Clinton years of relative peace and prosperity, I could put such insights on the backburner — could still persuade myself that my new country played a benign role in the world, more like the Athens than the Sparta of old, more like the African National Congress government, which uses its relative wealth and power to exert a “soft” regional leadership, than like the old racist tyrants. However, in the
aftermath of September 11, and in the wake of the turn in US foreign policy towards aggressive unilateralism and pre-emptive war, this view proved more and more difficult to sustain.

What, for example, was I to make of the video of Nick Berg released on the Internet, screaming in agony as his captors sawed his head off with machetes? On the one hand, like my fellow Americans, I could only react with an outraged horror, bemoan the sheer monstrosity and evil of an act so inhuman and savage. On the other hand, I had to pinch myself to remember that I was not back in the 1980s, with Winnie Mandela proclaiming that liberation would come through matchboxes and necklaces, and young anti-apartheid comrades forcing people who broke the consumer boycott to eat up whole boxes of laundry detergent. Back in South Africa, white politicians used incidents like these to prove that dialogue and negotiations with Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress were suicidal and foolish. As late as 1989, F.W. de Klerk was still demanding that Mandela renounce violence before negotiations begun. Were Al-Qaeda really just criminals and terrorists, worth locking up and killing but not or thinking about as real human beings with legitimate grievances? If so, what precisely made them different from the anti-apartheid leaders of the 1980s, who, while not exactly organizing mass murder of civilians, at the very least consciously overlooked major human rights atrocities?\(^9\)

Or what am I to think, as I write this, of a report in this week’s Economist,\(^10\) describing the modus operandi of US troops in Iraq? According to this journal – hardly a rabid left-wing, anti-American tabloid – American forces drive around Ramadi these days with bilingual bumper stickers on their Humvee jeeps warning motorists: “Keep 50m or deadly force will be applied.” Since any vehicle could potentially be a car bomb, US troops fire on any car that does not clear out of their way, frequently killing civilian drivers. Since insurgents set off

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\(^9\) For a discussion of the African National Congress’s war crimes, see the final report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Reference this.

\(^10\) “When Deadly Force Bumps Into Hearts and Minds.” The Economist, 29 Dec 2004
<http://www.economist.com/World/africa/displayStory.cfm?story_id=3524840>
Improvised Explosive Devices (IED’s) using cellphones, they also kill anyone handling a cellphone near an explosion. “It’s kind of a shame, because we kill lots of innocent people,” an unnamed lieutenant told the newspaper. Brutal, deadly force against civilians by uniformed American troops is not something that, in the post-Vietnam era, I would ordinarily associate with the world’s leading democracy. It is, however, something I strongly recall from my childhood and adolescence, although then as now, I learned about it from reading foreign publications – back then, my sources were Time, Newsweek and The Washington Post.

Or finally, what to say about red-state Americans’ mass endorsement of the Bush Administration’s Middle East policies in the recent and closely-fought, historic elections? The media here were full of home-grown theories about an antigay evangelical backlash and about John Kerry being simply too wealthy and too closely associated with the educated, liberal state of Massachusetts. I, on the other hand, was convinced that I was simply reliving the 1987 whites-only South African election when voters, terrified by the township violence and atrocities, voted overwhelmingly for conservative parties that were “tough on security” and opposed to anything but the most superficial political reform. During the recent US election campaign a South African newspaper suggested that perhaps, since the outcome stood to affect the whole world, people living on all seven continents should have a chance to vote in it, much as black South Africans should have had a chance to make their voices heard in 1987. If the world’s dark-skinned, impoverished masses had cast their vote last November, neither George W. Bush nor John Kerry is likely to have won, but rather a candidate like Nelson Mandela, India’s Sonia Ghandi or Brazilian President Luiz Lula da Silva. All of these, while rejecting murder, medieval patriarchy and religious fanaticism, would almost certainly support at least some of Osama bin Laden’s stated goals (whether genuine or opportunistically-appropriated). These include, to list only the most obvious: the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, elections in US-backed dictatorships like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and the end of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.
For good or ill, the essence of my South African-American perspective on the war on terror—my limited vision, if you will, in the curved play mirror of my own history—is a straightforward one. It amounts to the insight that the exclusive reliance on military force, when a group or nation confronts a political problem, is a recipe for catastrophe and decline. In South Africa’s case, the results of P.W. Botha’s repressive policies in the 1980s, after an initial period of relative stability due to increased security measures, were a rise in the unemployment rate to close to forty percent, a near halving in the value of the national currency, hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths both at home and in neighboring states, and a culture of endemic violence that has left South Africa with the highest peacetime homicide rate in the world. It could have been much worse. In J.M. Coetzee’s apocalyptic novel Life and Times of Michael K. South Africa has fragmented into a chaos of marauding soldiers and rebels. People starve; the middle-class get their homes appropriated by troops; and concentration camps full of skeletal inmates dot the African landscape.

Whatever the evil and demonic qualities of Osama bin Laden and of the radical Islamist movement, the political energies feeding the current terrorist war against America are clear from the opinion polls showing strongly anti-American attitudes in most countries of the world, and especially in Muslim nations. Unless substantial policy change, equivalent to the South African white minority’s decision to grant black South Africans the vote, addresses the concerns of these ordinary women and men, the war on terror is likely to remain a pointless and dangerous enterprise. At best it can lead to the kind of tense, angry standoff that we have at the moment, where soldiers are dying in their hundreds, whole vast tracts of the globe are essentially off-limits to US passport holders and we await, month by month, the next September 11. At worst, it could lead to global nuclear and biological terror followed by a devastating US retaliation. This outcome, as Nationalist Prime Minister John Vorster once said in relation to the South African political situation, is too ghastly to contemplate.

This time, I do not plan to leave my country of residence and citizenship. Unlike many of my liberal and progressive friends and
colleagues, I have made no enquiring calls to the Canadian consulate; I have not even seriously considered returning home to South Africa, to the progressive democracy I helped fight for. If there is one thing recent developments in the United States have taught me, it is that there is no fleeing right-wing militarism or the ravages of violence. Rather, what is required is more of what I did fifteen years ago: more speaking out against mass insanity and injustice; more civil disobedience, marches and sit-ins, more standing on the street corners with placards drawing commuters’ attention to the costs of their government’s imperialism.

From today’s standpoint, a return to the international mood after the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of communism seems to require nothing less than a miracle, the ascent to power of women or men of the caliber of F.W. de Klerk or Mikhail. Probably it requires a good deal more suffering: only after years of mutual agony did a peace settlement in my home country become politically acceptable. However, if South Africa illustrates the perils and tragedy of rigid, blinkered wars on terrorism, so does it demonstrate the possibility of peaceful transformation and hope. Ending the current face-off may need a miracle, but South Africa just emerged from one in 1990-94.
AGAINST FORGIVENESS

In these troubled times of wars between civilizations, videotaped beheadings, and cold, cheerful picking-off of kids by sawed-off shotgun in the school library, I have been increasingly been losing patience with the popular spectacle of “reconciliation,” “letting go of past wrongs,” “compassionate understanding” and “forgiveness.”

Don’t get me wrong. I have nothing against small-scale, individual mercy for accidents and transgressions in the mild-to-moderate range. When your son neglects to sort the laundry, say, and ends up coloring all your favorite clothes brilliant scarlet, I think the appropriate response is probably to forgive him — after, of course, some appropriate drama theatrics, such as tearing out clumps of your own hair, and asking him how he would feel if by mistake you included his CD collection in Tuesday’s garbage recycling. Likewise, when your spouse or partner leaves a hairdryer blowing on a damp mattress, as my cousin did recently, and burns down the entire house and all its contents, it certainly makes sense, initially, to make use of all the ashes lying around to wear with sackcloth as you scream and stab your fists into the air. However, once you’ve got your feelings of grief and rage out of your system, it is probably best to let go and move on.

No, it is not relatively mundane pardons like these that make my skin itch and the nape of my neck break out in a pink, pocked rash. In fact, I would be somewhat hypocritical if I did have a problem with these, since I am really the world’s worst pushover when it comes to apologies for small things. My friends, family, colleagues and even students know that they stand a good chance of being able to pull almost anything on me simply by acting all contrite and repentant afterwards. This has not just caused me problems in my social life, where I have put up for longer than I should have with certain individuals whom I should have told much earlier than I did to disappear from my line of vision. It also had the potential to transform my life as a high school teacher into hell on earth, until I learned the hard way that the only way to get along productively with
teenagers was to be as unyielding as the bunkers they build to withstand nuclear bombs.

Nevertheless, I view these merciful tendencies in myself as mere ordinary human weakness – eminently forgivable in themselves, like my tendency to drift off while driving and overlook red traffic lights. Nor, I must confess, do I particularly have a problem with the kind of forgiveness we think of when we usually use the term: the letting-go of deep, profound hurts and the absolution of people who have done us severe harm. I am sure that, in moderation, such “letting-go” of pain can be salubrious for most people. Moreover, I have no doubt that for some it can even be healthy in excessive quantities, the way certain rare individuals apparently get energized by rattlesnake bites.

