



Mali, born physically male feels feminine inside but is insecure with the depth and expression of such. Over some years Mali has gravitated progressively toward feminine presentation. But the apparent ridicule of the world around, much of which Mali attributes to how they look in the mirror keeps them in check. Not to mention the more fem they let out, the more they are read as being 'gay' which feels like the painful end of hope for their most cherished dream, a melting love with a special woman. Now floating in Thailand as a tech-nomad, Mali is flirting with hormones and feminization surgeries, with no goal in mind but to face their identity once and for all before returning to the USA.

Cat is a successful Thai entrepreneur, educated in Japan with impeccable social polish and beauty, still seeking an elusive happiness that her heart is holding out for despite cultural and family pressures. Grappling with the loss of her lifelong best friend due to her apparent attraction to Cat, and an always lukewarm relationship with men, her current boyfriend no exception, she feels like she's reached the limit of being able to understand herself and move her life forward.

When Cat and Mali meet a friendship develops allowing each a place of deep expression of what they've been unable to communicate with anyone else - in friendship and eventually intimacy. To Mali, Cat is the perfect woman who could get 'him' over the whole 'fem thing'. And to Cat, Mali is the perfect man, a 'rockstar', the answer to what has been missing in her relationships. To each, the other is the answer. But in the way expected?

Chapters

FFS is being published serially on this site starting December 2019. New chapters will be added weekly until complete!

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Dedication

To...

Who has always been here but for acceptance, a name and outward appearance.

Who never gives up searching, often on the tail of a feeling and a distant hope.

Deciding to trust oneself, body and feelings, even when the external world has come up empty on answers.

Ripples

Bluegirls come in every size
Some are wise and some otherwise,
They got pretty blue eyes.
For an hour a man may change
For an hour her face looks strange...

Marching to the promised land
Where the honey flows and takes you by the hand,
Pulls you down on your knees,
While you're down a pool appears.
The face in the water looks up,
And she shakes her head as if to say
That it's the last time you'll look like today...

The face that launched a thousand ships
Is sinking fast, that happens you know,
The water gets below.
Seems not very long ago
Lovelier she was than any that I know.

Angels never know it's time
To close the book and gracefully decline...

Sail away, away
Ripples never come back.
Gone to the other side.
Sail away, away.

Words by Genesis (Rutherford, Banks)

One Day

One moment can change a day, one day can change a life and one life can change the world. — Buddah

Hospital Moderna, Montevideo, Uruguay

The wall-clock across the room ticked away, making it all real now. 8:05am.

Ana put her hand on her heart and massaged, gently kneading into her small developing breast, the warmth and softness in stark contrast to the almost scratchy starched gown she was in.

I'm sorry about this. Sorry you've hurt so much.

The lump in her throat came and her eyes contracted with mist.

You can always tell me 'no'... still. I'm listening now too.

An image of herself as a young child. The girl with full wavy auburn hair inside the playhouse simply turned her head, smiled back and then turning back went on playing like nothing.

She nodded. Business as usual. Just as before. Simply the feeling of things being right... with herself, the world...

Even that clock on the wall.

If I die in this process, I've died fighting for myself.

I'm at peace.

She was starting to see the pattern. These decisions took aggression to make. Each choice to change nature's physical default, required a certain threshold of something almost like anger despite feeling at the same time right and absolutely necessary.

She shook her head.

The paradox of being violent against her own body in the name of authenticity. It had taken the last eighteen months to face and accept that.

But I'm still sorry.

She ran her other hand over her face and neck, letting her fingers gently sink in and massage the flesh.

Hi face... hi neck... everything inside... I'm sorry...

The dark nothingness approached... it was planned to last over eight hours today.

The one I've already put through hell.

The tears intensified in her eyes.

"I'm sorry little cells," she pout-smiled and intoned almost inaudibly, as a mother to comfort a child, herself choked up with emotion.

The usual response did not surprise her.

"It's okay. We've got this."

Once again they were going to war for her.

With their blessing.

Only minutes from now, she guessed. Thrown into a state of trauma and shock. Confusion. Attack. There was no way that it was not that. The loving and innate intelligence that no matter what would fight for survival until the very end.

And even happiness.

So maybe, then, there's no conflict after all.

"Good morning Ana."

The man in green scrubs and a surgical cap whisked around the corner and smiled, causing an immediate smile back from Ana, pulling her out of contemplation.

He came see me before the surgery.

Just as he had promised.

The last little thing in the trust rebuilding process.

Check.

The one... she'd flown half way around the world for. With whom she'd fought with almost to the point of canceling plans several times in the six month waiting period. During that time she had wondered if she could trust him and his team. At best their email communications had been volatile. And now, if she had to do it again, she would have flown here six months ago to meet him in person. Because in person confirmed everything about her choice.

Terrasanto. Everyone just called him that. No 'doctor' prefix, just Terrasanto. An aesthetic and surgical genius. A hacker in his own right. A man with an internal barometer of what was good and what was not. He did forehead reconstruction differently than any other doctor in the world. The online forums were full of back and forth about him.

In the end, when someone is the one, they simply are.

And you know it.

It hadn't been about any promises he made her - in fact he only told her what he could do and where his limits were. He didn't ask so much what she wanted but more like an artist told her what he thought would be a best total result. So much different from the technician surgeons who seemed to think of her face in pieces, as if they were themselves insecure in taking responsibility for the final result and instead asking her 'what do you want to do?'.

And she'd seen examples of Terrasanto's work. So on paper and inside she knew.

A hope she'd never had before.

Back then she barely had the faith such was possible. At least for her. Not the least that all the other surgeons she'd met with at best had been reluctant.

Maybe the only one in the world who could do this.

For her. What she needed. She knew enough of life to trust such strong senses, as they were not always so clear.

If I don't trust things when they're crystal clear, its like taking a sledgehammer to my internal barometer.

She knew that from experience.

A spontaneous deep breath entered her lungs as if her body was giving its blessing into his hands. The same that had always come when she contemplated this choice, regardless of the apparent external conflicts in the interim.

"How are you this morning? Sleep well? Get here alright?"

Terrasanto continued in strong but accented English, the rapid fire questions making it clear that detailed answers weren't required. His perceptive eyes were already studying her face.

"Yes, everything was fine. Glad to be here finally!"

She smiled. Although fluent in Spanish she no longer cared to assert so when addressed in her native tongue. It was funny how the more she liked and became herself, the less ego she seemed to need to support her.

The surgeon was followed by two other men in the same type of scrubs.

"This is the rest of my surgical team, Dr. Salvatorre, Dr. Rivera, and you'll meet Dr. Guzman my anesthesiologist in the quirofano."

Standing around her bed the surgeons began talking amongst themselves, her face was the object, discussing the locations of the incisions they'd make for the various combined procedures and the surgical game plan. With the green head covers and surgical masks, all she could see was the focus and intentness of their eyes.

Another deep breath came. She felt surprisingly calm. She felt complete trust in this team and what was coming next.

How much more you appreciate what you have on the day you leave.

There was something inside that shriveled when she recognized how her defenses, the anger and anxiety so often present played into alienating herself from others. And now the same feeling, but with life itself.

All the times I've cursed the universe for putting me in this position. Giving me these challenges. And not trusted. Over and over. And every time...

The tears again came to her eyes.

Because it's been perfect. I'm always cared for in the end. Always have been...

I'm sorry life. Universe.

Thank you.

I love you. I wouldn't change for anyone.

Really.

A smile broke on her face when she realized what she'd just said to herself.

She knew today was a big point between before and after. Every piece of imperfect trust had led here. The operation and change almost no one she knew thought she should have or 'needed'.

That's what hurt. But then again...

This is not running.

She knew how good it felt to run. Drop things, start over, go somewhere new. But today was different. In the last year, running had lost the power of promise.

This is what all the running of the past was toward.

From here on I live. I face things head on...

If I live.

For the first time in her life she really saw it for what it was, the passion that made her, to the outside world including her family, appear to be fragmented and lost. Albeit a world nomad who up to now did fine supporting herself and her enigmatic lifestyle and choices. And then the last sprint to the visible goal when the mystery unraveled enough for her to see things clearly, this past year.

As if the thought of running was the cue, the gurney-bed was now in motion, guided by a pair of nurses who had come silently to the task. On her back, all she could see was the ceiling as its dimmed lights as they went by.

No more time.

She couldn't help the silent tears from falling now.

On the edge between choice and no longer having it. Like the occasional dreams she'd have of being in the waiting line to receive death.

Immediate non-existence.

Nothing about pain. Just the line between being on one side and then the other.

The huge emotion of letting go.

This must be how animals feel. On the way to...

Out of your hands unless you want one last fight.

I have no will to fight this... any longer...

A fitting climax to the past eighteen months of her life. Not to mention all the years before.

I'm all in.

She massaged her heart again and nodded.

Poor heart. I'm sorry.

Regardless of the comforting, she felt her adrenaline kick up a notch sending a visceral chill of anxiety through her system in a cool sweat.

My system. My life. I'm playing with it. I made a choice.

She took a deep breath.

Time was speeding up more now, she could feel it.

And if this is how it ends, thank you life. I've loved you.

She felt the release of big tear dropping from her eye.

A port in a wall of glass approached. The sign said *Quirofono 9*. She turned her head in curiosity. Inside, smooth white tiled walls were accented with electronic equipment, blinking lights, a few metal tables. She saw the array of x-rays of her skull up on the lighted screen behind the operating table. One more detail making her feel safe, cared for and in the right place.

As her gurney cleared the opening, the glass wall closed behind them and the room became its own enclosed and protected station.

Terrasanto, the team, and a few other people she hadn't met were already there. In her last two surgeries she had not even known if the doctor had arrived by the time she was put under, leading her to wonder even when waking up if the surgery had actually taken place.

Another detail making things just right.

As the gurney made its final roll and the nurses helped her transfer to the operating table, she was greeted by a smiling man who took her hand. Terrasanto approached them.

"This is Arnaldo Guzman, he's a genius with anesthesia".

Dr. Guzman's smile captivated Ana. It was wide and warm. Like a Cheshire cat. He had backed in with the moving gurney, having taken her hand gently, and sat casually atop the table next to her in his differentially gray surgical uniform and wrapped head. Meanwhile several other hands were on her prepping for the surgery adding to the sensory overload.

"You may be a bit dizzy," he mentioned almost in passing, still holding her hand with that mixture of comfort, professional confidence and care.

She had been put under general a handful of times before. She guessed soon they would tell her they were administering it and ask her to count down from 100. Probably that feeling of coolness flowing up her arm from the IV, the cool of unconscious sleep. Maybe the mask and to 'take a deep breath' of 'oxygen', they would say. *That one* would otherwise make her crack up... 'oxygen... yeah right'... but she had never stayed awake to do so. Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't have that mask. The smell-taste of the gas was imprinted on her psyche.

For whatever reason, she paid close attention to everything that happened each time. On the way in and the first moments out. It seemed important.

But why did he say I might feel dizzy?

Then nothing.

Black. Not even that. Not even nothing. Void.

Not.

Koona

Soothed by the sound of the nearby waterfall the two young women sat next to each other, dangling their legs, feet playing in the warm water of the amorously shaped pool of dark blue. Among the aroma of sea and suntan lotion, the beach-side sunset faced them, lulling and soothing both even beyond what the expert Thai massages had already achieved.

Long hair and slender silhouettes. Thai-slender actually, a level of petiteness, delicateness beyond, yet beautifully healthy. One woman with a round pretty typically feminine face, the other with a more forward face, eyes that rest in slightly furrowed ovals giving her an aura of being serious and quiet, even angry. Always the relative introvert or the two, everyone always said how striking she was but she had yet to believe it.

They were the only ones remaining, as it was midweek in off season. As well, the last of the hovering men they were habitually used to - according to Koona, really after Cat - had been waved off, as always, without second thought.

Cat toyed with the water surface with her toes. She had never really considered it, but it had always been this way with Koona and it felt strangely right. Forever friends and just here, alone together. They had always waved off the guys when they were hanging out. To the very last one, even the cutest and best looking. It was like an unspoken agreement, a loyalty.

That's all.

Cat smiled and stared off into the approaching sunset, darkening blue skies punctuated and shrouded by clouds of every color from the light puffy to angry looking shades of dark gray. All framed by the surrounding trees and freshly lighted evening torches, the light warm wind soothing primally, deep inside.

"This is so amazing!" She could not control the feeling of beauty and awe not to mention the warmth and company of belonging with a lifelong friend, at the end of a few days of just hanging out, beauty treatments, massages and Netflix.

She caught Koona's subtle nod in agreement, the other woman still staring off dreamily into the distance. Always on the same page with one another, without words.

She and Koona, were two of a kind in childhood in Chiang Mai but separated in early adolescence when she was sent to Japan for school. But they had both found their way to the same university in Bangkok which renewed their inseparability without missing a beat. Aside from another fateful trip back to Japan for herself for a year, they had both ended up living and working in Bangkok, like so many young up-and-coming Thai's did.

Cat smiled to herself. To her, her friend had not changed a bit, but in the outside world Koona had become one of the top finance execs in the country. It was weird how this was. Working at one multinational then another, as well as with a seemingly constant flow of interested farang - foreigner - suitors. Good ones. Cat had always assumed the eventual outcome - Koona ending up in a foreign country, for work, love or both.

And of course herself with her own passion, her beauty clinics. But they still arranged at least every couple weeks to get together. At the mall or simply take a walk in the park. Celebrating the plentiful Thai holidays together when they were not returning to home up north, often also together. Always close and open with each other about everything, boys, then men, suitors, drama and whatever else was going on.

Each reached thirty years old this year. The birthday's came and went without any apparent change in themselves or lives.

It'd be nice if this never changed.

It was a thought she had never had before.

Maybe that's what's different after you hit thirty?

She nodded unconsciously and smiled ironically.

I wonder if we'll loose this when one of us gets married.

"What are you thinking about?"

Koona's husky voice modulated close to her ear, pulling Cat off-guard out of her world-off thoughts.

She turned her head to Koona with a broad smile as her world, one that was so orderly and bright teetered, like a glass ball balanced at the edge of a precipice.

The Price Tag

"Hi Mark," he whispered, rubbing the photo gently.

The words escaped full lips, gray-blue eyes meeting with his current reflection in the mirror ahead while the old self, Mark, stared back blankly from the voided passport in his hand.

A person I am no longer.

And today even less, by legal name.

Switching his eyes to the freshly minted passport, he smiled, seeing his new name in the black ink. He ignored the icky feeling resulting from the fact that his picture looked more like a gay queen than anything resembling female. One who in the past habitually made a point of paying attention to such subtle conflicts and detracting feelings, at some point the noise and drive in the foreground had gotten too loud to consider such things.

The chain of events over years that brought this moment came from somewhere deep inside. A part of him - seemingly very physical and in his body - that seemed to hold an override switch even over what he wanted most in life and in his heart. This driven part of him had its own momentum and agenda.

Or more like a compulsion? Was it healthy?

When ignored or displaced, it would sooner than later return full force and irresistibly. The start was always sexual.

To be taken.

The both forbidden and delicious feeling in his gut that only in recent years had he decided to be okay with. If for no other reason than he had no control over it.

To surrender. To feel embraced and penetrated completely that the energy in his pelvis could run up his body and fully express itself... straightening his spine, opening his heart and neck along the way before it then connected him to all that was and is.

But from there it led elsewhere. It needed to be expressed and he could never conceive of not doing so.

In intimate connection.

And not as a man. It was just not acceptable to not be a woman in this expression, the mandate coming from the most visceral parts of his body. Mental gymnastics and therapy aside, he could never get there.

Getting smooth. Waxing. Always the first step.

Where it led after required every ounce of self-permission he could muster. And each time more than before. Not to mention the time, money and energy. And fighting the unspoken feeling and thought behind all this that told him this was a waste of life and resources.

Becoming high maintenance. At least relatively.

All vanity.

This drive supplied the needed aggression and the leap to execute on things the world thought - or wanted to think - were out of character and even not natural, not to mention breaking his own heart in the process.

So here I am.

The sadness came the moment he saw the old passport.

The man who once was.

He could see this, feel it. Who seemed to have a certain possible future. Not that he wished him back. Even when he'd tried, time and again over the years to give him another shot...

Even as he watched his world get smaller and smaller, from being higher maintenance to the stress of not conforming to the likes of society as a whole....

The path always ends up back here. One way or the other...

To my worst nightmare.

The hope of some *normal resolution* had been dashed on the same rock too many times for the damage not to be imprinted.

He put his hands on his knees to balance himself and took a deep breath to balance the lightheadedness that took over more and more lately. He felt his ever faithful heart beat heavily in his ears. The walk up the five flights of stairs had had the same effect as it had started to of late.

Tears came up to his eyes.

Like wounding an innocent animal...

My heart. My body. The faithful and insistent life inside, nature itself. The collateral victim.

It was this feeling, that came more often these days, that...

I'm in the process of destroying myself.

His trajectory felt like a runaway train that not only could he not get off, but at the same time, one he chose to stay aboard.

Another wave of tears came and he didn't hold them back this time.

"I'm sorry I could not be you," he looked at the photo in the old passport, "I'm sorry I couldn't make you happy."

All of which simply increased the crescendo of tears.

Maybe this is why people don't like crying.

Crying had always felt good before. But this time it was different.

Maybe this is how people feel at funerals.

He'd never understood that completely either.

Looking back into the mirror he knew he'd fought his whole life to stay in the light and away from this. Even as a child, San Francisco had felt to be a dark place. The gay place. Of 'alternative lifestyles'.

And now here he was in this tiny studio in the Tenderloin, in the heart of the deep San Francisco fog, something in any possible future he would have prohibited from his life... Living in the darkness.

BDSD, S&M, TS/TV... gay... bisexual...

Words from the shocking adult newspaper he and his brother as adolescents had once found on an SF street on a family visit to the city. All indelibly etched along with the feelings and images a child creates when contemplating incomprehensible sexual acts, some involving pain. Hearing about men, bathhouses and an out of control disease that was killing them. Men who dress as women.