What does get me annoyed, though, is Forgiveness with a capital “F” – the elevation of amnesty to one of the most lauded moral values of our time. It seems that once upon a time the promotion of forgiveness was safely confined to dull sermons from the church pulpit. Nowadays, however, there are institutes for reconciliation and forgiveness, nonprofit organizations working to help people forgive those who have hurt them, and entire clearinghouses for academic research showing that forgiveness lowers blood pressure, leads to a longer lifespan, and even can help you pay off the house mortgage faster (because someone who has let go of their grudges is less likely to binge spend). In short, forgiveness has received a major promotion. From a lowly Christian virtue, honored more in the breach than in the observance, it has become nothing less than the rallying cry of the postmodern, psychoanalyzed, urbane middle class.

Anyone who doubts me on this last point need only head for that repository of contemporary philosophical reflection and guidance, the self-help section of their local bookstore. For instance, when I bring up the home page of my own favorite book retailer, Amazon.com, and type in the search term “Forgiveness,” I get a list of 33,985 titles, almost all of which seem, based on my examination of the first hundred or so hits, to advocate the granting of absolution to wrong-doers. Titles range from No Future Without Forgiveness, to Freedom Through Forgiveness, to the somewhat misleadingly-named When Forgiveness Doesn’t Make Sense, which apparently does not limit or qualify the need
for forgiveness but rather instructs its readers on how to show mercy when it is difficult to do so.

Thirty-four thousand! I cannot even conceive of how many books that is; to me it seems enough to fill a small palace or sink a barge. By contrast, "Rainforest Destruction," in my opinion one of the most urgent and frightening practical issues facing the planet, received a piddling 4,651 hits - barely enough to make a decent bonfire on the White House lawn if the polluters and exploiters ever manage to stage a fascist military coup in Washington, D.C.

Or take that other staple of the people who are rearing our children and installing in them a framework of moral beliefs and values - daytime television. I cannot claim to be an expert on this medium, since I work for a living and do not subscribe to cable, and in any case have always found it less fun to listen to other people's problems than to complain about my own. However, on the occasions when I have watched talk shows like Oprah, Montell Williams and Dr. Phil, I have been struck by the pressure placed on contestants to forgive those who have wronged them - philandering husbands, neglectful boyfriends and the like - and to reconcile in public, in front of audiences of millions. There is even a talk show named Forgive and Forget, which is dedicated to promoting forgiveness, and where teary-eyed, merciful victims bestow bouquets on those who have done them wrong.

Or take yet a third instance of the forgiveness cult at work in our society: the twelve-step group, whose fourth to ninth steps demand that adherents make an honest accounting of their flaws, and then make amends to those they have wronged. In my personal circle of hell, the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community of Miami/Fort Lauderdale, twelve-step support groups have, in recent years, become as common and tenacious as coconut palms, and the attendant apologies have proliferated like sea grapes. While no doubt some of these acts of contrition are legitimate, others strike me as simply silly. As I write this, I have just got off the phone with a good friend, who in turn recently received a phone call from his recovering-sex-addict ex-boyfriend. This person called, as part of his recovery program, to apologize for using my friend's computer to view porn sites, and thus infecting it with spyware and adware. "Don't worry about it," my
friend told him. “Trust me, I have contributed enough spyware to my hard drive myself.” Nevertheless, the ex-lover thanked my friend at length for having found it in his heart to forgive him, and told him that this forgiveness gave him hope that he might one day be able to form healthy sexual and emotional relationships.

Is all this cultural outpouring of penitence, amnesty and gratitude healthy? I, for one, find it more than slightly distasteful. To me, it smacks of cheap talk and bleeding-heart liberalism, of dangerous good intentions and vapid self-indulgence. Most of what passes for forgiveness in our culture strikes me as lazy and hollow, there to make the parties feel superficially better about themselves and about what happened between them, rather than to deal with the hurt in any substantial way. Of the remainder — of gut-wrenching, heartfelt, soul-shaking forgiveness — a good portion strikes me as being as premature and ill-advised, as likely to lead to victims’ re-traumatization and perpetrators’ complacency as it is to genuine growth and healing.

I have no doubt that in certain exceptional circumstances forgiveness can be a joy and a balm to the soul: a flowering of sudden and surprising grace, like when a flower blooms for one night a year. However, these rare benefits hardly justify forgiveness’s promotion as a universal panacea. I am not saying that forgiveness, when it occurs, should not be celebrated. However, it is important to keep these things in perspective. Forgiveness can be a boon to a human life, but it is hardly necessary or even important for a human being’s health, sanity and success. Rather than making it seem as if a human life is limited or incomplete without forgiveness, psychologists, do-gooders and all the myriad advocates of peace-and-God’s-love would be much better advised to reassure people that there is nothing at all wrong with not forgiving, and that it as possible to live a perfectly harmonious and respectable life without forgiving one’s violators as it is to be content without a sculpted gymnasium body, a gleaming red Lamborghini, or a tested IQ of 163.

The first and most important fact about forgiveness of serious hurts and wrongs is that it is extraordinarily difficult. Indeed, by an
emotional law as merciless as that of gravity, the more profound and brutal the harm that needs to be forgiven, the harder it is to say sincerely, “It’s nothing. Don’t worry. You’re forgiven.” Even forgiveness’s defenders acknowledge, to a point, this uncomfortable fact. On the talk shows and in the self-help literature, discussion of how hard forgiveness can be typically serve as preambles to sermons about how, like swimming or weight training, it will bountifully repay any effort invested in it. What the shamans of forgiveness and prophets of pardon almost without exception fail to discuss, though, is how the difficulty of absolution, especially when yoked to the pervasive pressure to pardon our trespassers, frequently leads to people to lie about their degree both of contrition and of mercy.

On the face of it, such dishonesty may not be a bad thing. After all, human beings fib and dissimulate all the time. We tell our boss that she looks lovely in a red suit, and we assure our haggard, ashen-faced friend in the hospital room that we have absolutely no doubt that he will soon get rid of the cancer in his lymph nodes. Why should things be any different in the realm of forgiveness? Isn’t it better, in the end, to pretend to be sorry about a misdeed so as to soothe the hurt persons’ feelings, and to act as though we hold no grudges against those who have harmed us? Surely the alternative to bogus mercy and goodwill is precisely the honest expression of hatred that produces insane wars of vengeance and blood-letting?

Perhaps so. Perhaps fake forgiveness is not such a bad thing -- if we place little value on genuine emotional intimacy with our fellow human beings, or on the resolution of serious long-term problems and injustices. However, as Joseph Conrad put it in Heart of Darkness, “[t]here is a taint of death, a hint of mortality in lies.” Lies, because they cosset us into self-delusion and therefore obliviousness of the world, lead us little by little towards death, which is the ultimate lack of awareness of our surroundings. In addition, phony absolution, when it rewards insufficient or contrived contrition, fails to hold people accountable for their moral failings and thus perpetuates bad behavior. I, for one, have never been able to be comfortable lying about forgiveness; the dishonesty irritates me, like an ill-fitting woolen cloak. I would much rather have someone say to
me honestly that he hates and despises me, and let me make up my mind how to deal with that inconvenient fact, than to realize later that I was fooled and deceived by someone’s apparent generosity and kindness.

One of my own formative experiences in relation to forgiveness — in fact, I might even say the incident that early on set my heart against the very idea of forgiveness, and made me a lifelong skeptic on the topic — occurred when I was twelve years old. At the time I was attending a government boarding school, where I was being horrendously bullied, sexually abused and tortured by a seventeen-year-old prefect. Elsewhere, I have discussed in some detail the sheer horror, terror and rage provoked by this abuse, which was reminiscent of what was done to Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. I have also described my parents’ reaction, which was to provide me with lots of love, support and understanding, while keeping secret their outraged confrontations with the school administration so as to avoid placing me at further risk. However, what I wish to focus on here is what happened on a luminous Monday morning smelling of dust, honeysuckle and bougainvillea blossom, when my father handed pulled a packet of dried buffalo meat out of his jacket pocket and handed it to my principal tormenter, saying:

“I’m not one to hold onto grudges, John. But do me a favor, hey? Go easy on my kid. There’s no need to give him hidings for every little trivial thing.”

It is, of course, impossible to say that my father was lying when he told John that he held no grudges against him. It is, at least, theoretically plausible that he had, in his heart, truly adopted his and my mother’s Catholic mantra of unconditional love and forgiveness: Jesus telling us to forgive our persecutors seventy-seven times and asking God to forgive the soldiers banging nails into his hands and feet. Nevertheless, the awkwardness of my father’s tone that morning, and the way he tensed up his shoulders and wiped the sweat off his face with a hanky from his front shirt pocket, belied the literal content of his words. At age twelve, watching him and listening to him, I was not fooled. What I was, though, was wounded: a stab right into the tendons of my heart, from a cold icy blade. It is no exaggeration to say that a part of me died that day. I felt small, helpless and humiliated; one of the few remaining pillars of truth and strength in my life seemed to
have crumbled. Of course the appeasement also did nothing to improve John’s treatment of me; since he now knew that my parents were a source of delicious snacks, he regularly began to arrive at my locker and search it for tasty treats.

Phony forgiveness makes the spirit recoil and the stomach turn. Because it inevitably involves some level of betrayal and endangerment of self or loved-ones, our protective instincts make us turn away from it instinctively, the way we would from a brilliantly-colored mushroom or a hissing snake. Different people have different thresholds as to what constitutes both false contrition and both false forgiveness, and would make different judgment calls about specific instances. However, when it is recognized for what it really is, the negative reaction to false forgiveness is all but universal.

How else to read the healthy political skepticism when a politician like Bill Clinton climbs on a podium in Uganda and apologizes for slavery while simultaneously signing a bill that forces African-American welfare into menial, underpaid jobs that closely resemble the kind of labor performed by her slave ancestors? While not all media commentators were immediately alert to the hypocrisy, the Black leadership in this country lost no time excoriating Clinton for his banality. True repentance for the legacy of slavery, as they pointed out, would require more than polite, sweet-sounding words.

Or how to explain the remaining healthy skepticism in my home country of South Africa regarding the “deal with the devil” that was made at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where torturers, murderers and thugs were allowed to go free in exchange for making a clean breast of their crimes? Prominent members of the Sweetness-and-Light contingent, like Archbishop Tutu, eagerly trumpeted the TRC as a model for other countries striving for post-war reconciliation. However, well-known victims’ families, such as the relatives of murdered Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, refused to back the killers’ amnesty applications, and opinion polls revealed a deep reservoir of ongoing suspicion about the value of the whole TRC exercise among the South African population in general.

Or finally, how to explain my own reaction when I recently received, in the mail, a catalogue from one of my oldest friends? The
catalogue was for an exhibition entitled “the ‘f’ word: images of forgiveness,” and my friend sent it to me, among other reasons, as a way to celebrate our own reconciliation after years of avoiding contact with each other because of differences over what we wanted from the friendship. The exhibition collects photographs and essays from both victims and perpetrators of atrocities living in war zones, and spans a wide assortment of geographical locations, acts, and experiences. It also includes a number of strikingly different perspectives on the topic of forgiveness: both perspectives in favor of mercy and those, like Mariane Pearl, who regard forgiveness as “too lame an answer for extreme situations.” Of all the essays in this collection, though, the one that stuck in my mind – the one that lodged in the fibers of my psyche, like a recalcitrant pebble, pricking and goading me long after I put the catalogue down and turned off my bedside lamp to go to sleep – was one by Linda Biehl, the mother of Amy Biehl, the American exchange student who was stoned and stabbed to death in a black South African township in August 1993.

It took me a while to figure out what it was about Linda Biehl’s essay that bothered me so much. Certainly part of it was that I was familiar with the case from the time I was living in Cape Town and had mourned, along with much of the city, those striking images of her being pulled by her car by gangsters affiliated to the Pan Africanist Congress, chanting their slogans of “One Settler, One Bullet” as they plunged their knives into her and clobbered her with bricks. Certainly, too, I found the symbolism of Linda’s actions disturbing: the fact that she had chosen not to contest the killers’ claims, in front of the postapartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that their crimes were motivated by politics rather than hate. This allowed them to receive a complete amnesty for the murder. Then there was her and Peter Biehl’s decision to set up an anti-crime foundation in their daughter’s name, and to employ Easy Nofomela and Ntobeko Peni, two of their daughter’s killers, as township youth workers. This decision, along with Linda and Peter Biehl’s public statements about how they had completely reconciled with their daughter’s killers, had

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11 See http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/?id=13
prompted some ridicule in the South African press when another of the killers, Mongezi Manquina, was found guilty of raping a mentally retarded 18-year-old woman shortly after his release.

Certain phrases in Biehl’s description of her reconciliation with her daughter’s killers kept coming back to me, gnawing at me: “It wasn’t about pity or blame, but about understanding. We wanted to make things better.” And later, describing taking the group of killers out to dinner: “[W]e didn’t ask about the past. We were all looking to the future.” And, finally, in the third to last paragraph: “I’ve grown fond of these boys... They’re like my own kids.” Finally it came to me. What about your own kid? What about the fact that, battered and bruised now, and sealed up in earth, she can no longer be taken out to dinner by you, or benefit from your love?

The irony, only partially acknowledged by forgiveness’s apologists, is that the supposed “negative” emotions of hatred and resentment flow directly from their positive counterpoint, love. Indeed, facing the abuse of one’s loved-ones, it is hard to imagine how any human being could not feel outrage, hatred and vehemence at the perpetrator of such cruelty – or why they would wish not to. Human nature demands such a response to cruelty and injustice; perpetrators, for their own moral good, need to be exposed to these real consequences of their actions. In the end everyone is cheated when, out of guilt, cowardice or dogmatism, victims fail to give these forms of unforgiveness their due.

At this point a possible objection to my argument arises. Granted, you might say, that counterfeit forgiveness is destructive. Granted even that fury and abhorrence are necessary parts of the journey to exoneration, to be honored and accepted rather than denied and repressed. However, what about deep, voluntary forgiveness, arrived at after painstaking acknowledgement of hurt and pain? What about perpetrators who are genuinely repentant and work hard to show their sorrow and regret? Surely this kind of forgiveness is something worthy of ardent pursuit?

Perhaps so. Perhaps, like scaling El Capitan’s cliff face in Yosemite National Park or doing a double Ph.D. in classical Hebrew and
linear algebra, true forgiveness holds a veritable treasure trove of secret rewards for those that are willing to practice it. However, like other challenging and difficult activities, even substantial, authentic forgiveness holds some grave risks. Perhaps the most important of these, for victims, is re-traumatization: the repetition of a previous abusive experience and the compounding of the attendant emotional and psychological damage.

In 1992, I moved into a household where several of the female members happened to all be involved in the establishment of a Cape Town battered women’s shelter. On evenings and weekends, these activists and counselors spent long hours upstairs in a small Victorian house, speaking to women whose husbands were regularly beating them up. A few of these battered women did, in fact, take advantage of the services offered by the shelter, which included economic support, accommodation, police protection and job training. However, the majority of them went back several times to their husbands whenever a sincere apology was offered for the offending behavior. “But he really means it,” the women would tell my friends. “I know he loves me -- I can feel it.”

These women were not false or insincere in their forgiveness. Neither were they cavalier in their granting of mercy, or about their decisions to move back in with their spouses. Many of them had worked hard in counseling to build personal power and self-esteem; some of them had even called in mediators to try to resolve the sources of conflict between themselves and their spouses. In these tragic cases, or at least so my friends and housemates saw it, the sheer momentum of these unhealthy relationships was simply too much to overcome. Every effort at reconciliation, however carefully planned, simply ended up producing more swollen eyes, bleeding mouths and aching souls.

Over the years, various friends and therapists have, on occasion, asked me whether I wanted to contact John and confront him with the consequences of what he did to me. Perhaps we could sit around a table in a room with a therapist or counselor and discuss what he did all those years ago: the machines he built to deliver electric shocks to our prepubescent genitalia, the beatings with pillowslips filled with athletics spikes. Probably he would tell me that now, no longer an immature, testosterone-wired thug, he is truly sorry for his actions.
Perhaps he would offer to make amends: join a high school anti-bullying program, perhaps, or write a letter of apology to all his former victims in the local newspaper. We could shake hands on it and, if the spirit moved me, I could tell them that I had forgiven him.

There is certainly something appealing about this imaginary scenario, something empowering, in the manner of a Hollywood ending where justice is finally done, and the erstwhile enemies ride off together into the sunset. In real life, though the prospect of meeting John again — skinny, beady-eyed, pasty-faced John who smelled of Clearasil facewash and cheap deodorant — and talking to him about what he did to me fills me with an intense, almost disabling displeasure and anxiety. I think I would, to tell the truth, find it hard to contain myself if I met him. In general, I am not inclined to physical violence. With John, however, I fear I would not be able to stop myself attacking him with everything at my disposal, clouting him with furniture, fists and shoes, trying to knock out his teeth and covering his body with bruises the way he once battered mine. I have cannot imagine that any of this would do me any good, except in the sense of providing me with a visceral but short-lived satisfaction about finally being physically big enough to hit him back. Afterwards, I think I would feel ashamed all over again. I cannot imagine that it would be a positive or healing experience.