And that he was a man too. At least seen as one.

And that I always loved being penetrated.

Well... I look gay.

It fits right in now.

Alone. No real in-person friends. Not having had a date much less embraced with anyone for years now.

Not living... in this world or that one...

And mine getting smaller and smaller.

The ghost of the woman who could have been the *one* for him cried along inside. Who he'd longed for since early childhood. She was the only point of doing anything in life.

Still.

But I don't even imagine her anymore, holding her when I fall asleep at night anymore.

Because it all seemed further from any possibility. With each step on his path toward what he called the 'fem', powered by this inner force, it seemed females in the world took a step away from him.

Except to have a gay friend.

He nodded sadly.

I've become my worst fucking nightmare.

And I'm not even fucking gay. Jesus!

If there was a way to put out into the world every possible wrong signal about who he was and wanted most deeply inside, this was it. And the heartbreaking thing was, whatever this was deep inside...

I still want it.

I don't make a reversal.

When I try it never sticks.

This is my price.

The fem is more important than my heart.

Maybe than even my life.

He shook his head and dropped to the floor. Against the wall of the dark closet, falling back through the hanging clothes, embracing his knees with his arms, surrendering to the deeper tears. The ones that take over sound and breathing, running through the body as if they own it.

Because today they do.

Shocked

Cat had turned her head in the direction of her friend's husky voice. Koona's now striking soft alpha face was very close. Dark eyes, wide, with what seemed like perpetual and indelible makeup that was just their natural beauty. They searched Cat's own coffee brown before they traveled down to her lips. Koona was leaning over and it was only inches that now separated them.

Busted.

Koona's proximity disturbed and invigorated something deeply intimate in Cat. It was the last thing expected and she had no idea what to do. What with always being close, hugging and embrace between them had always felt so normal. But this, even though they were not touching...

The tone had changed.

No words were spoken but there was no escaping what clearly was now, just like the object they had watched way out in the ocean become apparent as a ship... and then a cruise ship... then the Princess line.

That real.

Koona felt both excitement and fear inside. Not only Cat was her best friend, but she did not understand completely what was going on with her. Why she was losing control. And why now? She'd held these feelings close over the years. But they were now breaking her apart.

Maybe its just age. Time passing... makes you crazy...

Cat held Koona's gaze, unable to relinquish it nor process what was going on either. She swallowed. Her jaw relaxed and lips parted slightly, unconsciously.

Something in deep in her abdomen felt an incredible excitement too, desire yet enveloped in fear, nondescript but it felt very personal and vulnerable.

Dangerous.

In the given moment it was an unclear and confusing feeling.

But not foreign.

_So from where? _

Without warning she felt her feet brace against the pool wall, as if not her own, with them and a feeling of giddiness, her hands pushed off like a rocket and buried herself in the water. As deep as she could. Holding her breath as long as she could. No thoughts, just the impulse action of activity, of doing something, anything to maintain her world intact.

Kaa Kaa

"Chan chop gin puk gup kaew ka," Mali completed the sentence perfectly albeit mechanically.

"Kaa kaa!" Kuhn Nok, the teacher at the whiteboard affirmed, "Jonathan, *poot arai Mali na Angrit ka?* -- Jonathan, can you translate what Mali said?"

"He likes to eat vegetables and rice?"

The teacher smiled in partial acknowledgment and corrected, "SHE likes to eat vegetables and rice. Remember, 'ka' at the end is for female, 'krup' is for male."

The other student, a big black guy from Chicago, looked about to protest but thought better of it.

Mali's lips turned up in a smile.

Fuck me. She's correcting people on my gender. All for the price of using the 'ka' instead of the 'krup' at the end of the sentence.

He had had no 'identity conversation' with the teacher or anyone in the class. Not the usual crap you had to do in English if you want something when you don't meet the standard the culture has set for you to be yourself: *'I identify as female and use the pronouns she, her and hers...'* and all that bullshit.

It seemed obnoxious to \$er.

Something Mali had no heart for because...

I don't look to people like a woman. I look like a rockstar. Or a gay guy.

A gay rockstar probably.

I would have to go around the world telling everyone then. I don't want to force people to make me be what they don't see in me themselves.

Uphill battle.

And there was the latent truth that \$he did not even realize at the core...

I want to see and be seen. For who and what I am. And on the trajectory I'm on, if I can't have that... I'm truly destroying my life.

Fuck me.

Fuck you English.

Fuck you puritan creepy fuck-off American culture.

Thailand is so much easier.

The fact was, below the surface as it was, Mali's pronoun and gender for him, her, or whatever 'self' depended upon the world. How others seemed to define him, her, them, whatever. Setting up a perpetual conflict with others and the world.

And reading the above paragraph you can get the sucky confusion and wordiness if you don't know which pronoun to use for someone...

Or what is right with yourself.

So in this moment Mali wrote proudly in the notebook in block, double embossing each letter...

\$HE

\$ER

\$ERSELF

For now that's what I am.

Like a variable in computer code.

A variable in code is a placeholder which at least in some languages can be assigned anything... and generally changed while the program runs.

\$he = 'she'

\$he = 'he'

\$he = 'Mali'

\$he = 'Mark'

\$he = 12345

\$he = ['The', 'Real', 'Fuckface', 'Von', 'Clownstick'].join(' ')

A placeholder, and what's inside is changeable. A work in progress. Like a shell in a shell game, you may know which shell contains the item, but the shell itself is not the thing inside it, which you may or may not know what it is.

If you're hacking into some code, you may see the variable but until you look inside it, you don't know for sure what it contains. It might have a nice name like...

\$Cassandra

But look inside... what is in there?

The world... the people outside see only the variable, not what its value is. And they make inferences and judgements based on only that. Which you can imagine makes it hard for someone like this:

\$BigTallMan = 'Jessica'

Especially when SHE walks into a bathroom in some hick town in Texas.

That's why \$he came back to Thailand. Thailand seemed to be less obsessed with coupling the variable name - its shell - to what was inside and made the country a good playground, compared to many places. It did not have the often present threat of outrage and violence that the US seemed to hold.

Mali's naive thoughts upon making the travel plans were - and without timeline - maybe try out hormones, a couple of relatively minor surgeries to if not become female in appearance, at least a lot cuter...

Harmonize my variable... my container...

And do due diligence to know what this mystery inside *actually is*.

Dee and Dee

Cat plunged deeper into the twilight water, continuing to hold her breath for what seemed like a super-human time, and through it a series of semi-conscious thoughts passed that never quite made it through to prime time...

She's my best friend!!!

But we're both Dee's. Feminine women.

In Thailand it is men and women, Tom's and Dee's.

Dee's and Dee's? Never.

She had heard of this but the couples were laughed at and called abnormal.

How could it be?

We're both not only normal but successful people. High performing!

Far from the night life and the street...

But it was happening right now. Inside her and she'd lost her grip to keep it at bay.

Ah, but I'm not gay.

Somewhere more deeply sub-conscious, Cat had a hope that somehow Koona would make this easy for her. Koona was always there. She was always the one to get things to work right no matter what the situation was...

And without still knowing her true emotions, Cat surfaced and intently looked for Koona where she had been sitting.

Because even within all that fear in her was a hope she was not willing to admit, rationalized as friendship. And coming up for air, that hope was now.

As if Koonas and the air she'd done without were one and the same thirst.

Cat's heart dropped.

Koonas was no longer there.

Or anywhere.

MRT

Heading out of the air-conditioned Sukhumvit 'Times Square' building, the sweet warm humidity of the Bangkok evening hit Mali. She smiled. This felt good. The class, the little camaraderie with the other expats. Even the Chicago guy seemed okay in the end. There was something fulfilling about being social, even frivolously social she had never really ever enjoyed before in her life.

It wasn't lost on her that this was also the first time her felt gender had ever been affirmed publicly. It was strange as she never felt okay to ask for this or state it herself. But given the choice of 'ka' or 'krup' she knew which one she was more of.

And here I get to choose...

I'm a katoey here. Ladyboy. Transgender woman.

I'm seen.

First a katoey. Not a gay guy. Not a drag queen. Not a 'man in a dress'.

I'm defined as something...

At least more like I feel I am.

It doesn't even matter what I look like.

That was something she'd absorbed from the various Thai katoey movies she'd watched in her first time in Thailand the year before. The pride and absolute disregard for the haters but for the own femininity and self-regard of even the most masculine appearing katoey. It was amazing. Anyone, she saw, could be fabulous... and just themselves...

_For the choosing. _

It had been two months since her breakdown back in that SF apartment and the resulting decision to come back to Thailand. For hope. To progress. Steps which seemed far too difficult and scary back in the United States. Bangkok felt a world away from San Francisco. It did not have that dark energy. It was more like a hybrid between urban Mexico and NYC.

Walking down the steps of the Asok MRT subway station, she felt just a little more herself, more authentic. A little proud even. Proud was not a familiar feeling to Mali, so a little was a lot. With a slender one-hundred-thirty pound dancer's frame, only that her face was so much masculine, in a European-type way, long, oval with big lips, pronounced cheek-bones. Always a target for the gay men throughout her life, making things ever more complicated in the social world.

I do wonder how Cat sees me.

One inconvenient fact was the Thai culture seemed to regard katoey as only being romantically and sexually interested in men, and of course that was a problem. Cat was the receptionist at the beauty clinic she was going to for her ongoing laser facial hair removal. On whom she'd developed an enigmatic crush.

Would I drop the fem and be a guy if she was into me?

Would she be the one who is so special that it overrides all of this?

It was not a new thought for her - that the perfect woman, 'the one' could fix this that ailed her, but before it had always been a hypothetical question while the fem train she was on continued its seemingly wayward journey. But now... the problem was embodied in a real woman.

Cat was *that* attractive to her.

The perfect woman.

Standing

Several Months Later...

Chatuchak Park, Bangkok

A slender silhouette stands by the edge of the lake amidst a chorus of cicadas. A thin oval head, slender body and big hair make an appearance that seems as likely in a Dr. Seuss book as in the surreality of predawn Bangkok.

Alone.

Stationed under the tree with huge protruding roots, half in the water and half on land. Those which are visible and those only known to existence by inference or from their subtle reflection through the water. And the massive trunk they hold upright. Above, the branches extend like protective arms in many directions with the effortless grace that only a tree can embody perfectly.

The figure's arms, like branches too, are held circularly in front of their chest, fingertips of each hand pointing to the other, knees slightly bent, back straight. All seems to be in complete stillness.

It's way before sunrise but nevertheless tank top weather, the sultry humidity foreshadowing yet another completely normal Bangkok day. The sweet smell of natural bug repellent lingers around the figure. The early morning exercisers - joggers, the tai-chi and qi gong crowds one by one and few by few are making their way, to their usual spots and routines. Usually the first ones here, some notice the return of the silent farang to the scenery. Several months had passed since they'd seen...

Him? Her? Too slender for a man. Too minor a head. Too tall for a woman. Wider hips than a man. Not a woman's chest. Crazy mop of hair, frizz that seems on its way to wanting to belong in some horrible frustrated neverland.

The face hidden in the shadows hides its distinctions secretly in the one time of day the conflicts are fewer. The occasional passing and curious onlooker wouldn't know at this hour that the situation was almost as ambiguous inside as out.

Whoever.

Falang never show face.

Mali has long loved the solitude of the early morning. Time away. Alone. In the darkness. Before the emerging forms and definitions could be easily cast. A relief. Time to reset. A chance at a new beginning. Toward this everlasting hope and passionate drive inside.

For whatever reason years ago \$he honed in on \$er body being the answer to the conflicts \$he felt. All the tension \$he seemed to have no conscious ability to release or control. Not to mention the romantic sense and sexuality which has defied \$er apparent male incarnation. The abundant feminine energy in \$er pelvis \$er primary teacher.

But even in the brightness of day, like the tree, half in, half out, half in overwhelming feeling, half immobile, half rooted in the ground yet stuck, but with a head and heart - and hope higher in the sky as seemingly anyone, as such was \$er existence.

A tall skyscraper looms through the trees, on the other side of the street, poised to provide shade as the sun rises. 'TMB' in red and blue letters glows at top. Mali has positioned \$erself specifically in its line of shadow knowing that \$he will be standing here immobile for \$er usual forty-five minutes - and it being important to be shielded even from the earliest morning sun. As much as for a few extra minutes of shaded solitude as to protect \$er skin from what will already be indelible sun rays, and its resulting entropy.

Not good for skin or beauty.

A few ducks float by on their early morning food paddle making an ever so slight murmur in the still water, oblivious of the silent presence.

Mali is after something. Been after something. For years now, day after day, going inside. Not to mention all the years leading up to such. This practice, alone, the solitude and discipline for the good yet still not masterful rewards, also matched the rest of \$er life.

Good but not great.

Closer but not spot on.

Even with this essential morning reset, on the average day things virtually always went downhill from the stillness, poise and whatever grace achieved.

I only know a few things for sure. I may not know exactly where home is. But I know this is the way.

Mali had the somatic inner confidence to dismiss every teacher, sifu and martial arts master to date.

My power is softness. Slow, minute movement. When my body becomes more aligned, more symmetric, muscles balance themselves, it brings...

Joy.

Anything or anyone empirically contradicting this got the boot. Anyone who espoused speed or force before perfect slow mastery.

\$he knew this joy was inside \$er but no one seemed to see it. It had at best been drummed out of the public view with laughter and ridicule in childhood. If in fact it was ever fully accessible at all in \$er.

I can't remember... But I can feel it there. The thing under everything. Like the eternal flame. Perhaps at times a tiny flicker but it's always there. Another of the few things I actually know.

Only in the past year had \$er discipline crystallized to a level of conscious comprehension, a system and checklist with consistent results.

As the body becomes increasingly symmetric, front to back and side to side, and the muscle tone between opposing muscles balance...

It was the practical theory \$he'd come up with to describe how \$he could get there. And more and more \$he could apply it at will.

...comes true authenticity, joy... super-consciousness...

Or in more practical words, the ability to...

J_ust be myself._

This translated practically to acquiring the ability to move and adjust consciously in micro-movements, aligning the front-back tilt of each body region as well as the lateral and twisting relationship of every body part to the other.

It was ironic that the discipline \$he poured in to excavating \$erself - which showed increasingly as female or yearning to be such - in its diligence felt disciplined, focused, even controlling...

Mali smirked.

Using the male programming to become free of itself.

Pretty funny.

It made \$er happy - and confident - to know that \$he never had to be lost to \$erself again. At least for long. What in the early days required much more effort, time and muscle - and sometimes losing the path for months on end - as much as now it required the opposite - softness, balance and alignment, finesse. And just a few moments.

The practice was \$er rock. For the mornings. Along with almost daily afternoon hoopedancing. Practice probably being the wrong word. Joy would be a better one. It was a desire and release, not a 'have to'. Standing, solitary and contained. Hoopdance, passionate and expressive albeit following the same evolution over the years of brute force and effort moving toward grace, softness and minimal effort just as standing.

A slight breeze caressed \$er bare arm and face from the side. Like a gentle tug. A reminder of what is truly delicious. At the edge of the lake, like at the edge of life looking on in...

My life... practicing... just to be able to exist...

Each day coming and going like a number, starting like this.

This was \$er lifeline and consumed much time, including what would be otherwise social time. \$he was always aware of this tradeoff of friends, fun, even maybe lovers.

I'd have it no other way in the early morning. This moment I only want to be here. Alone.

The dusk, evening, going to bed alone, was when the longing would present.

A third thing I truly know.

Mali smirked.

Today we're counting I guess...

Ever since \$he could remember, the embrace, with a girl, now a woman. The always elusive melting contact together. True connection, intimacy.

The primary dream.

And the heartbreak that the same force \$he was connected to now leading \$er into increased authenticity was in direct opposition to ever having this.

That one magical night with Cat aside.

Even the general limerick in Thailand had been getting drummed into \$er head... 'Thai ladyboy like men not women'... \$he'd heard it over and over and it made \$er pissed.

But what else could \$he do? To stop fighting was not an option. To stop this practice, the entropy of \$er grace and structure would begin to unacceptably degenerate in just a day or two making \$er run back to the early morning discipline. Stopping this fight would be also akin to stop loving and revering life... and what \$he felt inside.

The same reverence made \$er doubt some of the things \$he was doing now in \$er life, and wanted to do. But they were all connected... \$er pelvis, standing straight, opening \$er chest and heart, feeling female, hormones, surgeries...

Too much passion.

I've come a long way. And every step of it toward the fem.

That night kind of proved it's working.

In younger years \$he felt due to the excessive tension and gridlock in \$er body that trying to express the passion inside was like sending a million volts of electricity through a thin constricted wire. Energy that when tried to be felt and expressed would result in even more gridlock and tension because there was just too much of it and a constricted conduit getting blown out, burned.

But that night...

The full charge of energy came through \$er unimpeded.

For the first time ever... and with another person...

\$he shook \$er head in disbelief still of that evening and smiled. It had been ridiculous. Everything \$he had dreamed about in connection with another.

Complete union.

But the moment after...

Complete separation.

Until tonight.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

And why I am back here in Bangkok today.

Mali slowly and slightly rolled the bottoms of \$er feet. Pressing the ball of the left foot just behind the big toe into the ground. And then the same on the left. Then each heel too, alternating feet. Outside ball of left foot. Then the right. Inner left ankle. Right ankle, slightly flexing each joint. Outer ankle. Pushing the left heel into the ground and feeling the left knee extend. Then right. Left hip up toward ribs. Right.

Left shoulder up... down... forward... backward, all with the right side in turn. And so \$he worked through the body the preliminary exercise which allows the generally contralateral and differentially left and right wired brain sensory-motor areas to create a more accurate map of the current and actual body asymmetries and muscle tone imbalances.

The magic of all this which Mali discovered is that by bringing such awareness to the brain, without further conscious intervention, the brain takes over to do an often almost miraculous realignment... Essentially creating a 'current state' map, to which the brain is able to superimpose with the more ideal prototype it already knows.

My true self.

The template of the best me.