Recently, while talking to an old friend who lived through that eighth-grade dormitory with me in 1983, I received news that one of John’s friends and cohorts had shot himself in the head after an argument with his wife. When that happened, I ruminated for a short while about the lost opportunity to confront this man and perhaps forgive him for the mock hanging he organized one night in the matric passage, where the junior boys’ penises were first burnt with cigarette lighters before nooses made out of sheets were tied around their necks. Then, driving home one night on the freeway and thinking back over that experience, it came to me. I did not have any regrets about this man’s death. In fact, the world felt like a fundamentally safer place with him gone: no longer would I have to tense and turn around when I ran into him on visits home at the mall near my parents’ house, as I had done on several occasions during adulthood. My only regret was that I
could not have had some role, perhaps via international telephone call, in encouraging him to pull the trigger. "Here we have the death penalty," he told us all those years ago, and laughed when several of my terrified friends urinated on their own legs. In my fantasy, before killing himself, he would find my name and number in the international White Pages, and would call me seeking forgiveness for his earthly sins. However, I would refuse to provide him with any final comforts. Echoing his earlier statement, I would have said, "You deserve the death penalty," and I would have egged him in my fantasy I would have applauded and cracked open a bottle of my favorite champagne.

For a few people, discussion, processing, forgiveness and reconciliation may be appropriate and constructive ways to overcome trauma. For many others, including myself, it is simply too ambitious a project. For us, it is better to know our own limits and stay within them. Contrary to what the love gurus tell us, there are productive alternatives to forgiveness that do not involve remaining "trapped" in anger and hatred. These include: harnessing rage and resentment in the service of art; plowing one’s energy and outrage into human rights activism or social work; and working, in therapy or elsewhere, on simply accepting the reality of what happened without needing to fix anything about it. In addition it is possible to simply let time make the resentments fade into the distance, until they no longer play an important role in one’s life.

Forgiveness, in the end, is too forced and deliberate for me, too clumsy, saccharine and artificial. I have lived just fine without it for thirty-five years using the above strategies. I think I have a reasonably normal, happy life. Like anyone else in the world, I hold down a job, fall in and out of love, worry about my health and finances, and enjoy food, music, sex, exercise, traveling, and lying on the beach and watching a good movie. Let more sensitive and desperate souls go searching for a way to "let go of their pain" and forgive their abusers and rapists. For my part, I am content to carry my anger all of the way to my grave.
SAUDADE

So here you are, thirty-four years old, still single and starting to grow plump around the waistline, just the way your father did. You are tired of being on your own. In your heart of hearts, you don’t believe that anyone your age, with the frown lines growing on his forehead and his dark curly chest hairs beginning to turn gray and his belly beginning to puff out into love handles, really wants to be single, to wake up on summer mornings with the sun pouring in through the bedroom windows, illuminating the emptiness of the bed with its mussed-up sheets. Deep down you believe that everyone has a romantic fantasy implanted in his soul from early childhood, right over the contours of that compelling, mysterious mold that we call human personality.

The medieval romantic novelists knew it. Two thousand years before them, the ancient Greeks knew it too. In Plato’s Symposium, Aristophanes describes how in the time before time began, human beings once had four legs, four arms, two faces, and two of every organ (some were hermaphrodites, while others had double penises or vaginas). When the gods became jealous of humans’ power, Apollo cleaved them in two, sewing them up again at the belly button. Ever since then, people have not wanted to be on their own but have tried to seek out that perfect dream-mate, the one whose body and spirit were separated from them before they were even born.

The Portuguese language has a word for melancholy, impossible desires. The word, which you learned about through listening to the bossa nova jazz tunes of Antonio Carlos Jobim, is saudade. It means, literally, solitude or loneliness, although it also can mean regret, longing, homesickness and nostalgia. A Brazilian living in Miami or Fort Lauderdale might say: today I am full of saudade for my grandmother’s feijoada stew, which used to fill the whole house with the smell of beans and sausages, and bring all the neighborhood dogs to the kitchen door. Or another might say: today a strange mood of saudade is upon me; I know that there is something wrong with my life, but it is hard for me to say exactly what it is.
Saudade. Over the course of your decade and a half of various lives and loves, you have gleaned enough experience to teach you that that your romantic dream is extremely unlikely. Nevertheless, it lives on in you, even after all these disappointments. It still animates you every time you head out for the bar on a Saturday night, or meet up for a restaurant meal with someone you’ve struck up a conversation with on an Internet dating site, or glance around in the gay and lesbian church that you occasionally attend, seeking out the men who are standing on their own, without someone else’s arm around them.

How unlikely is this dream, exactly? One utterly stultifying summer evening, sitting bored out of your mind eating ceviche with a singularly unattractive, cricket-obsessed Indian stockbroker, you compile a mental checklist and try to estimate the conditional probability of meeting someone who meets your most important criteria of an “ideal mate”:

1. Intelligence. You have, in the past, done the dumb, mediocre and idiotic, the narrow, rigid and prejudiced, as well as the kind of pseudo-pretentious academic cleverness that ends up being as unoriginal as the loyal, drunken yells of a sports fan. None of this works for you. Your ideal husband does not need to be a genius, but he does need to be your intellectual equal on the topics you care about. What are your mathematical chances of running across such a man in a single interaction in a more or less random group of people, such as a bar or political meeting? This is almost impossible to quantify, but by taking the fact that you scored in the ninety-eighth percentile on the verbal/critical thinking section of the Graduate Record Examination, and assuming (a questionable proposition, you know) that people applying for postgraduate study across the disciplines are at least somewhat more able to conduct an interesting intellectual conversation than the general population, you settle on the figure of one in a hundred.

2. Sexual attractiveness. In the past you have, on at least one memorable occasion, tried to force yourself to feel lust for a man you found emotionally attractive, yet physically repellent. It only, over time, made you feel trapped, secretive and lonely: all those evenings
embracing him, yet resisting him when he started kissing or stroking you. While it is true that as you have grown older, your sexual tastes have become more flexible, nevertheless, you are still quite fussy: walking around in the mall, say, or along the downtown streets, you probably find yourself glancing at just three men in a hundred. To calculate conditional probability, it is necessary to multiply successive independent ratios. Through a process called random sampling, multiplying three out of a hundred by one out of a hundred, you get three in a thousand. Conservatively assume that only a third of all these men would want to go to bed with you, and your chances are now one in a thousand, on a given date or encounter, of meeting someone both intellectually and physically compatible with you.

3. Emotional compatibility. There are, perhaps, an infinite number of things that can prevent two people who are mentally and physically suited to each other from building a successful relationship together. To name a few: jealousy; alcoholism and other addictions; an imbalance in the degree to which they are each in or out of the closet; different fundamental values on issues such as monogamy and fidelity; an inability to communicate openly and honestly, rather than resorting to passive aggression or cold hostility. On the issue of sexual fidelity alone, you know that it is extraordinarily difficult to find a gay man who will be able to be faithful. Recognizing that the world is full of immature people, and acknowledging that you, too, can be short-tempered, touchy and difficult to get along with, you guess your odds as being one in ten of being emotionally compatible with any given man. This in turn leaves you with a ballpark figure of one in ten thousand that any individual homosexual male you encounter could be, in the Aristophanian sense, the kind of husband who would make you feel utterly happy.

One in ten thousand. In your mind you recall a baseball game that two colleagues once took you see, in the Dolphins arena in northwestern Miami. The parking lot was filled with cars as far as the eye could see; the spectators filled all the lower sections of the stadium like a human ocean, a lake of bodies and voices that became individually indistinguishable in the distance. The number of people in the stadium
that day was close to ten thousand. If they had all received a single, bright red raffle ticket, and if only one raffle ticket from the crowd were drawn — those would have been your odds of bumping into the man of your dreams on the gay beach or in front of the gay magazine section at Barnes and Noble.

Still, hope springs eternal. What are you to do, resign yourself to a life of growing old by yourself? Even if you are far from optimistic about the opportunities available to you on the homosexual dating scene, you need, you tell yourself, to at least try. In short, you need to be a good sport.

So at first you collect your fair share of horror stories, which all seem to confirm your calculations. There is the cute, slender 32-year-old Cuban guy you meet on gay.com who reads Tarot cards and is amazed when you speak near-fluent Spanish. He tells you he is crazy about you, invites you to a party or two at his house, holds your hand in front of his friends, and rubs your leg with his. You kiss him and rub his head, but, perhaps out of some sweetly old-fashioned sense of romanticism, you don’t have sex. You call him. He calls you. Then he makes a date with you. When you arrive to pick him up at the agreed time at his home, he is still in his bath towel, in the kitchen, with the man you know is his ex-lover. The ex-lover is busy making supper — fried plantains, rice and beans. He, your date for the evening, offers you food. “Sorry,” he says, when he has you alone for a minute. “The other guy just showed up.”

Or, on another foray into the gay bar scene, you meet the medical student, Jason, who has taken a year’s leave of absence and is working as a waiter at a café in downtown Fort Lauderdale. Jason, an attractive blond with brilliant blue Midwestern eyes, spots you sitting alone at a patio table, drinking a beer. He invites you over to come and join him and his friends; he is ebullient, more than a little drunk, but full of lucid jokes and observations. Within an hour or so, you are thoroughly charmed by him; he leans forward and rubs your chest through your T-shirt while giving you a précis of his Master’s thesis on microbiology. Already, visions have lit up in your mind of you and Jason spending evenings together in your living-room furnished lavishly on his medical earnings, conversing about articles the two of you have
read in Scientific American. Now, however, he asks you if he can go home with you. You say yes. He asks the waiter for his check, which comes to $85 for drinks alone. It turns out that over the last four hours in the bar he has downed no less than twelve margaritas; when you lean closer to him his breathe smells like a club carpet after a night of New Year’s revelry.

And so it continues on for a month or two. The rhythm of this sexual and romantic merry-go-round is familiar to you. In fact, in its sad futility it evokes in you its own kind of saudade, of nostalgia for your life in your early twenties, when this excitement and variety seemed enough to sustain you. Back then, you had no doubt that one day, when you wanted to settle down, you would find the relationship you were looking for; now, the awareness that life frequently fails to deliver on our most powerful desires haunts you like a fading echo in a dusk-bound canyon.

Feeling as foolish as an African mother who goes to the herbalist to buy her daughter a love spell, you sit in church and pray to the God you only nominally believe in to send you a lover who is good for you. And then, the very next Sunday morning, as if by divine providence, you experience a minor miracle. As you stand holding the program for the day’s service and reading off the words for the day’s first hymn, one of the most beautiful men you have ever set eyes on squeezes into the pew next to you, gives you a shy, gentle smile and asks you in an accent that sounds to your ears like a cross between British and Italian if he can share your hymn sheet.

You are all a-tremble. On looks alone you are already smitten: he is, after all, pretty much the living incarnation of your ideal physical type. He is young – in his mid- or perhaps late twenties. His skin is a heavenly complexion, somewhere between ruddy olive and rich cocoa brown, his eyes are dark and glistening, and, like all your favorite men, he is considerably shorter than you, slender and delicate-boned, with lovely long hands and a firm, well-defined jaw. His appearance and accent, and the ethnic-looking beaded shirt he is wearing over his brown corduroy pants, make you wonder if he could be East Indian. You even, for just a minute, wonder if he could, like you, be originally South African – perhaps an Indian South African
émigré who has spent some time floating around the world. When it comes time to give the sign of peace, is it your imagination, or does he, too, hold you a trifle longer than necessary in the hug, the feeling of his chest pressing against yours a hard, firm warmth that stops your breathing and causes your heart to race? You notice that the smell of his cologne is vaguely European. It reminds you of your most recent ex-lover, a Spanish graphic designer.

After the service, as you follow him out of the church, you half expect him to disappear like a waif, an illusion, to be burned up by the fierce white glare of the South Florida sunlight. But no, there he is, after the service in the little hall with the sandwiches, cookies and coffee, sitting in the corner talking to a stocky black man. You chat to your own friends for a minute, then go to sit next him. When there is a gap in the conversation, and he turns sideways to look in your direction, you shoot out your right hand and say:

“Hi. I’m Glen. We’ve wished each other Christian love and peace. But I still don’t know your name.”

He gives you that smile again — a smile that lights up his face and makes his eyes shine in the light of the overhead lamps.

“Rafael,”¹² he says, “or Rafi for short. And before you ask — it’s not Spanish or Italian, but Portuguese.”

And so it begins. Over the next fifteen or twenty minutes, the two of you make friendly small talk. During this time you will establish that he has three citizenships — American, Brazilian and Israeli — as a result of having been born in New York of Brazilian, Sephardic Jewish parents, and as a result of his mother’s having attempted to emigrate, with all her children, to Israel when he was a teenager. He is doing a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology in the University of London and, like you, merely has to write up his dissertation while holding down a full-time job — he works processing insurance claims at a dentist’s office. Both of you are immigrants; he arrived a year ago, at age twenty-four, exactly the age that you were when you moved to the

¹²At his request, Rafael’s name has been changed to protect his identity. All of the secondary details pertaining to his name, such as what other people say about it, are correct, and apply both to his real name and his pseudonym.
United States. Both of you have lived and traveled all over the world; he has even been to your home town in South Africa. When he is not struggling away on his research into refugee policy – he, like you, is a political progressive interested in social justice in the developing world – he is reading literary fiction. In your spare time you both do creative writing: you write essays and fiction, while he is a poet with his own web page, two chapbooks and several prestigious journal publications.

Saudade. With him it is almost instant, this longing for some kind of intimate connection with him, this sudden sense that without further contact your life will somehow be less than, impoverished, incomplete. Part of it is the feeling, in itself a form of nostalgia, that you know him much better than you really do, that he reminds you of someone you once knew – perhaps your best friend, James, with whom you had long chats like this when you were both adolescents. Part of it is your awareness that meeting someone so strikingly compatible with you, at least at first glance, are statistically negligible. At any rate you are instantly a-fire with yearning; you are so excited that your body is tingling and your heart is thumping in your chest. When his friend, who is giving him a ride back home, says that it is time for them to leave, you shake both their hands, and say a casual good-bye. You do not think, until too late, to exchange phone numbers; you realize you simply assume he will be there next week. When he is gone, you try to deal with the utterly irrational and peculiar feeling that when he left, he took a small part of yourself with him.

Next Sunday, you look for him in the congregation of three or four hundred faces, but do not see him. You keep wondering if you have simply missed him; but no, he is definitely not there; the crowded whitewashed church with the slow ceiling fans, the full choir behind the lectern and altar, and the numerous gay and lesbian couples holding hands and draping their arms over each others’ backs and shoulders has never felt lonelier or emptier. The next Sunday, too, you try to find him, to no avail. Has he gone back to his old parish? Has he returned to London to defend his dissertation? You ask around discreetly among some of your own friends and acquaintances, but nobody seems to know
anything about either him or his friend. There is a rumor about how he sometimes attends the earlier service and catches the bus home, but essentially this man is a mystery; even his name puzzles people. “Is that Spanish?” they ask. “Italian? Wasn’t there a film star in the seventies named Rafi?” You tell yourself to forget about him.

But then on the third Sunday, you do see him afterwards in the corner of the hall, standing on his own sipping a cup of coffee, awkward and lonely somehow, vulnerable in a way you find intensely appealing. You stroll over to him, establish that he had to miss church for two weeks to work on his dissertation, and then pop the question that has been on your mind since the last time you saw him: “Do you have any plans for right now? Would you like to go off somewhere and grab a bite to eat?”

“I’d love to,” he replies without hesitating, and gives you one of his breathtaking smiles.

And so you spend the afternoon together. First, you walk down Las Olas Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, talking about how charming you both find the Spanish colonial architecture and the canals – memories, for both of you, of a Europe that you miss and love, although both of you simultaneously acknowledge that you cannot really live in that continent of low wages, unemployment and pricey housing. Because neither of you can think of anywhere else to go, you lunch at the Cheesecake Factory. Over your eggs benedict and his Caesar salad, you agree that the best kind of restaurants are the small, cheap, ethnically-authentic kind, like the Cuban and Nicaraguan cafeterias that you frequent on a near-weekly basis in Miami. You offer to take him to them sometime; he says he would really like that. After lunch, you try to catch an obscure foreign art movie that you have both been trying to see at the local art cinema. When it turns out that you have already missed the afternoon’s showing, you spend several more hours sitting in the used bookstore across the street from the cinema, buying books, sipping coffee and talking about everything from theology, a subject you once thought of studying in order to become a Christian priest, to the individualization of history in the work of the novelists both of you consider your favorites: Gunther Grass, Salman Rushdie and Jose Saramago. As the afternoon goes on, you, the older
and more experienced man, gently push the boundaries of your physical intimacy, teasingly ruffle his hair and lay your hand on his knee. He reciprocates, lightly touching your shoulder a few times and brushing your arm.

What is happening between the two of you? It is almost magical and enchanted, this extraordinary sense of being his spiritual doppelganger, the feeling that you are talking to a mirror image of yourself, or perhaps a long-separated twin drawn away from you in a cosmic amniotic fluid. Every topic you touch on generates a pleasing echo in him. When you talk about your feelings regarding Israel, namely that you are strongly attracted to Jewish culture and civilization, but that you find contemporary Israeli politics frighteningly reminiscent of apartheid South Africa, he agrees and points out that he, a Brazilian of Jewish descent, was able to become an Israeli citizen, whereas a Palestinian whose family had thousand-year roots in Jerusalem could not. When he discusses his conversion to Christianity, and the problems his secular Jewish family had accepting him when he entered an Anglican seminary, it seems, to you, to parallel your own religious-spiritual journey, from Catholicism through left-wing secular humanism to where you find yourself today, a church-going semi-agnostic still trying to wrestle with the big existential questions of your life. Even when he talks about his family, and how he is completely alienated from them, you simply link this to your own experience of familial brokenness – your parents a world away, in a jacaranda-shaded African town, your sister unwilling to talk to them because of unforgiven hurts.