The image of a perfect, open spine with arms outstretched, unimpeded to the heavens came to \$er as a visceral feeling. The innate, wise part of \$er that seemed would take over and run the show if \$he could eventually let it.

Being all that I am... and can be.

Just as a prism divides the pure light into a rainbow, the longing for bonding, intimacy and love had somehow become disconnected from \$er innate sexuality not to mention, male or female identity.

\$he was somehow now in this in-between place, living in fragmented light. It was currently a painful mystery that in the moment the prototype \$he was after seemed to be at odds with \$er core dream and longing.

Standing was \$er way of getting the cohesive light back, it's what \$he felt and trusted... And Mali was spending \$er free time writing an app which formalized this system...

Maybe other's bodies work similarly...

So things - all this that is my solitary life - could mean something, someday, to someone else.

Another warm breeze caressed \$er now slightly perspiring skin, the resulting coolness like a whisper making \$er feel that everything was and would forever be alright. Everything was already okay in the pure now. Nature and the outdoors had that way with \$er.

\$er eyes teared as the peace of stillness overcame, finding that familiar better place. Muscle tension ceased to exist and as the alignment progressed, \$he came to be as one.

Moments ceased to be divided and flowed together into a timeless place. A place where forty-five minutes, an hour, would pass like nothing.

\$he fell into the nothingness of stillness and balance.

The sideline of life where \$he felt \$he lived most waking moments dissolved.

There is no sideline.

I just am.

And have always been.

_This. _

A deep breath filled \$er like water in the desert breaking the tears of freedom open further. The insidious complex of tension in \$er neck, shoulders and heart broke as it often did.

A full smile came over \$er face as the tears silently streamed rivers unhindered down \$er cheeks, cascading down \$er neck and down the middle of \$er chest. \$he could not explain the feeling aside from being authentic joy. Relief.

And the tears, freedom.

There was nothing more addictive than feeling this way.

Nothing.

Why I do this.

And everything.

It was the only actual feeling in life that made \$er know not to fear death. The mind being off and everything being still was actually very sweet.

Now I remember...

Who I am.

I'm nothing.

And everything.

Onwards of an hour later \$er closed eyes dozed open slightly allowing in with always surprising vividness color and light as if \$he'd slept, as if it was a second new day but in a Technicolor world. Across the striking dark blue lake \$er eyes made out the form of a slender and athletic Thai woman jogging. Poised and straight, a graceful neck that seemed to oscillate with each foot-fall, the envy of envies to Mali, being the major challenge in \$er own posture. Straight black hair pulled back in a French braid. The muscle tone in her jaw depicted determination and strength, in a kind of masculine way that \$he loved to see in a woman.

Strong, beautiful. Hot.

What she takes for granted.

Then came the immediate sadness.

What I do too.

What we all do.

Breath entered again making its sweet presence know in Mali's lungs.

Under it all the familiar feeling of both wanting to be with and wanting to be at the same time.

I hope this is what's coming back to me tonight.

The almost gone feeling of hope was still an ember. But \$he checked the thought as the first vestige of tension and disharmony returned to \$er body. As \$he had become used to in life, letting go of what \$he hoped for and creating a more compelling plan in place of the originally desired tended to work magic.

Not Cat then.

Instead, me!

Thai Reality

Outside the steel fence, the tranquil greenery abruptly ended and the concrete jungle began. The park was bordered on three sides by the gigantic 'tanons' - boulevards - the same of which could be found all over the city. Cars - many cars - densely populated the road, coming into existence just as the light of day too had come to pass.

_Rot tit. _

Mali smiled at the Thai words for traffic jam.

Synonym: Bangkok.

When: Always.

Where: Every major street that leads anywhere directly.

The taxi drivers were always amused when \$he'd spout the word. It was one of the ways \$he knew to create good feeling and commonality which was highly valued in the Thai culture.

Where there was not 'traffic jam' were mazes of side streets and alleys which only the most experienced taxi drivers could use effectively as many of the little portals ended abruptly. But some didn't and the navigation by some of these drivers to Mali bordered on genius. These side streets or "soi's" were finishing touches on a city and country which Mali had in earnest started to believe that many things had been arranged by some Machiavellian mastermind to keep foreigners in an at-best confused twilight. Busses with one name but variable routes. Words that \$he could pronounce but no one could understand. Transliterated signs with letters that did not come close to the actual sound of the word - not in the Thai alphabet, not in the phonetic alphabet and certainly not in English!

All part of the fun and mystery.

Not to mention the juxtaposition of the apparent respectful status toward foreigners and at the same time the sense of them being the primary joke of the natives. Of the kindness in one minute and then virtually being laughed at to \$er face, with Thai words \$he was assumed not to know.

As always, walking in these post-standing moments, \$er body felt at its best, strong, aligned, cohesive, even graceful as \$he began the twenty-something minute trek.

\$he passed the bus stop and the lines that had formed to board ever crowded and rather old busses with destinations to the nether-regions the giant unknowable city. Whereas in Mexico or other countries \$he could find \$erself intrigued by the busses, their numbers and the names of destinations, these days and here, they held very little interest. If nothing else it was simply too hot to make geographic exploration much fun.

Some eyes of those in line rested on \$er as \$he passed but it was okay.

It meant \$he looked good, tall, graceful, maybe even strong. When they were just eyes, not words, they were like a Rorachach to \$er inner state.

Eyes are okay when you feel good, have poise and grace.

Soon \$he was back to the preferred solitude as \$he upped the steps of the first of two expansive pedestrian skyways which criss-crossed above the tanons and would deliver \$er to Tanon Latprao, which would lead back to the hotel.

Making \$er way up the second skyway, the panorama was simply city, morning sunlight came from somewhere beyond in the forgotten sky. Two large shopping malls, several skyscrapers with the rest being two or three story serial buildings, the kind and style that seem to populate many large cities, roll up door bodega shops on the first floor with a few floors of apartments above.

A woman passed by on her way across the bridge and stared. The long held stare. An enabled stare. The one that says you may as well be an inanimate fucking object. Mali was often conscious of the fact that in a split second when receiving such a look if \$he added a smile it could turn into a heart-filling moment of connection. Unfortunately even now \$er defenses did not permit such.

And why the fuck does it always have to be me who smiles first???

In \$er mind they were different, but for \$er sensibilities now over half a year into \$er Thailand journey, it was a tie between the inanimate object stare and being laughed at and talked about just feet away. They both in the end led \$er to the same place.

\$he felt the minute anxiety and accompanying tension of defense raise. It always was disheartening.

And the story of my life.

This was not just Thailand.

In the US and other western countries, people would tend to look away sooner. Here not so much, added to the mix that people would often laugh or even say words to their companions in plain ear sight. \$he did not know all the details but enough times the words farang, katoey and laughter paired made a plausible story. It hurt here as with everywhere. The difference was that here it didn't feel dangerous as it did in the USA, although for some reason it hurt more.

I know they're calling me a transgender foreigner. Thats okay in theory, aside from the inanimate object stares.

But fuck the laughter.

It was like people there often seemed to feel they had the right to stare, do double and triple takes with \$er.

Gets fucking old...

And although \$he was no stranger to relative isolation in \$er life, isolation of course made it worse here. So over time, in the day to day, with the culture here \$he could only characterize it for \$erself as polarized love-hate. Or love-anxiety relationship, punctuated with uneasiness and feeling ashamed when \$he seemingly overreacted from what \$he held in.

\$he remembered the day in this general area \$he'd walked with a friend from Thai class, a tall and quite attractive woman. \$er friend had also been stared at and on an occasion called katoey. Mali smiled at the memory. On one hand it helped to know... that it happened to genetically female foreigners too here. On the other...

They're still gender categorization obsessed assholes.

In Thailand \$he appreciated the crazy amalgamation of new and old, modern and traditional. The deep history and Buddhism, the dark unknowable alleys of the city as the Thai psyche itself paired with the most modern, over the top malls, technology centers and innovation. Superior street food outside of five-star glitzy restaurants. Not to mention their polarized femininity and masculinity coupled with what seemed like everything in between. Tom's and Dee's, gays and katoeys.

And to this mess, add a heaping measure of self-consciousness. Image.

The selfie-culture.

Insecurity, especially in the heteronormative young, female world which \$he had grown to dislike, the ultra-feminine, temperamental and at least superficially vapid young females who did nothing apparently than shop and text. All this made \$er feel less feminine than \$he felt in the US due to the divide.

But then there were others, the LGBT types \$he'd come across in the 7-11's, cafes. And so many good natured people in their forties and above. So in short whatever anger or frustration would boil over in Mali would be checked regularly with shame when \$he met with kindness and what seemed to be a genuine smile and connection.

Just like my own volatility and insecurity.

This place is a perfect reflection.

Don't even think of leaving here until you've worked yourself out.

Mali warned \$erself about this regularly. It was the intuitive and unwritten deal \$he had with \$erself that \$he was going to resolve \$erself here and soon. And not leave until then. \$he had a habit of moving and was starting to wonder if it too wasn't an escape.

Running away.

This place is the best chance I have.

Like it or not.

Mali was no stranger to surreal living and the sometimes floating feeling about \$er life, in Thailand exacerbated by low cost of living relative to almost any major city in the world. Mali, then Mark, had left the normal 'job' life in 2009 and began freelance programming to support \$erself. Self-trained, \$he had wondered if \$he had what it took. But \$he got one client that lasted a couple years, then another, then another. All of which enabled first a new life in NYC, then as if to push the boundaries, \$he went to live in \$er old love, Guadalajara, Mexico.

The problem was... it worked. \$he didn't miss a beat with \$er client. This fueled the fire of pushing boundaries virtually at-whim, city and country hopping for the last five years. And in the meanwhile finding the freedom to explore \$er identity more. At least in appearance. It was amazing what you could do to be free if you had money and could be virtually anywhere.

In \$er words it was 'simple living' but \$he generally went where \$he wanted, when \$he wanted, saving a good amount of money on the way due to making \$er US contracting rate. In a way \$he started to understand how it might feel to be wealthy or a celebrity and have so much freedom of time and location.

But the flipside was - just as with the celebrities - that sanity could also at times seem like a relative thing.

Like tonight may be.

It was virtually guaranteed to be.

But the unknown was in which direction.

The Pink Button-Down Shirt

That evening...

What was I thinking?

Cat was staring at her date again.

Friend? Date.

No. Nooooooooo!

Friend.

Date. I was the one who asked...

Her deep brown eyes and impeccable Japanese poise veiled the internal conversation expertly, adding to the already unknowable mastery of her Thai birth culture.

_But that night... _

What is anything?

It's frying my brain.

This and everything surrounding the situation. She had missed Mali enough to call, in the hopes to see. If the friend, the time together, the *before could be...*

But now?

I wanted *that* Mali to show up. I miss - uh...

Him.

The hope HE represented.

Future boyfriend. A 'yes', at least a 'maybe' instead of a...

No way.

Regardless of how easy and perfect they were together, there was something more than that. Something that had been on her mind ever since the night the dam broke.

With HIM I could make sense...

Of me. Of how I am.

Having a man with her. Not any man, but a man *like that* made her feel like she was okay inside too. Secure and safe.

A chance. And the connection...

It reminded her so much of how it had felt with her best friend, like it had been with Koona, transparent, natural.

I want more. More connection, fun, and of course love.

And a man.

And what happened in the bedroom?

Cats breath caught at the thought as it always did since that night a few weeks back.

Well, at least up to that point.

She had still not come to grips with who she'd become there either.

But that's beside the point. It's fine if it's just in the bedroom.

But it wasn't just the act and she knew it. It was what inspired it, triggered a desire and abandon she'd never known. She had hoped Mali would come back as the rock-star she'd projected on 'him' when they had met and first gotten to know each other. A guy who could be that and love with her the way they had been *that night*.

That's the point! But this is not who \$he is.

The person sitting in front of her confirmed it.

Heck, I even encouraged this!

Although she wanted to kick herself even for perhaps inspiring Mali to go further in embracing \$er femininity, she knew how selfish that was and recoiled inside against her own thought.

She took a deep breath as the realization settled.

I can't do this.

There's a reason I stayed away and felt so confused.

I should have listened to that.

When Mali had walked in a few minutes late Cat had watched \$er approach from afar. At first her eyes caught at Mali's hips in \$er fitted blue jeans. Then \$er lower back, smaller, gracefully muscled and more slender than many women... that perfect ass. \$he reminded her of the dancer woman in the movie *The Black Swan*. She had admitted to herself that although Mali's face was masculine, \$er body, especially that ass, exuded an energy that felt female.

Mali's long legs one in front of the other, perfectly aligned feet-knees-hips-ribs, graceful and not even trying. It wasn't a show, it was what \$he was. Not to mention the energy and feeling that came from \$er...

And what was between those legs...

Being with Mali had been nothing like being with a man. But it was the same that had put her over the edge that night... that feeling... that tight body. Female energy against her. It was intoxicating. And really all about why she, after everything, had suggested Mali come tonight.

In rapid succession Koonas came to mind. She'd never thought about it but Koonas was tall too...

I don't understand it but I want more.

Of something.

I thought it was this. But that shirt...

The pink button-down shirt was tied at Mali's thin waist. Tight blue jeans and combat boots. Five centimeter silver sliver pendant earrings, add to that makeup that was... over the top just enough to be questionably theatrical and not flattering.

From the neck down perhaps... a country type.

From the neck up... uh... flamboyant? Is that the word?

The combination of the two being fine aside that they created the illusion of what...

Neither wanted.

She did not know how Mali could have made it all the way from Chatuchak on the MRT without being stared at constantly by the not to mention hovering gay men.

It's not that \$he looked bad.

But toggle a tight black tank top and pull the faders down on the makeup and voila...

You have rock-star Mali!

She made her way to Mali's face and lost the illusion.

What we're you expecting here Cat?

The girl she saw in the body she did not see above \$er shoulders. The intensity of the night they'd shared mostly in the shadows clearly had created some projection and transference. She'd begun to desire something more...

But this isn't it. I know now.

With the initial 'hi' from Mali, she realized, in the way Mali smiled and how \$he talked that Mali had a way to go even to accept \$erself.

\$he's not all female. Not yet at least. I don't see it in \$er eyes.

Cat caught herself in the thought.

As if you're looking for a woman, Cat?!

The problem was, the extra feminization Mali attempted out of anxious anticipation of this evening did nothing in the service of the felt inner being \$he was so desperately trying to exude.

Mali couldn't see it right now but one day would recoil. Given \$he had been on the way to see Cat, it was true, \$he conveniently deleted the looks of *every-gay-man* in the MRT on the way here. Otherwise it would have been the case in point why \$he dressed rather androgynously usually. Albeit assuredly in all female clothes.

But Cat's sudden communication and request which brought \$er back to Bangkok today had electrified like a zap of lightning on a complex of wires every conflict and insecurity within \$erself. *That night...* the last time they'd seen each other... it was all fem. And initially everything that went beyond the friendship between them had happened and ended so fast that there was no time for insecurity.

But no longer...

\$he'd had to decide if this was this a date. Cat had disappeared for three weeks, not to mention their awkwardly painful goodbye. So in the end the result was a combination of "I don't give a fuck" and "what the hell, let me go all out".

So the image of who and what \$he felt to be tonight won out over hard reality. As every female knows, dressing is for your body type, situation and the social context. Things Mali was not yet to the point of comprehending. And no true fault to \$erself, in that, appearing female is a total sum of many things. But when you have only a few of the ingredients, the tendency is to overemphasize the ones you do have - both in accentuation and attempted masking. Only natural.

It was true that \$er face could never right now pass as female or close to it. What didn't help was its muscle tone, the tightly wound tension was just in such contrast to the the effortless surrender that female faces seemed to have naturally, even in the toughest situations.

That and too, if it weren't for \$er rather forward, what \$he judged as 'turkey neck', and the tension in \$er chest and shoulders, \$he might actually look elegant...

'Body of woman, face of man'

It was a phrase \$he'd heard repeatedly over the years on the street, usually after the person had turned around to check. It never ceased to ricochet in \$er brain amid the rest of \$er confusion. It always was at least two or more people and the comment in ear sight, for whatever insensitive reason. The feeling of something being wrong with \$er eclipsed the true hurt and sadness that the remarks left behind.

\$er neck was one of those things \$he knew \$he could have control over. \$er shoulders a bit wide and athletic for a woman and showed the struggle between them, \$er neck and head for poise, the muscles and tendons of \$er neck showing the fight against the exposure of \$er Adams apple. \$er standing practice helped this control, day by day.

\$er facial features were pronounced from \$er Jewish heritage - the way \$er bone structure was and proportions. \$er head and face were oval and compact more like a woman's. But the features were male.

And as slender as \$he was...

Hence the gay look.

The mirror was always a schizophrenic place for Mali, not to mention how to process the man-woman comments. As half of it was affirming, then the other a painful dysphoria.

A socially constructed shit sandwich.

The most painful part aside from constant self-evaluation and judgment was the feeling that how \$he appeared to the world was so far from the nature of who \$he felt to be inside.

It was not that \$he was adamant that \$he was a woman. But that \$he was at heart gentle and not an angry person, and that \$he did not feel like a man. And the world seemed to see a rather serious man.

Albeit a rock-star.

At least according to Cat.

So in the end, \$er face was the biggest barrier. To be that soft and gentle but with this face, it was unthinkable.

It felt so wrong. \$he felt like \$he always came off as...

Very very gay.

So \$he'd created a kind of wall. In androgyny. Flirting on the edge of what felt right while using the roughness in \$er tank top, jeans and combat boots to make sure anyone \$he came across would get the message that \$he meant business. Not a good target for ridicule.

Faux butch.

Bull-dyke.

Although \$he wanted to see this in \$erself, there was not a bone in \$er body with this kind of poker face.

And did it work?

Not really.

Fuck. Fuck? Fuck!

"I think we made a mistake," the words escaped Cat's lips as if they had a life of their own.

A mistake.

"I feel responsible. I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't have..."

These were her first words and she'd had no idea she'd say this. They were rude and insensitive.

Not of your class, Cat.

Because I didn't plan them.