Then, somewhere in the midst of all this conversation about what you have in common, it occurs to you to ask him the obvious question. “Have you ever been in a relationship before? Have you ever been in love?”

And now he drops it on you – the first of what you will later think of his dollops of the purest kind of saudade, a melancholia so powerful and concentrated that it will, over the next few weeks, gradually confuse and intoxicate you, dull your wits and senses like a strong Brazilian rum.
"Yes," he says, "I have been in love. It was four years ago, with my best friend, Andrew. We were friends for a long time, then finally we became lovers. When I lost him, it hurt so much that I never wanted to get involved in a relationship again."

"How did the relationship end?"

Rafael takes a deep sigh, averts his eyes. "Actually, Andrew killed himself," he says in a halting voice, "None of us saw it coming. One day he just threw himself out of the seventh-floor apartment of the apartment building we both lived in. I arrived when the paramedics had already taken away the body and cleaned up the blood."

He smiles at you, that gentle, vulnerable smile again, apologizes for being so "sad and heavy" on a first date. You tell him not to worry. You touch his hand.

"I'm sorry that happened," you say. "I have my own collection of traumatic stories from back in the old country."

The truth is that you are drawn even closer to him, through this revelation of an inner wound. With any of your friends — with cheerful, practical Nathan, the engineer who has started his own consultancy and is close to being able to retire at age forty; with cynical Rick, who shrewdly sums up everyone he meets and operates on the assumption that "all men are dogs" — this story might strike them as shocking, melodramatic, perhaps the sign of a man who is congenitally drawn to tragedy and dysfunction. Not you, though: you from that country at the foot of the African continent, full of erstwhile activists with arms blown off in letter bombs, gaunt AIDS orphans wandering around the streets, and men and women like yourself who are survivors of torture. You now know that both of you have your injuries in your souls, childhood pains that you do not like to show to this world, for fear that the world will fail to understand. You touch his hand; he smiles. You lean forward and kiss him on his lips.

At the end of the day you exchange phone numbers, make plans, go on several more dates. The relationship rounds out, grows, becomes better; what you have between you is gathering momentum. You have the talk about monogamy: both of you are on the same wavelength when it comes to sexual fidelity and exclusivity. He tells you about his childhood-onset diabetes, shows you his little bottles of insulin and
packs of syringes that he needs to use daily, at pain of organ failure; however he assures you that is “a manageable condition, and nothing to be afraid of.” In the films you see together, you find yourself laughing at the same things, having fascinating intellectual conversations afterwards in which you analyze the formal construction of the narratives. He shows you his poems, which you find somewhat adolescent and hip-hop, but nevertheless skilled and interesting. You show him some of your poetry and essays, including a piece about what happened to you when you were a child - a piece that moves him to spend a full evening with you in the back yard of the house that he shares with his roommates, on the canal with the fireflies flying around in the darkness, talking about how those events affected you. That evening bring two more firsts into your relationship: it is the night he tells you about his mother’s death of breast cancer, a slow-wasting-away in a Lisbon hospital room with her dosed-up on morphine and vaguely delirious. It is also the night that you make love for the first time, a tender and moving experience in which you are captivated by nothing so much as his gentleness, the sensitive way he touches you, the way he rests his head in the crook between your neck and shoulder and lets you enfold him.

There is no use pretending any different. You have fallen madly in love with him. During the days, when he goes to work and you try to write in your apartment, you miss him so intensely that it is difficult to sit still and concentrate. Sometimes, making yourself a salad or pouring yourself a glass of wine, you have to pinch yourself to remind yourself that he is real, that all of this is genuinely happening to you. Now, you don’t even want quantify your luck. The memory of that image of the baseball stadium packed with raffle ticket holders fills you with an abject anxiety, and a premonition that somehow this is all too good to be true, that sometime soon it must end. Three times a week when you visit him, lying in the quiet darkness of his bedroom, with the theology books stacked in the closet and the tower of CD’s next to the television and the whir of the box fan on the window sill mixing with the sounds of his breathing, it occurs to you that at some level this is what you have always wanted - that there is nothing missing in this, nothing uncomfortable. You could stay like this, you
think, drawing Rafi’s body closer to yours and planting a kiss on the
nape of his neck, for the rest of your life.

The two of you spend a weekend together in your apartment in
Miami. You show him the sights that are inaccessible to him as a
European who does not drive: Bill Baggs State Park, Little Havana, the
Art Deco Historic District in South Beach. You take snapshots of the
buildings that you both like. Then you stroll down Lincoln Road
pedestrian mall, take a break from the heat and glare by drinking iced
Cokes at a sidewalk café with umbrellas and a view of the passing foot
traffic.

Then he asks you one of his profound questions – most of them
complete non sequiturs – that simply stun, surprise and delight you.

“If you could put your finger on a single emotion that defines
you,” he says, “what would it be?”

You have to pause and think. A newsreel of your life runs in
front of your eyes, the way they say it does just before the brain runs
out of oxygen. You remember the boarding-school on top of the hill,
with the mock hangings, the forced naked dances and conga lines in the
showers, and the school prefect thrashing you with a pillow slip filled
with athletics spikes; then you recall Cape Town in the 1980s, mass
demonstrations against apartheid, and the nights under the stars at
counter-cultural parties, listening to guitars and reading the poetry
of Goethe, Plath and Ginsburg.

“Anger,” you say, “and exuberance. The two of them are mixed
together, ultimately inseparable. How about you?”

“There’s a Portuguese word to describe the emotion that defines
me,” Rafael says now. “It’s saudade. Do you know that word?”

Do you indeed know about saudade? Now that he says it, of course
you know that saudade defines you too; it is the perfect word to
describe you, sitting at your desk writing essays about your long-
abandoned home country, dreaming at night about your mother, father and
sister, about your forgotten friends and about dusty Karoo desert roads
and the smell of dust and lavender. Probably, you think, it defines
every human being, since we all have to grow older and die, all have to
master the fundamental human existential art that Elizabeth Bishop
called “the art of losing.”
“Yes, I do,” you say. “Probably I know more about it than you realize.”

Later, you walk together along the beach. You have been pondering his words, the fact that the two of you have concluded that you both live mostly in the past, obsessed with the passage of time. He gives you a sharp, knowing look.

“There is something I need to talk to you about. I’ve been keeping a little secret from you.”

You are taken aback. Thus far, after all, you have been impressed with his openness: the way he told you, right-out on the first date, about Andrew’s suicide; the way he shared with you the painful details of his mother’s death. If there is anything that you would have said encapsulated your experience of this relationship it would have been the unusual openness between you and Rafael, the extent to which you have already, in such a short time, shared your most intimate secrets.

“The reason I am living in South Florida,” he continues, “is that I was deported here from Pakistan in handcuffs – a no-good criminal, a totally reckless, fanatic radical. I was doing research for my dissertation about the way that the Pakistani government’s mistreatment of refugees encouraged the growth of radical Islamic movements, including Al Qaeda. At a certain point, I joined an organization agitating for refugees’ right, and participated in a street demonstration in which several people, including me, got arrested. They threw me in prison for several days. It was the most horrible hellhole, one of the worst experiences of my life. Then they deported me to Miami. I arrived here in handcuffs, having spent all my scholarship money on the airfare and on trying to find a lawyer on the other side. You have to understand, I was an American by passport but not by culture – I didn’t even understand the difference between a nickel coin and a dime. I called my father from Miami International Airport. Since he’s a respected, conservative corporate lawyer, he was so embarrassed that he just sent me money via Western Union; he didn’t want me to visit him. I didn’t have the money to return to London, so I looked for a job here. That’s why I’m here right now and not in London.”
“I had to tell you this before we went any further with this relationship,” he says then. “I had to let you know how radical, fanatical and reckless I can be – how I can endanger both myself, and compromise those around me, because I get outraged about something and cannot keep my mouth shut.”

Today, looking back, you clearly see the red flags in this story – the romantic element, reminiscent of Midnight Express, of the Westerner unjustly held in a third world jail; the subtle grandiosity implicit in the concept of himself as a “reckless fanatic,” imprudent yet also fierce and courageous. That afternoon, however, leaning against the waist-high stone wall on the South Beach promenade, your first thought is to reassure him.

“You are talking to an old left-wing activist,” you tell him. “None of this is that abnormal to me. I was watching my friends getting their passports taken away for political protest when you were still in junior high. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

And indeed over the next week or so you laugh about it. You call up your old South African friends and tell them that the miraculous has happened, that you have met a boyfriend in superficial, materialistic South Florida who is as left-wing, anti-establishment and angry as yourself. You even tell your mother about Rafael’s story. She is horrified at the thought that a parent would reject a child for doing something so courageous and idealistic.

“Tell him if I ever meet him, he won’t have to worry about anything like that from me,” she says.

That Friday, you have a literary reading at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center at Fort Lauderdale. Rafael is supposed to be there. You had arranged for him to meet several of your friends at the reading, and then hang out together at a restaurant; you want to show him off, make him part of your everyday life. After thirty minutes, then forty-five, then sixty, you accept that he isn’t going to arrive. Your heart sinks, and again you hear that premonitory little voice telling you that something is wrong – you have visions of a trick having sex with him in the kitchen, next to the microwave, in front of the cutlery cupboard.
You call his home phone, half expecting to get no answer. But then he picks up, sounding confused and groggy.

“I’m so sorry,” he says. “I think I took a double dose of my insulin, and so I kind of crashed in the lounge with a blood sugar low. But luckily my roommate woke me up again and I realized what was happening. I’m OK now.”

Your fear and suspicion instantly give way to panic. You had forgotten about his diabetes. It is easy to do when he eats ordinary foods, including small amounts of sugar and bread – he claims this is fine for his particular type of diabetes, which is combined with hypoglycemia, a condition which in turn requires the occasional infusion of sugar to raise his blood glucose levels – and injects himself in the bathroom when you’re not watching. This is a reminder of his vulnerability, the fact that he might literally die if he doesn’t watch himself, and you instantly hang up, say good-bye to your friends, and drive yourself over to his place. That night, touched by the way you race to be with him, and how much you say you would miss him if he vanished, he tells you that he loves you more than he has loved anyone – you have become to him perhaps the most precious thing in the world. You fall asleep with your arms around each other, under the bed sheets.

You decide that you want to go away together for the weekend. You have now been dating for almost three months and you feel a need to escalate the commitment and intimacy. In your last relationship, you had an intense, albeit long-distance romance for four months before your lover came to visit you from Spain and you went on a road trip around the state parks of northern Florida. Something about sharing so much time together, sitting in a car and exploring hotel rooms and doing all that sightseeing as a couple, cemented your previous commitment and made the relationship more than just a pleasurable dalliance. You tell him you are going to surprise him, and you book a bed and breakfast for two nights near Cape Canaveral, which he has casually mentioned that he wants to see.

Three nights before you are due to leave, though, he calls you up again.
“I have another secret I need to tell you,” he says. “The last one was small, but this one is really big. This one, I can almost guarantee, is going to change the whole way you see me. But I can’t tell you now – not over the phone.”

You try to press him to reveal his mystery, or at least give you a clue, but he refuses. The only thing he tells you is that he is not breaking up with you, although he says he is afraid that, after what he tells you, you will want to break up with him. You consider canceling the hotel reservations on the assumption that after discussing such momentous news, neither of you will not be in the mood for vacationing. But then you decide that you are committed to this adventure for better or worse.

Saudade. Looking back at yourself during those three days of confusion, as you wonder how someone who feels so much like a soul mate could at the same time be so alien and enigmatic, you are struck by how, just at this moment in your relationship, you both have a window of opportunity to avoid your future disconnection and loneliness. You still, at this time, have everything working for you, or at least almost everything – sex, affection, conversation, joy, a plethora of shared fun and interests. Maybe there is still a way for the two of you to work things out. See, there he is, in your mind’s eye, at the workplace you never actually saw, listening to music as he is put on hold by some insurance company headquarters in Atlanta. He still has time to change his mind, call you back on the other line, say to you that he wants to keep his secret to himself. You are a grown-up man. You will accept that. But he does not make the call.

Or there you are. Thirty-four years old, freckled, with a few gray hairs appearing on your chest, and the feeling that the time for romance and passion in your life, at least the full-bodied, innocent, youthful sort, may slowly be running out. You are in love with a Ph.D. student, poet and diabetic nine years your junior who says he is not the person you think he is. Part of you has felt this coming. Part of you still cannot believe it – still cannot process the possibility that, after defying so many odds in order to find each other, something so completely unforeseen and unfathomable has the possibility of completely messing things up. You still have the prospect of putting a
stop to this. You can still go online and type him an email: Dear Rafael, On second thoughts, I don’t really want to know your secrets. All I want is for you to be a part of my life, and for us to be as happy together as we have been. That is enough for me. Glen.

But you do not do this either. Instead, you go shopping for road trip food, take out a guidebook from the library, speculate with your friends by phone about what Rafael’s secret could be – a long-distance lover in London or Lisbon? An HIV-positive test that could have placed you, albeit only marginally, at risk of infection? That Friday night you drive to his house with the groceries in the trunk, a Yahoo Maps! printout of the route north and a reservation number scribbled into your planner. It is a perfect evening. The canal behind his house smells of leaves and vegetation. His roommates are home; one is sitting in the living-room and the other is in the back yard with her boyfriend, listening to the radio and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

He takes you into his room, turns the fan up high and places it next to the door so, he says, his roommate won’t hear what he has to tell you. The two of you look at each other. He asks you if you want to hear what he has to say now, or later. You tell him you might as well get it out of the way.

He begins by saying that he has been telling you lies of omission whenever you have fantasized together about going on foreign holidays. The harsh truth, he informs you, is that he can never leave the United States of America – or at least the list of countries that he can visit is highly limited. Then he takes a deep breath and breaks it you, as deadpan and matter-of-factly as anything he has ever told you.

“The reason,” he says, “is that I am an international criminal. The government of Israel has issued an Interpol warrant for my arrest on a couple of different counts of treason. All in all, these charges carry a combined potential jail sentence of 150 years. I’m safe here, you see, because I’m a US citizen. Governments don’t extradite their own citizens for treason against foreign governments. The only countries in the world where I would be safe would be Arab states that have no diplomatic relationships with Israel, and then Brazil and the United States.”
You sit on the bed, shell-shocked, trying to digest these words over the fan’s roar. Treason. A hundred and fifty years. Whatever you were expecting, this certainly did not figure into it. But then very little, so far, about Rafi or this relationship has been ordinary or predictable.

“OK,” you hear yourself say, “you’ve definitely got my attention. Why don’t you just start at the beginning? How did you end up in Israel?”

And so he tells you. The pieces of the story emerge in chunks that evening and over the rest of that weekend: two days of your usual sexual and romantic bliss, interspersed with this new talk about espionage, political struggle, refugee policies and his philosophical reservations about Zionism. Over the course of the weekend, as you spend time in the historic bed and breakfast on the river, and visit the Kennedy Space Center with its interactive exhibits and IMAX movies recreating the moon landings and the view from the International Space Center, you will pass through shock, incredulity, puzzlement and sympathy. All in all, though, as he gradually provides the numerous details and clarifications that will make his tale believable to you, you will end up feeling even closer to him than you have been before, wrapped up in him. The two of you will inhabit your own unique planet, as separated from the rest of the universe as any of the worlds you have seen represented in the exhibits in the Space Center museums, in that hotel bedroom with the Victorian furniture, the view of the intracoastal waterway and the handwoven curtains and counterpane. Walking around the rocket park at Cape Canaveral, talking in hushed tones about the possibility that he is still being watched by the Mossad, and about what you should do to protect yourself from being pulled into all of this, you will, without realizing it, relive the delicious sense of belonging to a childhood secret gang or club, a club of only two with its own language and password.

The literal details of his account go like this. Before working in Pakistan, he spent some time in the Middle East, working with the Episcopal Diocese of East Jerusalem. The church, being Palestinian Christian, was a strongly activist diocese, with a liberation-theology orientation, and strongly opposed to the Israeli occupation. In his
capacity as pastor in this community, Rafael quickly drew the attention of the bishop as a result of his knowledge of refugee policy, and in particular, the different ways of obtaining passports of convenience for political dissidents and people escaping political repression or persecution.

Over a period of approximately six months, he and some liberal colleagues in the diocese organized, at the bishop’s behest, a project—he admits you could also call it a ring or a plot—to get Palestinians who were being hunted by the Israeli security services out of the Occupied Territories. He claims that as priests and peace activists, he didn’t work with any of the real hard core terrorists or suicide bombers, but rather tried to help PLO saboteurs, lawyers and labor activists, people whom Israel saw as terrorist allies but who were really just human rights advocates. He helped raise money in Europe to help buy them passports from Dominica and other Caribbean Islands, and citizenships in the virtual Republic of Lomar—an entity which actually exists to help refugees; you happen to know about it from an article you once read in the newspaper, about how it was granted rudimentary membership in the United Nations.

The biggest problem, he claims, occurred when, a few months into the project he did something “really stupid.” He had a friend from his undergraduate college days, a Political Science major and another liberal Anglican, who ended up, for whatever reason, working for the intelligence service of a foreign government. Rafael is unwilling to name this government when you ask which one it is; however, he claims it wasn’t an enemy of Israel, just a progressive Western European government with a history of support for third world liberation movements. This friend, with the support of his superiors, assisted Rafael with false names, identities and transportation.