Maybe this is why Thai women get the reputation for being self-entitled bitches.

Hmmm...

And now that's me.

Only in close relationship does one have the chance to see the jagged edges in oneself. Cat was not used to seeing such in herself as she was basically aloof in dating, so it was a blow to her otherwise polished and ultra-polite Japanese educated Thai self-image.

Without volition, Cat flashed again to Mali's waist and lower back... Followed in the next in rapid succession... of that last moment with Koona... when the seemingly inevitable kiss that Koona had been moving towards...

Cat... what are you thinking???

She would have liked for what happened with Koona to have been different and this now to be different but it couldn't be.

Because how could it be?

I'm not gay.

And I want a man.

With those two checkboxes marked, she knew she was writing off the two people she'd been closest to in perhaps her whole life, the best friends ever.

Done and done.

I'm a superficial and self-centered bitch and I know it now.

It was about appearance. But so much more. Mali as female simply felt out in the cold and dangerous although she could not completely put her finger on as to why she felt that way.

There are reasons. Very good ones though.

"I just wanted to see and talk to you in person."

Because I still had hope for something else.

Jesus Cat.

Despite her usual composure, a telltale tear fell from her right meticulously painted eye belying the mechanical precision of the rest of her demeanor. Which ignited just a little spark of hope in Mali's heart.

At least she feels something.

Because in the end, even in the embers of who and what 'he' was in the past, this fire would never extinguish, \$he knew. This longing. The original dream. If someone asked what \$he had always wanted in life...

It was this, right in front of \$er.

That night... it seemed to resolve everything. Who \$he was. Who SHE was. At least with Cat and in her...

What is that even called, an embrace???

Mali felt the memory of that moment when Cat took \$er to the limit of the world. HER and Cat. A crystallization. In presence of Cat's feminine, and dominant loving essence. There were no promises. And something in \$er still didn't want to accept this.

You just don't have nights like that without it meaning something.

Over \$er gender exploration years, in time \$he became closer to who \$he was while seemingly making more improbable ever fulfilling the longings of \$er heart.

You don't increase your already sucky relationship odds by looking more gay and feminine than you already are...

The usual maybe once or twice a year of meeting a potential girlfriend had fallen to zero. Whether it was \$er own complex that did it or \$er appearance. But somehow on *that* night, Cat singlehandedly leapfrogged that bridge. For a moment in time \$he saw the future \$he longed for as a possibility. Having both.

But then nothing...

The weeks of ensuing silence between them, the experience instead was on its way to being another case in point.

Of going to hell.

Killing half of \$erself for the dream, or the dream for \$erself. Neither of which had the will to die a natural death on their own.

Cat looked intently at Mali and raised her brows at Mali's silence. \$he had just then begun to have a 'what the fuck' moment inside which went something like...

I just flew in to Bangkok for this?!

Did I somehow become Cat's bitch?

In the most wrong way?

"It's just not what I want. You're amazing, it's just that I really want to be with a man, and that's not who you are.

Mali's ears selectively shut off for a moment out of self-protection and heard just sound. Cat continued what might have been for a minute or two.

"...So it seems..." The last phrase turned up just enough to be hinting at question as she added, "... who you want to be... right?"

Mali snapped out of \$er confused upset. It was true. *That night* was an experiment and they had entered it with the agreement to let it be. No promises, no knots.

"Who I *want* to be?" Mali raised \$er eyebrows.

When people talked like that it was the biggest fuck you of all.

Who in their right mind would do what I'm doing if it was truly a choice? What person in their right mind would cross the gender line to live without something very powerful driving it? I know I wouldn't.

The world seemed to think this was a choice. A Thai acquaintance had also made it clear that in her culture, one chooses their appearance based on who they wished to attract and be with, not upon internal authenticity, in the case of any conflict with the culture, "A ladyboy with a woman? Unheard of. How would the woman respect herself?"

Mali too treated it that way. As a possible aberration. Even up to now, except for the fact that no matter what \$he did neither dream nor impulse would change or go away. It had been years.

And then Cat entered the picture.

Conflicts with no resolution always made Mali's body tense and angry, as if both sides were tensing opposing muscles, embodying the stuckness. It was really the main thing that would anger her in life - feeling this way. It's what made her heart turn colder.

And truthfully this feeling is what she knew about being a man. Because being a man had always had this quality of frustration for her.

And not much else.

And as such, in contrast to the joy she found in herself more and more, being a man became increasingly repulsive to her. Like stagnant water, a smelly swamp. Truthfully, that's how 'man' felt. How she felt about men. And foreign. Like it was a game she had to put a lot of focus on to pull off.

"So the connection we felt was not real?"

"No, it was real. And nice. But it was alone, behind doors. I'm talking about all of life, everything. I just can't handle it," her hand fanned out and across the table as if to emphasize Mali's appearance,

"Being with a katoey. Even a woman... imagine, not a Tom but a Dee! I don't know, I just can't do it, I'm sorry. Now I realize when I started falling for you, I saw you as a rockstar, sweet and gentle and so many things. I still see those! But on that night..."

Cat slowed and unusually fumbled for words, "It's just, it would be unfair to expect you to be that. To be what you're not. Things just went too far too fast that night."

Mali nodded. And that was true. All of it. She'd had the thoughts too, those of changing herself to meet Cat's likely expectations in a partner.

Fuck me even for still doubting myself.

It was beyond her how many trans-women she knew could make a decision and transition within a year. And she'd been sitting on the pot over twelve yet.

"But what does it matter? I mean, were not talking about us not getting along, agreeing on things and no doubt the bedroom. How often do you meet someone that feels simply transparent? Easy? Fun?!"

"It just does. You don't understand my position here, I mean my family aside, who is very open, I have other associations and I don't know, it wouldn't feel right. Its just not what I can face now in my life. Its too much for me."

"But how do you feel now? With me?"

"Wonderful," her eyes upturned in a gentle smile and contact, just like in the earlier days of their friendship, sending that old familiar warmth into Mali's heart.

"Me as a woman?"

"Well of course. But I just can't do it, in life. It doesn't feel right."

"But we're here, out in public now?"

"But Mali, that's just it, you and me. I mean in the end what does it matter, some clothes and makeup? You could just dress as you were before, heck even a little makeup. You looked like a rockstar. Rockstar can be that way in the bedroom. They're different. But katoey, now, well..."

"And what's inside? Everyone who stares and laughs at me? About my body and face not matching? Even as a 'rockstar'!"

"That's just on the outside. I know who you are. That's what matters."

"Then why make the outside matter anyway?"

"Because it does to me still."

Because if I could accept being with a woman I'd be with Koon.

The unexpected words in her mind hit Cat like a freight train. Her eyes furrowed at a realization never considered in light of Mali, who for all intensive purposes had filled the void in her life left by the absence of her now ex-best friend.

"That's insane, Cat. Because from my side, everything else here seems perfect and how many times does life offer us that? You'd give it all up for this?"

"Aren't you?"

Mali played with the candle burning in the middle of the table. She was not surprised. It was how things, love - with someone she really wanted - always ended up. Her heart was breaking, as it was accustomed. She had learned time and again to detach from the longing for the outcome. For the return call, the second date, the goodnight kiss. Always ready and not surprised to receive the friend zone instead — or just nothing at all.

A ghost.

And now detached once more, she did not care to have tact and not to spill some of the worst words a true American can speak:

"So you're giving me a choice? To be myself or to be with you?"

Cat let her head angle downward to her lap as if in passive affirmative, where she kept it. Then with her head still down, she dealt the final blow.

Quietly and in almost a whisper as if she knew how hard it would hit with all Japanese sternness, "You have to be who you are. And too, you know my sister, hormones change many things and you've barely touched them. How can I really know? How can you really know what you truly want right now? Even romantically. You're just starting the change. If you are even."

To Cat it helped simply the way Mali presented tonight. There's no way she could handle... a rockstar, yes... but a flaming transitional katoey?

Mali would have kicked herself to have known this. But in the end, it was the same kick she'd been dealing herself on a daily, often minute by minute basis for years.

Being something... else... for someone else... for fucking hope's sake.

\$he knew it was over, the familiar black hole was there in the pit of \$er stomach. \$he knew that \$he could not argue Cat's last point in any convincing way. Cat was right. Hormones were a notorious unknown. She was in fact just starting.

I'm not even sure if I'm really a woman. Fuck me for not knowing. Not even proven myself... to ME!

No worse nightmare existed. \$he had failed to know or accept \$erself enough to have a solid identity. And now that \$he'd met the perfect women and everything was...

Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition.

FUBAR.

Check.

Each side with barbs that dig in. Pain and bleeding in either direction. Hurts going in and just as bad coming out. Or to just leave it, not move and not to breathe. Which would lead to absolutely nothing and safety but not actually living.

Oh yeah, that's exactly the life I have right now.

Frustrated Shaman

Mali promptly excused \$erself from the restaurant. \$he felt pinned down and backed in a corner, not in a good way. Setting out \$he just walked. \$he could have taken a cab or the Skytrain but walking was \$er medicine. The conversation with Cat only brought to a fever pitch \$er own inner dilemma.

Maybe I am like the Native American shaman who is not one sex or the other. Could it be that simple? Not have to do anything else?

Be with Cat wholeheartedly? Not have to be either?

If I had to choose would I be a man for Cat?

Mali knew even exactly how many cars, including the colors and how many windows and seats there were on this train of thought as \$he began riding once again.

The front engine car always felt like hope. But by the caboose it was always a sucky and heartbreaking shit-show.

I've lived it...

Through \$er last two actual relationships.

\$he was faster now running the scenario.

I know myself. It always starts in sexuality and ends in being feminine.

There was no role, no bonding or fucking that ended in a happy ending as a man.

Or in being anything than seen as female.

Maybe in Thailand than anywhere else, the man's societal role could be worked around. Men could be softer here if they felt that way.

It was in the bedroom.

It had been exactly how that whole night happened. As \$er armor fell, there was only what was left. \$he knew Cat had truly seen who \$he was.

And that's why she disappeared.

And why she doesn't want me.

It was undeniable and \$he wouldn't even try the mental gymnastics of earlier years around this one.

Cat doesn't want what I am.

Who *would* want that?

A woman that could have any man... heck, any woman she wanted?

Who am I deceiving?

\$he took a deep breath.

Every day, sometimes by the hour Mali felt the need to board this fucking train and ride it again, explaining once again everything to \$erself. The WHY. It was essential and was required at a moments notice \$he be able to do so.

Life is calling my fucking hand.

Mali kicked the pole as \$he walked by the now familiar park gate. The late evening was cooling ever so slightly to a pleasant eighty-ish degrees.

"Just bend me over and fuck me. Just fucking do it," \$he was speaking angrily under \$er breath,

"Fuck you!!!" \$he raised \$er eyebrows, looking toward the sky and made a bit of the finger gesture, just from the hips in taut but controlled aggression.

Then realizing to who \$he was addressing and the role \$he attributed to them, it inspired \$er anger to rise the necessary magnitude to confront the heavens.

"Universe, god, whatever the fuck you are why do you keep me here? Fuck me! Why don't you just put me out of my goddam misery once and for all? I can't fucking win. You bitch slap me whichever direction I turn."

"Fuck you. Goddamn you!!! Just fucking do it. Put me the fuck out of my misery."

\$he was screaming at the top of \$er lungs before \$he realized it.

Straggling late-night passerbys turned. In Thailand, anger was pretty much the last resort to anything, something the culture avoided except at the extremes. Expressed anger to another person could turn out to be very dangerous.

But given that the strange farang was yelling to no one in particular, those around with an almost imperceptible tic of the head simply turned on their mental erase and continued on with life deleting the episode.

She walked on into the late evening reminding herself again,

I know she feels for me, feels deeply for me. And I do for her.

The mantra which made the tears and uncontrollable sobbing break through the cloak of rage and run its course.

The one redeeming thing was the warm light she felt inside, the warm light that Cat herself had brought her closer to...

Myself.

That in here somewhere is someone to be treasured.

Who could make things better, all around, unconditionally, always, up to the very last moment.

Oh, how good that sounds.

Mali finally made her way to the skytrain station and her lips turned up in her first smile in hours, never one to not delight in the irony of life however painful.

Yes, the perfect woman.

But who was the perfect woman?

She heard immediately in her head the name Ana.

Ana?

Who is 'Ana'?!

""Home""

Suddenly I see what I want to be. Suddenly I see, why the hell it means so much to me. — KT Turnstall

Propelled by the still running energy of frustration and anger and the fucked-up situation, Mali had entered \$er hotel room, packed quickly and made \$er way to the airport on the MRT, having briefly logged in online and booked a seat on the last flight home. It was one of those nights \$he knew that \$he didn't care if \$he slept. Because honestly, \$he still didn't care if \$he died either.

The walk had helped but...

I'm still me.

\$he now sat in an alone corner at the relatively uncrowded gate awaiting the plane. A tear fell as \$he felt \$er breath and the life in \$er.

I'm still here.

Fuck me.

Why did I do this again? Get involved with someone?

\$he shook \$er head and chastised \$erself lightly for even going this far with anyone, when \$he was not even okay with \$erself.

Unresolvable. And it's about me.

My own internal fuck-up. I can't blame Cat.

I'm sorry world and universe.

I'm just really angry.

Through \$er life \$he'd always relied on external circumstances, like this with Cat to help \$er make up \$er mind what was right, who \$he was. But Cat was like water to either polarity and everything in-between. Different than the resulting train wrecks of \$er last two relationships which embarked with \$er willing and ably defined as a 'male', onward to their inevitable destructions. \$he could never sustain it.

Maybe that's why I tried here. I thought it could be different.

Now I know.

Life is calling my hand.

The rural tranquility hit Mali as \$he exited the cab just after 3am and made \$er way across the gravel parking lot to the security door of \$er building. \$he could feel a light breeze. The familiar chorus of cicadas soothed as \$he made it up the stairs and down the open-aired hall to \$er end unit apartment.

Opening the door, \$he gently raised the dimmed lights just to the point of being able to see and not much more. The subdued light was comforting and relaxing. Even cozy.

Home.

Liberating \$erself from \$er clothes, \$er arms brushed lightly over developing breasts and \$he noticed a soreness in them for the first time.

Feels nice.

Looking in the mirror, by habit or compulsion, \$er heart sank as usual.

Fuck if I'm going to be a man with breasts.

I still have to live with myself, so I might as well keep fighting.

It felt like everyone \$he knew would say that the stuckness and straight-jacket \$he was in was \$er own doing. By going against...

Accepting what I am without changing anything.

'Being a man'...

But does accepting what I 'am' come along with the feminine clothes and looking like a gay man? Or meaning I have to look around and dress... and act like men do?

Is the highest there is for me to non-conform?

Because in reality this is how others seemed - even Cat - to see \$er. But inside \$he was no activist or even trying to make a statement despite what people read into \$er person or intentions.

I just am what I am.

And this 'what I am' year by year was showing colors that conflicted ever so greatly with the exterior and how \$he was perceived.

Up to this point most of this had been like play. The clothes, makeup, even the hair transplant which broke open the door of hope that before had been pretty much plastered shut. All these things didn't mean what *this* did.

All of this.

\$he looked around, at the long counter, \$er makeup, hair products. The clothes \$he wore. Then down at \$er far too thin body.

What is this?

It was one thing to have moments of doubt while all alone in the world, but having just faced Cat, someone who possibly might have been... could have been... much more, *the one* for \$er.

I'm just flushing this... this life... this amazing precious gift... down the toilet..

Destroying a man.

_Going to hell. _

\$he knew \$he was pushing the red line with \$er body. The strange thing being that there was no turn-around moment like in the past where there was enough desire and a moment of full belief to put an end to the insanity and return to male mode. Or accepting \$he was fem or a woman but allowing a more full and male developed body to be, which \$he could never get \$er head around regardless of all the fifty-minute hours \$he had done over the years.

A magazine was laying on the desk turned to an image of a slender model with a sports bra and perfectly toned belly. Along with a beautiful face.

She was hot and a turn on.

I want her.

I want to be her.

Mali felt like crying as both felt equally far from possibility.

Images like that had always tugged at \$er in the two directions. Only lately was the duality becoming clear. Since a child it had been a single unified feeling: Complete bonding. As a child gender distinctions, ridicule and hiding didn't exist. But life and experiences like tonight had functioned over time to beat the simplicity of 'of course I can also wear my girlfriends clothes' out of her.

\$he stared at the beautiful woman.

That's my body.

I already am.

Breasts aside but who cares about breasts.

Mali was a face and ass girl, in \$erself and the other. Slight breasts were more attractive than any other alternative.

I have the body. *But not the face, not by a long shot.*

It had been a long roller coaster over the months visiting surgeons here in Thailand and getting their opinions on \$er face. Never finding the one that felt right.

It's all vanity.

How will I feel at the end of my life?

Will I care?

Will the cost of this make me cry while I'm dying?

And too, with all the surgeons opinions, it would be still be a great compromise - still a masculine-ish face at best for \$er. \$he was told \$he was too thin. Did not have enough fat for feminine cheeks. 'Very difficult'. Even with significant procedures. No one seemed confident.

What was the point of spending so much money and all that risk for such a result with a doctor that isn't even sure?

Mali looked around \$er apartment.

I know this is home.

I've felt safe and homey here before.

But it didn't feel like it right now.

Everywhere \$he looked there was something that reminded \$er of \$er inner conflict and indecision. Or decision to stay in the middle which was not any better than indecision.

Especially those.

\$er eyes had caught the 'over the counter' Estrofem and Aldactone tablets \$he was taking which were in many ways the tipping point. Estrogen and an anti-androgen.

Feeling listless, \$he flipped on \$er Mac to check email... just because. Even, although \$he wouldn't admit it to \$erself, \$he had a glimmer of hope that Cat might have written... that maybe... she had... rethought things. A persistent pull \$he knew even now would just take time to wane.

But instead a subject caught \$er eyes:

Virtual FFS photo results

It had been a few weeks since the order and despite the fact that the desire to see the result was floating around \$er consciousness, \$he had assumed it would have been a few more weeks to get the response and was not expecting it.

Funny timing.

It was from the woman in the UK who had a business of taking actual photos of a persons face, front, side and other angles, and simulating what different combinations of surgical procedures could achieve in terms of feminization. Mali had had pictures taken and sent in with the \$200 cost out of despair with all these surgeons.

All these Thai surgeons who only wanted to know 'what do you want' and seemed to see \$er face as parts, not as a whole. So far there was no true artist here. No confident man or woman who 'got' \$er and would say... *this is what I recommend...*

The image attachments were there on the email and soon they were open.

Mali stared at the pictures, toggling between before and after, different angles and different levels of surgical intervention. With the expected cost being in the \$10-30k range based on surgeons in Spain and Argentina among others, they did not seem to be earth-shattering. But they were way more feminine looking than \$he had imagined could be done for \$er.

But for the cost and the risk, is the result worth it?

After a quarter of an hour or so, noticing \$er head nodding off, \$he put things aside to get ready for bed. It had been the longest day \$he could remember, in time and emotion.

As \$he was coming to bed her eyes paused again on the open magazine. Something clicked. \$he grabbed it and looked close. One of the Virtual FFS pictures came to \$er. *That* look - smile and the eyes in the model.

I look like that in that picture.

\$he quickly sat down again and brought the Mac back to life and pulled up the Photoshopped picture of \$erself with the full shebang, including a lip lift.

It is.

I am.

With that a hope dawned on Mali. Maybe called obsessive, as it attached to the past. Cleaving to the despair, the aloneness, the ridicule. The lost hope. A possibility that \$he had never fully embraced before. Ever since standing there in \$er mothers form fitting black dress, alone in the bathroom mirror of \$er childhood home... \$er face forever the dealbreaker to any further contemplation.

I might... can be...

And another that \$he'd still barely ever let \$erself have...

Be attractive to another woman...

As a woman.

Photoshop was one thing. Reality another. There was still the question of surgeons, costs and risk.

And what this could all mean.

Have I stayed in the middle and not move to the female side because I'm not?

Or because I think I can't?

Or because I'm afraid?

These were new questions that were never possible because *this* never felt possible before.

Because I can't handle it being any worse than it already is.

Because I won't be a man with breasts.

Regardless of the questions, once \$he saw it, the connection could never be erased.

Angel or demon.

Re-Koona

First Koona, now Mali.

It must be me.

Once, sure, a fluke. Twice? I know three times is a pattern.

Oh, may I please be wise and avoid a third!

Cat upon awaking sat in a daze on the couch of her 44th floor condo, looking out over Bangkok's skyline. The condo with the plush mostly white decor, the fruit of her hard work but at this moment such achievement was lost on her in terms of meaning anything. After the tears, Mali's definitive exit, then more tears, she needed to say something. To someone. To talk this out. She needed a friend. A deep friend. A friend she didn't have.

Anymore.

In a city full of millions, busy sidewalks, subways and life, coupled with communication with her family, work, taking care of the business and clients, it seemed she could go for long periods without something deeper.

Aside from Koona, she loved her group of friends but they all fit more in the catty-ultra fem set and all very Thai. No one she could have an out of the box conversation with.

Certainly not this kind of one.

In fact it had been a year now since Koona disappeared on their vacation. And aside from the fact that she had a couple thousand Facebook friends, the only one she felt possibly that close to was Koona. Only Koona.

Not one to sustain known lies to herself for long, it was now clear what she must do.

She had no idea how this was going to go but had to try. Like life itself was calling her bluff at the end of a year of less than conscious avoidance. She hadn't intended to disappear and not try to reconnect with Koona. Just something in her...

Did nothing.

Paralyzed.

But how can I call her now? And even if she doesn't hate me, am I ready to tell her everything?

Will Koona understand?

After what seemed like hours, in a dazed stupor she began moving toward the inevitable action she must take. She fumbled for her unusually neglected iPhone, found Koona's contact and, with a deep breath and holding it in, pressed the green button. It rang a few times.

"Sawadee ka?" intoned the sultry-breathy voice at the other end of the line.

Cat felt weak in her stomach. "Koona ka? Is that you?" as tears migrated to her eyes.

"Ka."

"Hiiiiiiy," she let out softly, melodically as if encoding everything of the past year and what was now going on, in that one syllable. There was a silence on the other end that seemed to go on forever.

"Cat ka?" the voice sounded hopeful yet wounded.

"Koona ka, can I see you na ka? Karuna ka? I need to see you... please?!"

The Night Market

Just be calm, slow down, take a breath. Try to smile.

Mali heard echoed back from herself the inner advice and wisdom she was coming into especially from observing her day to day vicissitudes with herself in the little north Thailand city.

When she was calm, stood tall and was happy, things went well. Smooth. Almost very good. And she wanted more of this.

But when I'm not... it's shocking...

She smiled and laughed to herself. It was true. Heavenly or simply shocking. It was absolutely true.

And getting overheated, carrying too many things, does not help. Slow down Mali. Take a break when you need one.

That was the advice from inside.

The heat of the day still hung and radiated from the ground as Mali made \$er way on the short walk to the Chiang Rai Night Market - the place to see and be seen on a Saturday night. \$he'd made several deals with \$erself, one of which was not to carry more than a few light bags at most if \$he bought anything. Second, to stop places and take breaks before getting overheated. There was an inverse connection between being able to stay poised and 'ser own person' with getting physically fatigued or overwhelmed. This had become absolutely and replicably clear.

The third which \$he'd done since arriving in Chaing Rai was to fully rest every Saturday. As \$he was accustomed each Saturday, \$he reflected on the week past, a morph of the Jewish idea of a sabbath.

A week ago tonight I was sitting at dinner with Cat.

\$he felt like a different person now. But not in such a good way. \$he had grown listless, and day by day over the week, more. Feeling less okay out in the world, more untouchable, and inside seemed to mirror the outside. Today's rest hadn't helped like it usually did. It was the kind of feeling of not being at ease or comfortable anywhere in \$er own skin, even at home in the most chill and relaxed situation of the day.

\$he turned into the busier area at the corner with crowded mom and pop restaurants and of course \$er favorite refuge, Wawee Coffee on the other side of the street. \$he could feel the tension in \$er body, especially neck increase and willed to have control over \$er poise but it was a struggle.

\$er body knew \$he was going to be in contact with people.

Many people. Thai people. Often nice, but not infrequently, irreverent.

Passers by. The Night Market crowds.

Regardless of the Photoshop epiphany the week before, \$he was still going back and forth on it.

And I know although I see it, to have that face requires surgery. Why can't I just accept myself and my amazing body as in between? Love myself and get on with it?

It wasn't like \$he was unattractive.

And really, if I smiled more and calmed down, that goes a long way to being more of who I am.

There are people... women out there... who would get me. Look at all the new age or surfer people... the guys are often so pretty if not feminine...

It was true. But so was Mali's journey and the paradox of how the physical, appearance, hormones coupled with the spiritual, the emotional and life outlook — intimately tied.

More important than any surgery was the let down of \$er defensiveness. In times when \$he was able to 'just be' and connect with others, \$he felt amazing. It was a nice idea but \$he could not implement it. As the defensiveness seemed tied to how \$he looked, how others seemed to respond to \$er.

How can I possibly let my guard down... when I'm already stared at, laughed and and ridiculed all over the place?

So it was this catch 22 where maybe looking better might fix things. But it seemed the wrong way to do things. The easy way.

Then of course, was the almost irresistible allure of the potential change.

But then the cost.

The risk.

And no strong match on a surgeon.

It was true, being a man and \$erself now more than ever felt like oil and water.

But is it just because of where the world is? Because I can be this way? Choose it? Because that doesn't make it the right path...

Would I have chosen this if I lived in the past? When things were harder?

I doubt I'd had the balls.

Mali laughed at \$er own inside joke, having realized over the years that the more feminine \$he became, the more \$he'd 'grown a pair'.

Maybe I can just let this all go and just be happy, meet the right woman who gets me and loves me and everything will be alright.

Of course also tugging at \$er was the ongoing time on hormones. Soon certain things would be irreversible - like sterility and not to mention the manboob problem.

Surfers and new-age guys aren't taking hormones and getting facial femeninization surgery.

No comfort there.

Home did not feel comfortable or like home anymore.

The apartment felt like it had bad energy.

\$he had a Skype consultation scheduled with a recommended surgeon in South America, but that was not for a few weeks.

It was all up in the air.

Looking out the window earlier that day, at what was in weeks past such a tranquil world now for some reason seemed dark, something subdued, hidden, even malevolent. Even the rooftops with their Thai ornaments and the darkened windows felt like eyes of a world of which Mali was outside. In every possible respect.

\$he couldn't concentrate.

\$he knew from the past that such a state was due to not being able to be present in the moment and feel \$er feelings. But nonetheless it was like the whole environment had conspired. Construction had begun on a new building next door. Noise sometimes going into the night. Losing sleep didn't help. It felt like \$he did not own \$erself or \$er mind anymore.

\$he had tried to get away, to the park, the mall, the little coffee shop by the Clock Tower at the center of town. And now she approached the Night Market, although in \$er state it was more with anxiety than true interest.

So in jeans, combat boots and tank top Mali reached the street lined with makeshift booths and ad hoc lights. \$he wandered in the flow of the substantial crowd, many young-ish Thai people as well as adults, punctuated by occasional tourists. Flat chested, androgenously dressed, with \$er neck, \$he wandered in the flow, checking out all the bright, colored or simply beautiful merchandise being sold.

\$he still grinned and chuckled at the more strange offerings.

Jesus... putting snails of my face as a beauty treatment...

Not gonna happen!

\$he walked slowly, reminding \$erself to stay in \$er body and not rush, the only possible chance \$he had at enjoying the evening at all.

"Look at the foreigner..."

Of course this was said in Thai and not meant for Mali's ears.

Here goes...

"Looks good" another young male voice responded behind \$er, "thin, pretty."

"You think the foreigner is a Tom or Dee?"

"Hmmm... dresses like a Tom but you know, Dee I think."

"Yes Dee." They agreed.

Mali could not help it and turned to the source of the words, a couple cute young Thai — pretty clearly gay — boys quickly turned their heads away and together, Mali catching the embarrassed upturn of their 'no crying over spilled milk' smiles. There were twelve or thirteen distinct smiles that a Thai person can identify distinctly without any difficulty, and Mali was starting to be able to see them.

That was the thing with Thailand and it still screwed with \$er mind that even if people seemed to be laughing at you it was maybe not really necessarily that, not the same as being laughed at in the USA.

But Mali couldn't completely tell. They weren't necessarily being mean spirited. They were just being themselves, in the present, being Thai. There were so many levels of smile and laughter there and they could be as much about the emotions of the person themselves than a criticism of the apparent object.

Nevertheless, such attention activated \$er American sensibilities, which was generally the path of a downward spiral towards frustration, anger and feeling ridiculed.

This time, though, \$he actually smiled.

Hey, at least they get me.

Does that mean they saw me as female?

Is there Tom and Dee for gay men here?

Are they seeing me as female, katoey or gay man???

\$he would have done anything in that moment to be fluent in Thai and have Thai friends \$he could actually find out the truth from, it would be truly eye opening. But the language aside, the culture tended to put what seemed like a hard barrier between foreigner and Thai.

Tom and Dee were descriptive terms of lesbian women, the closest thing in English being butch or fem, but here they were much more than that.

Regardless, barring further understanding, Mali took it as a compliment.

After another twenty minutes or so, \$he was getting hungry and started edging against the general flow of Night Market people over to the street that was all about food. Which of course did not help \$er sense of wellbeing, both being hungry and having to try hard to get to where the fulfillment would be.

Feeling \$er blood sugar - which was ever volatile as \$he was late on a meal due to \$er minimalist diet, \$he compromised on some fried noodles and sushi. With a plate of food in hand \$he spotted a dry fountain area atop some steps where many, especially younger people, were sitting.

Finding a solitary step area, \$he sat down but not without noticing the following eyes of a few groups of youngsters. Not unusual, except one boy kept staring. Mali had no mechanism to interpret such attention positively - be it the attention of ridicule or of perhaps gay attraction. \$he ignored it and sat down.

It would be nice to connect with someone though.

But \$he had no sense or concept of how to do that short of someone approaching \$er. As was \$er default passive strategy in life to date. Intelligent and even aggressive, in everything but in connecting and meeting others. Not to mention \$er seeming inability to prioritize social time if there were opportunities against the somatic excavation project \$er body demanded for hours a day.

\$he kept noticing glances over at \$er. Also totally normal in Thailand and in fact anywhere at this point. They exaggerated the pain of loneliness, the form of which was tension in \$er body \$he felt impotent to handle at the moment. Every time \$he heard laughter \$he willed \$er eyes not to look to make sure it was not about \$er. But \$he succumbed to the compulsion to check out the situation more often than not.

Another foreigner, an attractive and confident looking black woman sat near \$er, a combination which Mali had always found very attractive. Black skin was unusual in Thailand. And too the culture was all about being white. The whiter the better. Evidenced by all the whitening cosmetics and skin bleaches available at every pharmacy.

I wonder how it is for her here.

Mali willed to talk to her. \$er mind coming up with creative remarks, but then sitting on their execution until they became stale. After a few minutes, as the woman came, \$he went.

As things were, Mali being who \$he felt \$he was perceived as, hardly had the spark to even try anymore.

What was the point to even try now?

A breeze had been coming up a bit but it was the first drop of rain that made it conscious. And then a big gust of wind, as if from nowhere. People looked around and many rose immediately. A trickle started but from the strong gusts of wind and the rather quick up and go of most people, what was coming was pretty clear. Mali gathered up her bags and followed in suit.

Home was ten minutes walk, close, but that could be ten minutes of being soaked with what seemed to be inevitable.

The heavy rain started just as she was turning off the night market street. Just a patter at first but then another wind came. It was dark, with occasional dim rural street lights illuminating the dampening pavement. A street later, crossing the two-lane bridge into the more residential area, full downpour.

Instead of fighting the rain she smiled and let herself feel it.

She was walking all of the sudden care-free in the warm rain down a dimly lit rural street of a remote town in northern Thailand. The confluence of surreal and real hit her. A remote nowhere, was a remote somewhere. Who would have imagined her here? As she was? She couldn't have even comprehended this a year ago.

This is my home.

In a split second was a traversal of the artificial division between outsider and insider, not okay and okay, man and woman, katoey and cis.

I might be nothing to anyone. But I'm someone to me.

I chose to feel the rain because I like it.

It felt powerful. To choose to like something because you do. To own your choice.

I like this.

I love these roads. The traditional colorful houses.

This rain.

The peace and tranquility here.

The chill people who I know are all around.

I like what I like.

I like what's inside of me.

From nowhere the apex of tension in her throat broke, just like the storm clouds spilling rain and she began to cry. No one was around and if they were, they could not hear it.

Being alive was beautiful. This simplicity, the joy of feeling the rain was so wholesome.

She did not know where the tears were really coming from, but her body was triggered by the contrast of surrender to everything she had and was going to put herself through.

It was as if nature had sent some help.

Like the black woman at the market. I like her because I do. I don't care that she's different.

In fact... I'd prefer her to be that way.

If I like being a girl then... why should I make that not okay either?

I'd be doubting it just as if that beautiful black woman doubted if she was beautiful... just because of the Thai white obsession!

So why not me?

\$he got home and felt a bit better about things. All alone and unsure of what she was doing, riding the waves tonight.

Almost literally.

Riding the waves. Finally feeling the vortex of forces \$he was enmeshed in.

Recollections

Leaning against the windowed wall of the quirofano, Terrasanto took a deep breath and watched his two protegees, Salvatorre and Rivera as they completed the stitching and de-prepped the nose and completed forehead. But his attention turned to Ana which brought an inner chuckle and smile. At that moment his phone rang - it was his wife - and as so, gave the signal to the team as he stepped out of the room.

Not unusual for her to call and check in especially on the days of major surgeries, he answered.

"Hola" he vocalized with a tone of caring and familiarity that belied their relationship.

"Como va?" - how are things going?

"Well, we got through the worst of it. Complicated nose - the worst we've seen this year. Horrible! But the result, well, you'll see."

"I know I will. It's to keep you on your toes!" replied Castaña.

Terrasanto chuckled, "compared to you I do the work of a nurses assistant!", referring to the fact that Castaña was a top cardiologist in Uruguay and known in most of Latin America. Not that one would ever realize that in the down to earth and warm way she carried herself.

"I'm not so sure about that! This is Ana, today, right?"

"Yeah, can you believe we made it?"

"You said always she was different. I'm still not sure, the way you tested her, was it right?"

"I wanted to be sure. She was a different one. I could just sense it. You know, everyone evolves of course. But the person who first contacted me and the actual woman who walked into my office last week, casi no lo creo. I'll never know for sure but I believe she grew like crazy in the interim. And I'd like to think I had a part in that."

"And apparently if the reports from Claudia are accurate, she took a deep sigh of relief too when she met you in person, huh? That was a bad scene for awhile. She really did know she wanted you to be her surgeon. Hmmm. I mean, you didn't even send a car for her at the airport! Hmph!"

"It was worth it. I lose some by testing them. But that's not what its about. In all the striving for perfection and vanity in this world, who would I be if there wasn't something special about the connection to and what I am doing for each person I operate on. I mean, look at who I have to compete with!" the smile pervading his voice as he referred to his wife, "no, I could not wake up with you in my arms and look you in the eyes."

"Ah que galan!", but Castaña's heart still melted, "Think of me as an accomplice then. I wrote most of those emails to her, remember??" as she arched her tone to emphasize.

"Pure artistry. You know how to read people. And this one, even more, and how you figured out her level of Spanish and pressed her buttons not even in her own language," he was now laughing, "But seriously, I read a concern, an unsureness, trepidation even in her - well actually then it felt a bit more like a 'him', with all respect..."