Eventually the Israeli security police got wind of it. It all happened one week when Rafael was out of the country, consulting with his academic advisers at the University of London. They arrested most of the other people working on the scheme. The owner of a Palestinian printing shop and a translator, whom Rafael had hired to help make passports, both got charged with aiding terrorist organizations. His best friend, another Israeli pastor, got arrested too. The pastor got
charged with treason and sentenced to 75 years in prison. It was all in the newspapers. Israel issued an international warrant for Rafael’s arrest. To avoid being extradited to Israel, Rafael fled to Pakistan, which has no extradition treaty with the Jewish state. Nevertheless, it was, he thinks, partly because of his reputation as a troublemaker that Pakistan was so quick to deport him to America once he joined the demonstration in Islamabad. Now, he claims, the State Department has sent him a letter detailing his precise legal status. Since his collaboration with known terrorist organizations predates the PATRIOT Act, and since that legislation is not retroactive, he cannot be extradited under its provisions targeting terrorist sympathizers. The treason charges do not apply because of his U.S. citizenship.

“Now do you realize, Glen, what I meant when I told you I was stupid, crazy, a complete fanatic? I am only twenty-five years old, but for the rest of my time on earth I will have to live with the consequences of these actions. It affects everything I do – my ability to travel, my relationship with my family, even how I handle things when I meet someone I care about, like you. I have, to all intents and purposes, ruined my life.”

To give yourself credit, you do question and interrogate him, raise some red flags about the severity of the prison sentences, which seem so stunningly disproportionate to the alleged offences – even in the apartheid police state, it would have been unheard-of to hand out seventy-five years for faking passports and smuggling human rights lawyers and petty saboteurs across borders. But he is a consummately brilliant man, passionate and informed; he is able to detail the precise political circumstances at the time that could lead to this outcome. Whatever you do on this trip with Rafael, the one act you shy away from is rock-bottom doubting his good faith or sanity. This is, after all, the man whom you have concluded is the first lover you have ever had who is perfect for you at every level. You are sleeping together with the sound of the distant traffic over the bridge to Cape Canaveral, having candlelit meals together in an Italian restaurant on the river, talking about your future plans and dreams (you would like to see a novel you write turned into a film; he would like to one day compile the world’s first dictionary of Aramaic). Already too much is
at stake emotionally to allow into your mind the words paranoid
delusional, compulsive liar or psychotic.

The moment of truth comes just an hour or so before you return
home. Driving back down the interstate highway, with a couple of hours
to spare before you need to be back at home, you decide to check out
Jonathan Dickenson State Park, a hauntingly-beautiful wilderness of
palmetto scrubs, pine trees and grassland on the Atlantic coast near
Jupiter, Florida. As you cross over a shallow, brackish stream, and he
irritatedly swats at a mosquito on his arms, he casually says:

“I can’t stand mosquitoes. When I was a child my parents used to
go on vacation in the Brazilian Amazon. I caught dengue fever ten
times. Most people die from it after the second or third time, did you
know that? The doctors have no idea how I even made it.”

“You certainly have had an amazingly eventful life,” you reply.
“If I added up everything that has happened to you, I could write
several different novels with tragic-heroic protagonists and still not
even cover the basics.”

And then you stop. Everything falls into place. None of this,
you suddenly know in the core of your being, is real: it is a story, a
fabricated fantasy. Rafael has been writing you a novel, a novel in
which you, up to this point, have been collaborating. In addition,
together the two of you have been writing a myth of your own, a romance
in which you both find your “other half” who is somehow meant for you
in a way that the ordinary people of the earth never could be.

That evening, back at home, you sit down at your computer and
begin your Internet research. You start with the Anglican diocese of
East Jerusalem, with the name “Bishop Stevens,” which Rafael has given
you. While the diocese is certainly as left-wing and anti-Israeli as
Rafael described, as far as you can establish there is not, and never
has been, a “Bishop Stevens” stationed there. There is no reference to
any kind of scandal involving the diocese, in which this bishop was
forced from office to make way for one more sympathetic to the Israeli
government. Rafael’s name is not found on any of the lists of current
or former priests working in the diocese.

You hunt through the archives of the Jerusalem Post. Rafael
claims that this scandal happened a couple of months before he arrived
in the United States, in the spring of 2003. You do searches both on Google and on the Jerusalem Post using the key terms “priest,” “treason,” “passport” and, of course, the names Rafael has given you, including “Johnny Michaelsap,” supposedly his friend who got the 75-year prison sentence. You do not uncover a single hit.

By 11:00 pm your mind is made up. You spend your last hour online reading up on delusional mental illnesses, and you fill out a checklist designed to help you judge whether or not the person you are planning to confront on their delusions could be violent or dangerous.

You call up Rafael and tell him you need to talk. That Tuesday, you drive to his place for the last time. As before, his roommates are home, something for which, on this night, you are actually grateful. As on the previous occasion, Rafael put the box fan up against the door, to stop them overhearing your conversation.

You spill everything that is in you. You tell him that you want to believe him, but that it is all too much too unlikely, too melodramatic and larger-than-life. You tell him about your Internet research, say to him that there is not a shred of evidence that any of the things he has talked about to you actually happened. You talk about the importance of trust in a relationship. You ask him to show you evidence; in particular, you ask to see the letter from the State Department detailing his legal status.

He is unfazed. You expected him to be upset and accusatory, or perhaps panicked and angry, but instead he very calmly tells you that he was anticipating this; that your doubts are entirely reasonable, and that he would do exactly the same thing in your position. He points out to you how much, over the past four months, you have taken on blind trust from him: you do not even know for sure that Rafael Ferreira is his real name. He shows you his passport which confirms this, then his student card at the University of London and his laminated clergy identification card, which establishes that he is indeed a licensed Episcopal priest living in Fort Lauderdale. When you ask him to show you the stamps in his passport from his visits to Israel and Pakistan he snatches the documents away from you, saying that there are still things in his life that he does not want you to know about him.
He says he wants time to think about what you have said. He still maintains everything he told you is literally true: the problem, he is adamant, is that you do not have enough information to find the evidence; if necessary, he can sit with you at your computer and help you track it down. As for the State Department letter, he will retrieve it from his post office box, where he keeps all of his important documents, and show it to you next time he sees you. However, his concern is about the breakdown of trust in the relationship. If he shares all of this with you, he says and assuages your doubts, will you at least believe him in the future? Can the two of you draw a line around this crisis and proceed again like two normal people, taking each other’s word without needing corroboration?

For a few hours you wonder again if perhaps this all is true, and his perspective entirely trustworthy. Next morning, though, when you check your email, there is a message from him:

Dear Glen,

I am sorry to do this the coward’s way, in a note, but I need to end this relationship before I get into even deeper trouble. I made a terrible mistake by telling you those things I did. I had no right to pull you into that, and I never should have. I cannot even tell you how much you mean to me. I love you. After Andrew’s death, you have shown me the meaning of joy again. After being closed, I have opened myself to you. You will always be in my heart. But right now, I have to go.

Ciao, buen amigo.

Rafael.

That is it. Nothing more. You feel oddly cheated. Is this how it is going to end, without a confession, explanation or so much as a discussion? A part of you feels relief, but mostly you are just annoyed with him for dumping you so unceremoniously, without so much as a phone call. You call him up and leave him a message to please call you back, but he never does. You send him an email saying that you are sorry about his decision, but that you understand. You do not get a response to this either. He does not show up at church the next Sunday, or the Sunday after that. You consider driving to his house one evening to force him to at least say good-bye to you in person, but
now your friends, to whom you have told everything, talk you out of it. Let him go, they say. You are better off without him. He is too crazy. Just be grateful that he is thinking of himself as the bad guy in ending this relationship, and that he is not stalking you or hacking down your door with a machete.

And so you let him go. At first the loneliness and sadness is overwhelming. You feel once again as if a part of you has been torn out, as if what was whole is now again severed. You feel ripped up and sewn back together at the belly button. At night, alone in your bed, you struggle to sleep. You are unable to listen to bossa nova or fado, or any of the other music the two of you shared, without feeling an immense and acute longing, a saudade for him and everything about him. You miss the smell of his deodorant. You miss the warmth of his body. You think constantly about him, about how, now, he is truly alone in the world. You can at least tell this story to others, and have them gasp and laugh at it. He, on the other hand, is utterly solitary in his delusions. His saudade, in a sense, is for truth, life and the experience of human connection itself.

You recalculate all the odds of finding a man who is compatible with you, adding two new requirements: one, that your romantic partner be in touch with reality, and two, that they be essentially truthful. The odds against your success are now so overwhelming that you resolve, at least for the time being, to take a break from the gay dating scene.

You also decide that when it comes to love, the law that applies most logically is that old staple of jokes, Murphy’s Law: that if something can go wrong, it will. If nothing ordinary can go wrong in a relationship, you might add, something utterly outlandish will mess it up, such as a paranoid hallucination or a brush with the Shin Bet.

Perhaps the only logical feeling, you reflect, for those who have to live under the dictates of Murphy’s Law as it applies to love is saudade, or a mixture of loneliness, yearning and nostalgia all rolled into one.
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