He was referring to the period where from the first consultation and subsequent delay before she made the booking, then for him to delay the final surgery date confirmation for a few months. Part by necessity as he was changing hospitals in the new year, which facilitated the process to make sure that Ana really wanted this, knowing the depth of what the complete rework of a male face to appearing as female - not only that, of an attractive female - meant in life. Sure, the general *gender community and WPATH did not advise or require letters for facial surgery, only gender reassignment. But he had his own standards.

Ana and his team had gone back and forth, escalating at one point to a name-calling email orchestrated in Spanish by Castaña alledging that Ana was being "incredula y loca", crazy and incredulous, and that she should "tener un actitud mas positiva", a brilliant double-bind.

Which Castaña knew Ana would take as feeling completely misread, as Ana's emails had simply been attempting to be warm, perhaps overly cautious but also anxious to know her surgery date. Ana had canceled and then with Terrasanto playing the good cop and making the emails appear to have been from his assistant without his direct knowledge, allowed them to mutually reconcile. A rollercoaster for Ana, and little did she know, one architected to perfection.

"Well, all in a days work, huh?"

"Mi amor, what a life. What do we do? Is it right? We can only answer to ourselves and god."

"Well, its time you get back to Ana, no? And let that blessing spill over. She deserves it, dios!"

"Si mi querida, bye!"

Terrasanto hung up.

The Chinese Tune

The next morning Mali awoke to a tune from the building under construction next door. It was like \$he had heard it before but couldn't name it. Melancholic and droning, pulsing with a light tingle of bells and the melody of a flute, Asian - sounded Chinese - but with a western scale.

So beautiful it felt ominous.

It was harmonious, shimmering and completely frightening.

Behind such beauty its effect made something hurt inside and hinted at something dark. Funeral beautiful but not death beautiful. It was overwhelming.

It made \$er feel things...

Like I'm in a movie. I'm that person you're so glad you're not...

... because they've made choices... it's dark... they're dying...

\$er next thought was that the movie is not even real.

\$he slapped \$er cheek lightly as if to test for this.

Ok okay... not a dream, not a movie.

Ow.

But it was a song that could not be ignored without digging into what this feeling was exactly. For some reason it hit \$er that maybe this melody was from the other side, the place where the psyche connects with everything beyond this life. And some in-between entity had written it down and performed it.

The place where consciousness meets...

Not.

The things that can be done to us... drugs, surgeries... w_hat you feel in moments before and after anesthesia._

Life bleeding away... close to the road. Approaching last moments. And at that point there's nothing you can do about it.

Every choice you've made leading up to this is in front of you.

Maybe this song is a warning?

Because I'm was still alive, right now, hearing it.

I can change things. Take a different route.

The one of light.

Not this one.

Maybe I've mistaken its light for darkness?

Images of hospital rooms, needles, anesthetic masks and the dark sleep of the beyond during surgery came over \$er.

A needle boring into \$er forehead. In fact in the proposed surgery it was likely that \$er forehead bone would be removed so it could be shaped and replaced.

It all felt malevolent.

And now with \$er body so slender, could \$he even survive such a procedure?

Because that's what was on the table should \$he go this way.

I'm playing with my life.

I'm betting with my life.

Jesus.

Most of the time none of us feel how just close to the road things are for us. Just some blocked air or a puncture to an artery in a moment brings us close to the meeting of consciousness...

With not.

Our biology, our life support. We take it for granted until...

It all goes wrong.

\$he turned over in bed, it seemed that sleep was likely over for the night.

Where am I? What am I doing?!

Was this the wrong way? The wrong choice?

Of course, deep inside, there was all the experience, knowledge and drive that had brought \$er here. The same which was in set opposition to the mainstream world. The world of people who had told \$er almost categorically that being gay is a lonely path and that being transgender is not real, just an element of play.

That being a man or woman - being true to your birth biology is 'where its at' for happiness. That one's stress response is innately built-in, either masculine or feminine.

And these things... I'm doing, contemplating...

Are permanent.

\$he remembered \$er last breakup before heading down this path of attempted self-knowledge and acceptance. It all felt like an alternative path then, to break up, a choice. Even as it was happening, it felt like a major switch in the code of \$er life. An alternative to something more wholesome and right.

But completely and unacceptably boring.

Staying as it was.

Itself its own death.

Yet life and \$er own body had brought \$er to that breakup. And as with the relationship, the same here.

Looking around, the room which before had been dark, subdued but relaxing and cooling \$he could now see - imagine - as the place of a cold, dark, lonely departure from this world.

Even the building itself could have been a hospital before. Who might have passed through this room?

Is this what \$he would come to? Would \$he remember *this moment* when the end was imminent and realize it was in fact folly, and feel the pain of knowing \$he had known?

Wrong choice? A fatal one?

All the heart, the dreams, the love, desire, the tears, \$er body, its cells, organs and magic, all reduced to nothing by the outcome of this choice?

Tears welled up and started to fall.

\$he pulled up the eye scarf \$he slept with around \$er head. It would be so perfectly fitting. So fitting \$he became afraid of it. Not conscious but deep inside \$he knew of a vision, path and inertia that \$he'd never had a whole lot of control over. The same which brought \$er here.

Its what \$he had always run from since childhood. Running from the darkness. From that fucking goddam San Francisco fog. As if it was one and the same as the darkness \$he saw there as a child in the 80's at the height of the AIDS epidemic. The *alternative lifestyles*. It seemed all dark to \$er. B&D, S&M, gay, transsexuals.

All that, dark dark dark.

As an innocent child the feeling was sadness, darkness and isolation. Desolation.

I know my heart.

My heart is not an alternative heart.

My longings and dreams are not the 'B' side.

A thirsting heart. A searching heart.

The same heart in \$er as a child holding a pillow in embrace feeling a beautiful girl with \$er.

The same heart that longs for...

The primary dream.

A heart that could love, connect, merge, some way, some how.

What the fuck am I doing?

But \$he *was doing* and \$er own heart was doing it.

As \$he walked out from the apartment building to the road, the fact was Mali must have looked strange. Coupling how \$he already presented normally, with the fact that \$he was more out of sorts than in a long time.

Weird energy.

\$he had dressed as \$he meditated on the Chinese Tune that still droned on like a malevolent zombie that would just not die.

In the mirror the body of a runway model. A female runway model. Thats how more than one past girlfriend described 'his' potential. At least from the chest down.

Jesus... neck down is just fine. Fuck breasts. Don't care.

\$he liked \$er body, slender as it was. Actually loved it. Despite all this fear instilled by the Chinese Tune, images of that woman in the magazine with a slender waist and toned belly like \$ers and the likeness of faces.

With surgery.

Like that. Just like that.

AND so fucking vein.

So much money.

All the risks.

But congruent.

For once...

...in my life.

It was compelling. Even in spite of the death-wish wakeup call...

Putting on makeup did not make \$er sad today like it had the past few. It had then felt like a burden. A reminder of how self absorbed \$he had become. But today, makeup at least brought \$er intermediate being into closer harmony. \$he felt better with it. At least reducing being misread.

\$he evaluated that today \$he was pretty. \$he knew \$he had a lot of masculine still on many fronts but this inner person was more and more real despite the warnings of a possibly crumbling facade from that fucking song.

Moisturizer, sunblock, some soft and nice smelling foundation, powder, bronzer, eyes...

Many times \$he asked \$erself how in the world it got to this point from 'his' past ability to wake, be in and out of the bathroom and outside in five minutes. It was not a lie that \$he missed such simplicity. But then again, \$er entire life had acutely diverged from such over the last few years and more even in the last six months.

And here we have... Mali in... the new normal...

Dressed in sleek yoga pants, a tank top, brown Converses accessorized by sparkling earrings, a rose quartz bead bracelet, \$er favorite aqua colored onyx studded Japanese ring, plus computer backpack, \$he made it out, and sooner than usual was able to hail a tuk-tuk.

And requested a ride to the Central Chiang Rai mall, pronouncing it 'Centroo Chiang Rai' to make sure \$he was understood by the driver.

Staring out at the passing scenery from the back of the vehicle, Mali mentally prepared \$erself for the mall. \$he had often left that place in an agitated and angry state and willed today to be different, remembering the visit from a couple days ago...

Maybe half or more of everyone who walked by was looking at \$er it seemed. Every lingering look. It was always like this. \$he'd often start out in good spirits and resilient, smiling. And then it would just go to hell over time.

Feeling at the whim of the world.

Hearing over and over the words 'farang' and 'katoey'.

And then often the fucking laughter.

Even seeing the people as they made these comments.

The passers-by who were not already satisfied would continue to look back once or twice, maybe three times after they passed.

As if I don't exist.

As if I don't have feelings.

As if I'm an inanimate object to those fuckers.

Or they know I have feelings and want a reaction.

Over \$er lifetime \$he'd learned to avoid showing \$er feelings and reactions in public just for that reason.

The mall. Like being in second grade. Insecure and picked on.

To not let them see me cry.

Yet here...

I live in a foreign country on my own volition.

I came here and I can leave when I like and go more or less wherever else I like in the world.

I make more money in a day than perhaps many of these people do in weeks or a month.

There might be no one I've ever come in contact with in all of Thailand that can match me at coding and analytical abilities.

And what the hell, I've been in the arms of one of the most beautiful women in Thailand.

So, Mali, what are you concerned about?

It wasn't even \$er style to look down on people. It was only especially in the recent years when \$he realized how much others would capitalize on \$er being different that \$he started to adjust \$er openness and caring for people.

When \$he was calm and really in \$erself, how \$he loved life and to see people. Feel them really. Associate to them. Almost like \$he was them. Their beings, feelings, aliveness. Each one's joy, dreams, longings and good intentions.

But when it got to the point of feeling constantly poked at, she simply felt angry, even violent. Hated them. Frustrated. Feeling tense and resultantly kludgy, ungraceful and frankly, ugly. And since starting the overt gender exploration years, the hurtful experiences unfortunately eclipsed the positive ones, at least in \$er primal brain which was wired for just such protection.

So eventually with enough instances \$he shut down in large part to anyone \$he did not know. To smile at a woman and be open, only to be stared back, even sometimes with that look of fear in their eyes. Or an initial smile quickly becoming a frown. Which \$he assumed meant \$he had been 'read' and rejected.

No more. The door is shut.

Or the dealbreaker being men. Especially if they were a group where any eye contact or even a nod would in a moment prompt audible comments if not all out laughter. It was only in the last few months that \$he'd allowed \$erself the luxury of ignoring men completely in passing.

No more fucking men.

Thank god I'm not attracted to them.

But \$he still had to deal with the atmosphere around \$er, like it or not.

Thailand had at first held a lot of promise, and even now was still a much softer place than many. But it had its own way of dealing with foreigners, much less katoey ones. And where \$he had hoped that \$he would have been able to become part of the Thai-katoey friendship culture, one of the hardest hit realities was that no matter who you were, foreigners always seemed on the outside here.

Unless you want to be a walking ATM machine.

The one notable exception having been Cat.

Although \$he was sure there were worse things to be, katoey farang seemed pretty low in the pecking order in terms of how a good portion of the public felt entitled to treating you. Well, unless of course you were in their store spending money.

This of course did nothing to help with the wound inside that \$he, for \$er lifetime had been desperate to sooth. And the old patterns of rigidity, anxiety, coalescing into what could appear as conceit, aloofness or simply shyness held.

The result was frustration and anger that always seemed just under the surface in \$er. And it was one and the same which diminished the joy and feminine feeling in \$erself. So it was a vicious circle - \$er defense to 'hurt back' itself made \$er less \$erself.

'Sabai sabai' was what the Thai used to describe a happy no-worries lifestyle. One of the reasons so many foreigners flocked there - the weather was warm, the people were overall chill and you could live on a fraction of what it cost to live anywhere else. It was attractive...

If you're a cisgender heterosexual man... or maybe a gay man.

But on the other side of things, \$he was constantly stared at. Things were said \$he sometimes understood but often was unsure of. So there was all that, and too, the chasm between Thai and foreigner - as they called them, 'farang' - became clearer. 'Farang' originally had meant 'barbarian' although the term was used colloquially now. And under all the smiles there seemed to be unknowability.

Almost dehumanization... at least of others... my emotions.

But all in all, even if \$he was in fact laughed at here, \$he felt safe. Unlike in \$er own country. At the end of the day, \$he felt both from contact and intuition, that the Thai people were generally sensitive and kind at heart although in moments they could at least in appearance be the biggest assholes.

And it's hard to put on a real smile when you don't feel good about even the smile itself and the face that depicts it. It's hard to be with others... or even be yourself to yourself... when you don't really know who you are.

And it's hard when the overall feedback projected back seems to be that something is wrong with you.

But nevertheless, as \$he entered Central Chiang Rai today, \$he put on the smile \$he had. Because if nothing else it was an emollient to \$er own edgy nervous system... as long as \$he could make it last.

Reunion

The roofbar was crowded as always and full of life. A veritable fixture at the top of one of the most salient skyscrapers in the Silom area of Bangkok, touted as one of the best rooftop bars in the world. Where wealth flowed, a respectful demeanor and anonymity held. A guilty pleasure of the friends even back in university days when they could scarcely make ends meet, it was their place to come and dream. Even then they dressed and looked the part, and now, upon reflection, they both had made it real.

Cat sat at a corner table, just a bit early. A few minutes passed and as if by instinct she looked up immediately as the door produced the figure of Koona.

Well, a new version of Koona.

Which she swore at this moment had become just a little larger than life. She exuded a confidence and poise Cat had never seen before in her and was looking simply...

Gorgeous.

Cat nodded internally... yes, that was the word...

This was not the basically pretty but serious and kind of invisible girl she knew. This was a woman, a woman with...

Something special.

Like an added dimension to her person had sprouted.

Koona wore slender black pleated slacks and a form fitting blue button down dress shirt, sleeves folded up at the cuffs, showcasing a silver link bracelet and a matching chain hanging from her neck. Enough glimmer to catch attention and yet calling out that the best is...

Uh... under those clothes.

WTF Cat.

Koona's waist was Thai-tiny as ever and although her torso was still long and slender as ever, her breasts had filled out even a bit more. Or maybe it was how she walked. This was a woman who owned herself, all confidence and self assurance. And not a facade, Cat could feel this was real.

She had clearly grown the last year into her own. That needed not be spoken. The natural oscillating opposition of her hips, ribs and shoulders along with her perfectly poised neck commanded attention. Her head straight and chin slightly angled down, her gaze powerful through the upper half of her eyes. Her straight subtly highlighted dark brown hair, long before, was now cut angled straight and hanging just an inch or two above her shoulder and swayed along with her.

Catching Cat's eye, which she held through her trademark furrowed sockets, a slight smile came over her upper lip, showing her upper teeth. By the time reaching the table, a full warm toothy brilliant smile she had rarely ever shown in the past bathed Cat. A smile that said too much. Of course which made Cat take a breath of relief, but also uncomfortable just a bit without knowing why.

"Hello ka!" they smiled in unison, as Cat rose and they embraced almost a little too long. Cat knew because she was looking up into those perfectly painted eyes and saw a glint too much. Knowing better than to repeat the past, Koona let go and made back for her chair.

From nowhere a pang of envy - or was it jealousy? - hit Cat, with the realization that the woman in front of her had clearly *lived* this past year. Even that she herself had been the one to push her away, it still held. What had Koona done and seen? Because whatever it was, it liked her, and people didn't flower this way in a vacuum.

"Sooooo..." smiled Koona, raising a brow slightly, prompting Cat.

Cat smiled and laughed nervously as she looked back at the best friend she had ever had. This was not going to be a game. Cards would be on the table this evening.

"I missed you so much Koona. I'm sorry, I didn't know what to do. I've been so alone in my heart. You are my best friend and always will be even if you tell me you never want to see me again."

"Why didn't you call ka? It's like you just let things go and gave up na ka," she intoned, adding the polite particles at the end, there was some magic of a close friend giving respect and distance in such intimacy. Something only Thai speakers and similar languages would ever know the melting heart of such a feeling inside.

Cat had no answer of reason she could consciously give, "I'm sorry ka."

"Well, I guess its true, maybe I sprung that moment on you? But you were there too. I thought you felt it. If I was wrong and scared you, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to. Okay, I mean, I felt it but you know what I mean. I guess... I... I just hoped."

"So you liked me that way?"

"I'm sorry Cat, it's more than like," then correcting herself, "was more than like."

Something in Cat wilted at Koona's correction like the same stupid envy-like emotion that she couldn't understand.

"I like women," Koona intoned with the 'come on' childlike whine, "That night, well, after you pushed away, I gave up the charade and just accepted it completely. Cried a fuckload. I guess... I mean I was not thinking... with you... it could have..." she cleared her throat and smiled the 'I said too much' smile,

"Anyhow, this past year, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I know. Its just who I am, it's not just you," she paused contemplating her water glass, tipping it a bit on the side with her perfect short clipped unpainted finger nail, "But really, I am first a woman, a friend, with a good heart, only after that a lover or mate. So don't worry if you don't feel the same. It's okay. That's how life is. It's okay. I get it. I felt bad after that day. After I got over the sadness it's true, I could have called you just as well. But I got busy."

Koona got busy.

How busy?

Cat!

Something in Cat would have done anything to turn back time to have kept that heartbreak from Koona. Was she just empathetic? Was that it? She couldn't imagine ever intentionally hurting this being in front of her. But not only that. Was it really heartbreak she wanted to take back?

Koona 2.0 was in front of her. Her heart felt jeopardy knowing that to become this... she had done things, who she was, and what those things must have been...

The women...

Who had Koona been with?

Cat caught herself as Koona interrupted her brief daydream,

"But anyway, we can talk forever about this, what made you call me?"

"I created a disaster and broke another heart."

"Not that you missed and wanted to see me?"

Oh fuck.

"I caused a hurt and somehow it woke me up to how much I miss having my best friend."

"So a guy?" Koona let Cat off the hook, but it made her sad that maybe this was a mistake, to see each other again, "Er, because Cat, that would not be news of any sort", she smiled her "I'll humor you" smile broadly breaking herself from her rumination.

Who cares Koona, I'm me and I'm seeing an old friend.

"Shit, it was almost a game for us back then! Damn marks on our bedposts, even if we never brought them there," she laughed and then playfully added, "at least as far as I know about you!" she flitted her eyebrows suggestively.

Cat blushed but the train was already in motion so she put some momentum to it, "Well, I met this amazing farang man. Well I don't know if I can say man. He looked like a rockstar, you know, combat boots, tight clothes, makeup. His name is - was - Mali."

"Wow, okay, this is new," Koona savored the information, "Mali, like meaning the flower bush in Thai, no?"

"Yes," Cat chuckled realizing she had never really made the connection for some reason, and so fitting that Mali's name referred to the flower plant, not the flower itself as if it was itself it's own hint about \$er identity,

"We got close - first as friends, emotionally. Then there was one night," Cat paused wondering how to simply summarize everything, "Koonas, he - she - is not a rockstar, thinks he - she - is katoey." Cat looked down, still ashamed about how the whole thing went down with Mali.

"He - she - told you?"

"In bits. Then the night we were together. I can't tell you. It was like magic. He didn't tell me. I *saw* her. I think. When we were together."

"Oh my god!" Koonas exclaimed smiling with a little bounce in her seat. Cat made an immediate mental note that this was in fact Koonas 2.0 because in the past the 'wow' would probably have been an 'eeeewww' accompanied by a concerned frown.

"So then what? Did you, you know?" Koonas winked all too seductively.

Cat nodded unable to speak the words to Koonas's dropped jaw.

God, when did she learn that look?!

Had she always been this way but I'd not noticed?

Is this how female friends look at each other?

Cat had never wondered about such things before.

Shit I'm self-conscious right now.

Why?

Cat was getting rocked. She was the master of poise and since Koonas walked in she could not even orient herself.

"So come on, then what?" Koonas cooed as Cat started to doubt her own unquestioned grip on reality.

"I ended it. Well I told him - her - that I wanted a man only."

"And you do? Because last time I checked you were not exactly hot for them. Or for anyone," swallowing the last phrase that was still begging for release...

And certainly not for me... I may know how to be a real friend...

But I'm still a hot blooded woman damn it...

Cat met her friends eyes while hers filled with tears. Koonas reached across the table and took her hand in her two palms and squeezed gently, "Cat, it's okay, I'm still me, you can still tell me everything. I won't judge you. Much less now than ever."

Cat shook her head,

"It's just that I feel I can't see straight anymore. I used to be so clear, now I am so confused. And unhappy."

"Cat can't see straight." Koona stated matter-of-fact and smiled deviously with the words holding gaze as Cat crescendoed into a full blush. Koona felt just a bit mean but it was so worth it, and Cat deserved it.

After enjoying the moment of her impeccably poised friends embarrassment, Koona interjected, "So, you don't have to tell me but when you made love with Mali, you saw her as a woman?"

Cat took a breath to survey the elephant she'd been boarding in her room up to now.

"Uhm, I can't lie, yes," she squinted her brows and eyes moving down beginning in vein to work on a subsequent thought that would save her as Koona waited patiently. She wasn't going to mention the images of Koona which kept hitting her starting that night. Nor the role she herself had found come so natural there.

"You know, I've never felt that way before. With a man. It wasn't aggressive, contrived or difficult, there wasn't even a *goal*, it was just softness, so incredibly soft and easy. I mean, once I helped Mali let go of... I guess of what the world programs males to think they're supposed to be."

"Do you love her?"

"Apparently not, since yesterday I told HER she had to be a man to have me," Cat furrowed her brows again, "But Koona, even so, even if so... I don't think she is far enough along. I mean, she's barely come to terms with who she is. Barely even on hormones. Hormones change people. You know my sister!"

Koona paused thoughtfully for a moment taking it in,

"Well, some of that may be valid. But acceptance of what one truly is can come in a moment," Koona winked.

Cat's heart fell. Once again, that unexpected feeling. How long could she ignore this and not probe deeper?

"Koona, honestly, I clung - wanted to cling to him - because I thought he was the one amazing perfect man in existence. I didn't consider further. He - she - had this feminine aspect. I mean, the way it felt to spend time together, walk in the park, the way he played the piano, could talk and join with my family. It was just easy. But still a man. It made everyone happy. Including me, for once..."

Cat paused not knowing if she should say what was next on her tongue.

What the fuck then...

"Spending time with Mali reminded me of how it feels to be with you. But he is a man... I thought..."

She stared out over the balcony and out to the sky. Because there was something else she knew but yet didn't understand. De-focused and dazing out, it felt like she was on the edge of something but could not say what in particular.

She had thought seeing Koona would clear things up but just in minutes everything just seemed much worse and even more blurred. She was expecting the old Koona who would get her back... box her up.

Koona broke the expanding chasm, "It's getting late, you want to see my new digs?"

"Diiiiigggs?" Cat questioned. Definitely Koona 2.0.

How long does a dark night of the soul last? Can it last a lifetime? Cause this one's dragging...

Mali had held the rather dark contemplation on the ride to the mall alongside the rehashing of \$er visit earlier this week.

But since arriving everything was just about perfection. \$he had settled \$erself at \$er favorite table at Doi Chiang Cafe, an open cafe in the free space in the middle of the top level of the mall. It was a modern mall with lots of glass and white. Buffered light filtered through from the opaque glass on the ceiling high above.

The mall was bustling - it was the weekend and rather a miracle to get this table. At \$er side was a plate of vegetables and rice \$he picked up from the vegetarian stall a couple levels below, to Mali the best meal in the world for about \$1.25. To the other side was \$er green tea latte. Doi Chiang made the best ones, beating out Starbucks easily. The 'cute as a button' baristas were exceptionally kind and friendly here too, greeting Mali as a regular with warm smiles.

With \$er Mac booted, opening Gmail in a Chrome tab, a spammy subject caught Mali's attention.

Hey you... from the past.

Mali laughed at the fact that \$he was still going to open it and mentally prepared...

I'm going to feel cheap, gullible and used in about a second.

But at least \$he had called it.

\$he read the opening line.

Wow, you're hard to track down.

Good one, Mali thought, as \$he knew \$he was going to keep reading falling further for the trap...

This is K, remember me? San Diego. Data Incorporated. Who saved your ass over and over until you disappeared???

That one.

At that moment Mali realized this wasn't spam at all but from the past that now seemed like another lifetime. \$he kept reading, intrigued.

Look this is going to sound too weird and... believe me its weird for me that I am even being driven to write this.

I had this dream - no it was almost too vivid for a dream - two nights ago and its staying with me for whatever reason and that's not normal for me. Like burning a hole in my pocket so to speak, so I need to hand this over to you and be done with it, hopefully --

In it I saw you as a child - you know how in dreams you just know who people are even if maybe they look different or you didn't know them then??, maybe around 8 years old? You were standing with your arms open as if flying and arched toward the sky. I heard the words 'open soul'.

That's it.

Weird, huh? Does that make any sense to you? Does it help in some way?

I know...

I feel like a stalker, I mean how hard was it for me to find you? You changed from Mark to the nickname MK and then to Mali. How I found you, the only constant thread: you're continued posting on blogs and message boards re elementary ROR!

Duh, dude, if you're trying to change your identity :(

Its a good thing you suck enough to need that OL chatty shit otherwise harder to find you LOL. I knew you too because of your way of writing, you're style stayed consistent. You write like a novelist and not a programmer. Easy to spot. Good for you :)

Your friend,

K

Mali exhaled realizing \$he'd been holding breath. Absorbing the punch in a way. But that was K's way and sense of humor. Not that it didn't mean gritting \$er teeth. But having learned the hard way, \$he knew it was a good thing when K taunted you because it meant she actually cared for and respected you.

It did not make sense to Mali nor could \$he even imagine ever being able to be that way to someone else just for the possibility that they might take it the wrong way and feel hurt. \$he smiled, but so was K. It had been years.

Right then the words entered \$er mind like a cutting of clouds, *open soul... maybe around eight years old... does that make any sense?*

It was weird. The timing. Why today?

The Chinese Tune, dark night of the soul. Now this.

Too serendipitous to ignore?

Mali did not make any connections though. \$he thought of \$erself eight years old. Seeing \$erself as a boy with open arms, standing and receiving some sort of bliss? No. That wasn't the quiet, timid, creative and sensitive child \$he knew from then. Expressing or showing outward jubilation would have been simply uncomfortable and out of character then. Possibly dangerous. Ridicule and bullying wasn't an uncommon occurrence back then for the boy. This was not a posture \$erself as child self had ever entered, \$he was pretty sure.

\$he had not had a bad childhood by any means. But at age eight, open soul, well, \$he was not living the dream, if K was seeing the past, it was not *this* child's past. Now, if \$he was seeing a potential, that could be.

Because \$he knew \$he was still fighting the battle to be that. Exactly that.

Open like that.

Just like that.

\$he remembered \$er last day in San Diego, walking away from \$er last girlfriend, the stable well paid job and the apartment overlooking the ocean, surfing in the early mornings before work. Stability. What felt like safety. It felt like another life. And that last day before departure to a new life in NYC, \$he stood arms open on the bluff overlooking the beach, a feeling that could only be described as *feminine*. Feeling the delicious and what seemed to be natural feminine arch of \$er lower back, chest opening, neck releasing and lengthening, poised.

Self-conscious but doing it anyway. As little bolts of electricity oscillated entering \$er spine from the ether.

That's what came to mind from K's dream.

\$he was more than a little intrigued. Not just open soul, but that K had clearly taken effort to find \$er. K... the last person on earth who would be so woo-woo about a dream, if it were. K was part of that San Diego life. Like the past calling the future back to it.

Hmmmm.

What did it mean?

All the listlessness of the past week returned en-force bringing with it that shit Chinese Tune song. What did this mean?

Another mixed signal.

A clue?

\$he had to... to get space... time... perspective and it was not happening here. Chiang Rai and everything surrounding \$er life now loomed claustrophobic. \$he felt desperate.

Away.

It was a good as a time as any to take care of business in Bangkok...

Get my visa fixed for the next few months...

And...

The Creepy Sperm Bank

The wall of 3pm humidity hit \$er as \$he exited the bronzed glass doors. She hoped \$er 'sample', was enough as \$he had no desire to return there. Ever. After all, \$he was doing the responsible thing but truly, \$er heart was hardly in it.

Was it \$er or the clinic that was creepy?, \$he wondered, opening \$er umbrella to shade \$erself from the intense sun on the busy Tanon.

Maybe its both of us put together.

Mali smiled lopsided about the weirdness.

It had hit \$er the moment \$he entered the office. Too many rooms, glass offices with white slatted louvers. Unlit portions of hallways. Tinted glass.

As much as there was a shimmery surface on Thailand - both the traditional and the modern, every time \$he dived in to learning more about the country where \$he lived, especially in the day to day, there was so much under the surface and some of it felt kind of dark... of which \$he wanted no part.

Like the massage salons. Infamous. 'Oil massage' meant 'happy ending massage', or so \$he'd learned from second-hand knowledge.

\$he wondered when \$he entered the place, just because of the apparent moral gray area in Thailand if in this clinic females would be made 'available' to the male clients to 'help out'. There were definitely stranger things being done in the country. Why was it that this should come to mind here?

If it did it raised a dilemma. Not that \$he would have accepted the help. Just as the feeling \$he got when walking by the occasional attractive women in front of the massage parlors. \$he'd still fixate involuntarily... on the less girly one, the tomboy, the girl with jeans and a tight t-shirt. \$er heart still wandered there. But it would derail quickly... it wasn't about sex. It was knowing this was all about money. But moreso, knowing that no matter what \$he would pay, \$he could never ever get what \$he wanted there.

Even in the peak of \$er testosterone days in \$er 20's, it was still more about the longing to bond. Even for a few minutes. Be close. Feel. Be felt. It had been five and counting years since even touching someone...

And then Cat came, throwing kerosene on the fire... that night.

To feel and be held.

Would I pay for it?

Stupid.

Such could never be bought.

As it would mean nothing to the girl but money. There was no 'happy ending' that money could buy that would satisfy \$er heart.

Not even in Thailand. And \$he knew that without having to stupidly try.

So was this why it was creepy maybe?

Or maybe all sperm banks are creepy?

Whatever it was, it was pinging \$er creep-dar red-line and \$he didn't like it. It was actually in good part a fertility clinic.

What is creepy about that?

But it was.

Nevertheless, it was the only sperm bank \$he could find in Thailand.

In the end the clinic was professional. No optional 'help'. At least to \$er. Not to the 'farang katoey'.

"Mr. Mali," the reception woman called \$er.

Fuck English.

Fuck this fucking fuck.

Mr. Mali dressed in womens jeans, a tight tank and in makeup, using the *ka...* going to a fucking sperm bank...

Now *that* was creepy.

Mister fucking goddam Mali.

Fuck me.

Mali shook \$er head and shrugged 'oh well' as \$he walked away down the street back to the skytrain, glad just to be away from the awkward situation. \$he had seen the Thai movies, even the most passable Thai katoey was called 'he' by others, 'Mr'.

But nevertheless.

What came the next morning was not a surprise.

The woman on the line spoke in clipped but clear English, "We need you to come back to clinic, need about ten more times you gave to have complete sample that be preserved."

And so went the ultimatum.

Surely in the past, \$er sample would have been normal. Not on hormones, and especially not the slenderizing of \$er body, probably borderline anorexia.

A sad tone set in, just slightly conscious. Confirmation and bringing up to front of consciousness that \$he was doing things that seemed against \$er body. The kind of thing you don't face until confronted with a medical exam or a blood test.

And \$he knew, because when \$he did ejaculate in that cup, imagining being in the arms of the Cat-surrogate \$he'd created in \$er mind, not much came out. And that was about a months worth! \$he had created the Cat-surrogate fantasy because it also felt creepy to imagine being with Cat.

But someone like Cat was okay apparently.

"Can't you just preserve what I gave?"

"No, ka. There is minimum limit. Not viable," then a pause, "You come back few times, give more?"

The truth was too it cost \$100 every time \$he had to 'give a sample'.

\$he viscerally could not imagine, visiting that creepy place ten more times nor ejaculating ten more times...

Ever.

"I don't think I can. It exhausts me," Mali spoke the truth, "Ejaculation, more than once a month drains me."

The language was probably lost on the Thai nurse. But the nurse spoke again,

"But maybe you not need do this?"

Mali would never know if this woman really knew what \$he was saying.

But to \$erself, \$he knew in that moment the truth of those words.

This was not in the cards.

\$er own biological child.

If the truth be told it wasn't so much true as the fact that \$er life situation was just coupled with not liking who and what \$he was. \$he was in no place with the desire to reproduce in love. There was no desire to reproduce the train-wreck of \$er own self and life.

Worse, the concept of \$er being a father was abhorrent. To be called 'dad'.

And everything else was very much in the frontier of possibility.

Too, if anything was in Mali's sensibilities, they were towards orphanages, foster children, adoption. \$he felt for these beings, not just empathy, \$he could see potential in people.

My genes are pretty much fucked anyway.

It was in honesty the furthest thing from \$er mind to bring another into this world where \$he hardly had dominion over \$er own existence after forty-something years.

It made \$er sad. Below conscious level, but the fact was, \$he had an amazing body, allergies and special diet aside, was very resilient, full of energy and strong. In contrast to so many who had issue after issue but were integrated into life and society in a way that Mali had never known.

And actually got laid more than once every five years.

It was all quite sad. Incomprehensible given what \$he dreamed of. \$he felt like crying when \$he ended the call but did not really know why.

Sitting in a mall cafe to refresh, \$he took the last sip of \$er hot chocolate and saw the bottom of the cup, trying to get one more drop of the delicious mixture, even with \$er tongue on the side of the cup, in vein as it was truly the bottom. As if this was the last of sweetness, ever.

\$he felt lost. Having made the decision of no more trips to the creepy clinic, \$he could return to Chiang Rai. But \$he was having a visceral aversion to returning.

Everything felt off. The goddam Chinese Tune was still resonating in \$er mind, not so much the actual tune but the image-print it had left. An inescapable haunting.

And open-fucking soul.

\$he *could* go somewhere else. To get perspective. That was an idea. And however ungrounded it was to run away from your relatively new home in an already foreign land, \$he was game at this point. \$he felt cornered by life.

All Living Things

All living things fear being beaten with clubs. All living things fear being put to death. Putting oneself in the place of the other, let no one kill nor cause another to kill. — Buddhist saying

"500 baht" the driver was adamant.

"Peng mai?" Mali arched brows and intoned.

"No expensive, it far! 10 keelomiter..."

Finally agreeing to the fare, now in the cab, Mali shuddered. Another mistake? \$he was generally good at intuitively making decisions, in quick time and good results. But, \$he sighed, here it could make sense. Under such felt pressure and duress to stay away from Chiang Rai at all costs, it would be easy to have followed a suboptimal path.

Running from was different than running to.

Which one was this?

Whichever one it was, this one was not fully baked. But that could be said about the depressed rock-bottom \$he felt in regards to \$er life in general lately. \$er rock bottom, not unlike walking in a creek bed of sharp rocks, you don't want to move too much and certainly not too fast.

Arriving after thirty minutes, the fare clearly earned, the resort looked nice but lifeless. The taxi pulled up on a gravel parking area in the arriving twilight. To the left the road and the ocean, and to the right, what looked like a pristine - but completely vacant, sparsely lighted resort. \$he assumed in the city of Hua Hin there would be movement and many tourists and the whole Thai-massage-expat-geezer scene there \$he wanted no part of. \$he wanted quiet and tranquility.

This was *that* and some. \$he walked up the path to a pool area, actually beginning to wonder if the place was not actually shutdown. It was not run down, just completely devoid of life.

\$he finally saw a solitary employee at the bar.

"I have reservation" Mali spoke slowly in tourist English but without meaning it, let the tone be tainted by \$er anxiety, as was not uncommon, causing an even more male voice, leading on one more level to being misunderstood for the person \$he felt \$he was and wanted the world to see.

The man seemed confused as if to say 'we're not expecting anyone'.

A chord played in Mali's body. Alone, deserted.

Not wanted.

But \$he did not know \$he felt these emotions, all \$he felt was annoyance coupled with self-consciousness.

There's something wrong with me. And everyone sees it.

Just for being alive.

Here

At all. Just by nature.

Perfect.

Mali considered the possibility that \$he really was not expected, but insisted again as \$he really had nowhere else to go easily. Finally the bartender pointed and motioned by hand 'that way'.

As \$he walked, it became clear that the entire resort was barren of people, not just the pool, but everywhere. \$he might be literally the only one there. Aside from the scare of such desolation, there was a quiet tranquility to the place.

\$he walked, following the 'directions', over a wooden boardwalk, through the tropical garden which encompassed all the property and hotel buildings. The place was composed of many individual buildings, most of them roundish or octagonal, two stories, white with wooden trim and roofs. They were all dark in the windows.

Aside from the conspicuous absence of clientele, it seemed to be an 'A' resort. Everything was clean, well maintained and basically pristine.

\$he heard a murmur of water as \$he noticed that alongside the path was a man-made brook, running the length of the property too, winding under the boardwalk path as it needed in order to stay unbroken by buildings and other obstacles.

All of the sudden, what \$he saw paralyzed \$er heart and made \$er stop in \$er tracks. Unable to move a step further \$he sat down right there, in place where \$he was.

Koona's Klong House

"Seriously Koona?" exclaimed a wide-eyed Cat, as the cab stopped in a very working class neighborhood, almost ghetto. It was a long way from Koona's previous plush condo towering Ploen Chit.

"Well I like it", Koona vocalized sassily, "Just check it out," she smirked as she handed the driver full fare and a nice tip, a habit she'd picked up from the farang.

They walked on the dimly lit path alongside the flat one story building which housed several in-line apartments.

"Wow," Cat murmured looking to the right upon hearing the soft murmur of free water, realizing that they were at the edge of a klong.

"Hold on, you'll see."

Koona softly put her arm around Cat to stop and guide her to the front door. She paused for a second and looked over at Cat, their eyes meeting softly, questioning eyes on both sides. Koona smiled shyly. She was having trouble making sure this was really happening.

Or what was happening.

She'd be damned if there were not at least mixed signals. Or she herself was going mad.

Equally possible.

She opened the door and ushered Cat in with her hand falling down her arm with a gentle tug on a soft receptive hand when reached. Koona switched on some very subtle track lighting which exposed a mostly rustic style studio. Immaculately clean and simply furnished, different shades of wood were the overall visual. A well equipped kitchen at the far back, a bed with all white linen on top of a wood box frame mostly behind a Japanese panel, a beautiful white plush couch just to the right and in front of them facing the front window, which she imagined if was not covered with a closed slatted wooden shade that it would look right out on the klong given that this was the last unit in the row. All darks, wood and mahogany color accented with plush whites and some black surfaces like the kitchen counter and the dining table.

It was perfect. Cat felt it. Even the smell had a slight musky smell of cedar.

"Wooooowwwww" Cat intoned, "I love this, I really do!"

"I told you! Really, I needed a change, I had this vision and I found it," Koona waited as Cat seemed to finish her admiring, "Do you want to sit down?" she motioned to the couch, "Something to drink?"

Cat smiled, "Yes. And water. Definitely water. I'm so thirsty," but her eyes, the way she was looking at her, Koona's heart filled with warmth and involuntarily connected to the ever longing sensation in her core.

Thirsty for what really are you?

Jesus Koona.

100 Years

Mali sat alongside the gentle brook. Glimmering fish, white, yellow and brilliant orange sparking a contrast against the black rocks in the twilight. Playing and flowing through the evening, alive and oblivious of the pain and despair looming nearby.

Swimming and swishing through their evening. Beautiful and alive, thriving, slithering. To Mali what looked like playing.

Just being themselves, in all they are.

Vibrant, alone and en masse. She couldn't help but feel a natural connection to them.

Isn't this all that any of us really want? To let life run through us, to be embodied and express what we are fully? To be, to flow? Be around others doing the same thing and in communion? Without having to worry?

It was a moment that reminded her of the mystery, similar to looking out on the stars on a clear night. Reminding her she knew nothing about how this was all put together, the fabric of life... and everything that exists.

The only reliable barometer she seemed to have was expression, feeling and being after joy and the enigmatic longing to bond - yet always on its skirt tails. Which came out when she hoop-danced, when she practiced her standing. The same river of impetus that had brought her exactly here - who she was, to Thailand, the clothes, makeup, surgeries...

And how it would feel to truly embrace and be embraced in someone.

If I ever get to again.

This was exactly what these fish spoke to \$er.

Vanity.

That was the deal-stopping thought time and again. That made \$er run back to 'being a man' over the years. Not just changing clothes and getting back to 'man' ways, but actually purging the female from \$er life, throwing clothes and everything else away as if *this time* it would be different.

Letting go of myself.

Just living. Being.

Isn't all the rest of this fem stuff simply self-indulgent?

Selfish?

Alienating myself from others?

And from my deepest longing for love?

Seriously, as a dude I'd do well in Thailand, being younger and more attractive alternative to the geezers. With Cat!

Then \$he remembered, \$he wouldn't have ever come to Thailand if it weren't for the katoey, the fem in \$er.

I'd have stayed forever in Mexico probably.

But at the end of life, even in later years when the body becomes less 'perfect', would it matter?

And the cost?

This life is ONCE.

What am I doing??!

Am I killing me?

Causing suffering, to my own flesh?

How was it, this unknowable intelligence and gift, within \$erself be the same that was seemingly guiding \$er to turn a knife against \$er own organism?

The fish as if their oscillation in the water ran through Mali's gut reminding \$er of the sperm in \$er that were, probably, even at this moment, dying off from the hormones \$he was taking.

And eventually would no longer exist either.

As much as \$he hated being a man, that was reality.

What was \$he doing to parts of \$er physical self? Was there a being who was supposed to come from \$er?

The livelihood of what \$er body was as-is would be able to continue to live and possibly thrive if \$he got off this train and damn soon.

The sperm and cells in \$er were just like those fish.

Unknowable.

The nature of life itself. A nature \$he didn't and would never completely understand. The mystery from which sperm emerge from nothing it seems, not to mention how they can combine with an egg and create life.

Me.

Like stars that are being born.

How the fuck can I take that into my own hands?!

Only as much as \$he could imagine - and \$he couldn't - jumping into the brook and with a knife taking life away from even one of these fish, could \$he imagine doing that to \$er own body.

Yet \$he was now, had been and was contemplating doing more. The woman in the magazine...

The face that launched a thousand ships...

In this moment sitting here with these fish \$he knew time was up.

Up to this point it had all been play - dressing, makeup, slenderizing... with who knows what kind of impact.

And the fish below had just presented \$er the balance sheet.

A drive toward death?

Destruction?

Is this the death instinct in me?

Going to hell?

The game was over. These fish. \$er body, it was of course \$er body still no matter how \$he looked at it. A body born and grown, as if magically, as if any of us really know the ultimate mystery. Inside a womb for nine months. The same womb \$er brother inhabited a couple years after. From a woman and man who despite their flaws gave this being love and cared for \$er and wanted \$er to exist and to continue existing and to be happy...

Who was \$he to take the knife against all this? All these gifts? Taking the knife to what was to date virtually perfect health.

Against all the love in the universe?

And the facial feminization surgery - the FFS. Just as with the fish and the sperm, every cell in \$er body was alive. Each one would feel at the level of their nature every incision and scratch, anesthesia or not. There was no doubt in \$er mind.

But maybe \$he too was like those fish - striving for life and to thrive, to be true. Misguided or not, her days, even the sacrifice of income and stability were all about this. Counterintuitive to most of the world, even stupid. Seeking \$erself, then in step turning the knife against \$er own body by its own instructions.

Barbaric ordination it seemed. Even tainted with evil.

A system consciously transforming itself.

But Cat.

Cat was the dream. Not an exaggeration, the original dream. The fem in \$er already existed then and \$he knew how it felt. But back then it was before it was a contradiction to love. A condition against it. A 'no' rather than a 'yes' from Cat.

The grace and beauty of the living being whose arms \$he'd been in only a short few weeks before. Wasn't that with her worth more than any of this?

How it felt with her... I've never felt with anyone else. Same as embracing the pillow feeling first as a child...

As if throwing it in \$er face, Cat had laid it out.

"I want a man."

No more makeup and... being... becoming prettier. Having to be and call \$erself a man.

Being fucking called 'sir' and shit...

Although \$he was more able to say no to this now, it didn't remove the pull and sting of wanting to run back to safety.

Was \$he entering the dark world? Is the Chinese Tune right?

All of the sudden \$he was viscerally aware of the feeling of multiple barbed knives sunk into \$er in opposing directions. Each one with any movement would cut further - whether moving from or toward.

Hormones. Surgery. Cat.

Integrity. Expression. Love.

\$he sat still. Almost not breathing because any more than the minimum was unbearable should it cause the knives to dig deeper.

Life had paralyzed \$er.

\$he had been paralyzed for years. Each day requiring a smaller and smaller world which permitted \$er to maintain the brittle illusion of who \$he was, if only to \$erself as \$er inner self-knowledge grew. And the world saw seemingly no more or less of something \$he was not. \$he knew there were all kinds of people, transgender, queer, every possible sexual orientation and so much diversity. But \$er foot wasn't in the pool. \$he hardly knew where the pool was. Or even if so, how to do it.

And certainly not swim.

To be myself, through apparent violence and have integrity but the loss of all hope of my core dream.

It wasn't about accepting femininity or trans-ness. It was about an irreconcilable duality in \$erself between \$er gender expression and romantic identity. And without the knife could there ever be a chance at reconciliation.

Or to stop the train and get off, all the dreams intact. Under the condition of being a man. With the intent cutting off of something in \$er that that seemed not willing to be dominated ever.

Not to date.

Not without someone to help figure \$er out. \$he knew well too, that's where ten years and probably \$100k had gone. The house most people would have purchased in their thirties sat with \$er and these fish in the form of barely remembered fifty-minute sessions, completely impotent.

As \$er ass with little padding tired of sitting on the boards, the hope of another way, one \$he had never considered or believed in sprouted in \$er heart like an angel of light. \$he had no idea what that was, but maybe there was.

Maybe I'll be able to find it... decide it here.

Once and for all.

But surrendering to the feeling of being pinned down, feeling it to the core, admitting to it here in front of this little brook, it seemed to have loosened the anxiety and terror of \$er situation and of the Chinese Tune.

After who knows how long, \$he raised herself and made \$er way on. A few minutes later \$he reached the actual front of the resort, where \$he was in fact greeted by a standing, smiling professional and welcoming Thai staff woman.

Mali had a bit of an ironic smirk on \$er face, as was \$er playful character with \$erself, even in adversity. Not to mention whatever the tears with the fish had made of \$er face, expression and eyes.

Which of the smiles is that??!

_T_he hostess could not figure out this strange farang. Maybe he??? was not American.

"Some 'open soul'", Mali thought as if in unison with the clerk.

On the wall there was a gold monogrammed saying:

Cut yourself some slack.

Remember, one hundred years from now,

All new people.

The pretty and polite Thai woman smiled and offered Mali the key to \$er room.

'What kind of foreigner?' the woman wondered.

'Just what kind of hotel is this?' Mali wondered back.

Mali walked away in a kind of sad stupor.

This is what I'm doing with my hundred years.

This.

Not to love someone but...

This?

Fuck!

Mali broke to the real tears again as she made her way down the solitary path to find her abode, knowing she was truly alone.

With this precious and fragile gift that I've been handed.

This never-to-repeat precious day, these heartbeats, this breath.

This force of life in me that makes me alive and here.

These feelings that never get touched or felt with someone else.

All this fucking vanity.

What was any of it but a fucking self-indulgent turmoil-quest?

As she climbed to her top level, second floor suite, all the holding of who knows how long crescendoed and tears turned to sobs and full catharsis toward what in feeling seemed to be *the bottom*.

It was perfect.

There was no one around to hear.

Much less care.

Japanese

As Koona went to the kitchen and was filling the glass Cat felt a shadow. Something eerie. This place felt almost Japanese. Substitute the bed with a futon and you had...

"Cat?" Koona returned with her hand out offering Cat a full glass of water, "Cat ka?"

Koona furrowed her brows, "Cat are you okay?"

Cat was immobile, staring directly ahead, what would be out the window if the shade were open. Koona set the water down on the coffee table and softly put her hand on Cat's as she kneeled. Cat's body literally jumped tense and then softened as she woke from wherever it was.

Koona saw fear and tears in her eyes.

Cat stared at her as if she did not know her. Or was afraid. It was as if her two worst nightmares, the things she'd simply not faced in life in a moment were coalesced by Koona.

"Cat, it's okay," Koona stayed with her, removing her offending hand and keeping eye contact. She'd never seen her friend like this.

"It's okay, please, talk to me, whatever it is, it's okay."

Cat's eyes softened a bit as she looked at Koona and took an audible breath. A tear fell, "Koona..."

"It's okay, do you want to hold my hand?"

Cat reached with both hands and pulled Koona's to her as she searched her eyes.

Still with fear but ready to talk, Cat spoke, "Koona, I'm so afraid," her hands responding with a tremor as if by command, as Koona held back gently but firmly. Cat knew what the things were. But the shaking in her body, *that* was the scary part. She couldn't understand it. Nor control it, like a visceral anxiety reaction.

"What happened just now? Where were you? What were you thinking of?"

"I was looking at your place. It reminded me of Japan," she paused as if wondering if to say what was next, "It was a place... not unlike this..." Cat trailed, "it's so weird..."

Kali

Dawn had broken and the early morning sunlight streamed gently in. Mali woke upon the round bed in the round building. Wrapped in a light white comforter, head on the plush pillow, legs wrapped around a body-length one, comfort \$he was not used to. The air-conditioning was on and the cool un-humid air created a coziness of not wanting to leave bed, a feeling \$he was unaccustomed to in Thailand. It was a sweet surrender \$he had not felt in some time.

But then \$he remembered who \$he was.

And where \$he really was.

And why.

There were bruises left on \$er psyche from last night.

As \$he turned over, \$he felt the hangover of the catharsis.

Good fucking start.

Ahead laid four days of what seemed like would be virtually complete solitude to some sort of hopeful resolution...

Something.

Because this can't keep on.

It seems so often in the first moments out of bed \$he would get the actual 'vibe' of the day. Today \$he stumbled and almost fell, having gotten strangely twisted in the blanket, hence frustration was the tone. Then anger at the fucking blanket holding \$er to this clumsy fate. The same anger and frustration which throughout life had so often threatened to overwhelm \$er slight figure and underdeveloped musculature.

\$he paused in the bathroom after brushing \$er teeth.

More of the 'decisions' that \$he'd made in the twilight yesterday came back.

Should I moisturize my face if I'm being a guy now?

Unsure, \$he just splashed water carelessly on \$er face and then made back to the big room.

\$he had packed clothes only for two days, and for Bangkok - for subways and air-conditioned malls. \$he'd either had to buy some clothes or improvise.

\$he eyed \$er jeans, not the favorite pair but they fit nicely enough.

Sacrifice?

It was either do this or go buy clothes somewhere. The trip to the resort for all \$he was aware placed \$er in the boonies. And the last thing \$he wanted to do was go anywhere. Hard enough trying to be fem. Now...

I can't go anywhere.

Nothing is solid in me.

I'll get eaten alive.

Inevitably someone would stare, perhaps worse because of not wearing female clothes or makeup, but having the slight figure \$he did, slender face, and what over time so many people called 'feminine energy'.

And witness my fucking transition from katoey to gay in public before my own eyes.

I think I'll pass.

It was different flipping back to guy mode. It had been over a year since \$er last attempt. Instead of a flow and moving toward things like smoothness and certain clothes and way of being, 'guy mode' was more of a rule-based mostly restrictive journey as if \$he was in the military or something. The only freedom is eating as much and whatever \$he wanted, as long as it didn't make \$er sick, which eating more often did.

In guy mode when they laughed or said something, it was worse. Because at least if you are clear who you are inside, it's an insult but in the name of identity. When you're not even being what you are to your best, all you are is a shell, a feather in the wind, you're buffeted randomly by the negative you come in contact with.

_And being a guy you can't take that kind of shit from people. _

Of course Mali was forgetting the possible good that could come from being out and about. We all want pleasure but it seems that we'll do more to avoid pain. And \$he was far into triage mode.

Even to be a 'he' today. It was not convincing - to \$er and probably anyone else in turn.

So walking over to the kitchenette, 'he' found a knife.

Maybe I don't have to do all this fem shit anymore anyway.

\$he was angry at everything and it showed.

The problem was, on the path toward femininity, whenever something new and more feminine became habit you reached a new level. A new normal. In moments of trying to return to manhood, \$he'd forget the stepping path of 'new normals' that had gotten \$er to the current. So given the heights \$he was at, \$he'd forgotten about the terrain \$he'd already climbed. And how far the fall would be.

But that was beside the point right now.

\$he stood with the jeans.

\$he had the impulse inside to cut the legs high.

Sexy.

Because... they'd feel good.

Jesus Mali.

Gay gay gay.

In that moment Mali self-acknowledged the man thing was off to a bad start.__

The warring factions compromised, cutting midway, mid-thigh.

They still fit \$er ass nicely.

Uh... I'm not supposed to care about that.

\$he figured \$he'd look like a European male.

Which would be called gay in the USA.

\$he walked to the bathroom to take a gander. With \$er slender build and non-existent but tight ass, the outcome was just as queer as if \$he'd cut them to the bikini line. The body reflected in the mirror was still of a runway model, not anything like male from the neck down.

Okay, maybe not the chest. Everything but the chest. But I don't give a fuck about having breasts...

Mali stop!

Seeing \$er feminine-like body in the mirror a rush of warmth and hardness came between \$er legs. It had always been like that...

Longing to be with and to be...

Being and being attracted by the same...

Being one with myself and how I feel...

Even from childhood, \$he'd found \$erself turned on often with sight of \$er own body. As it was... on what \$he focused and fixated, analogous to the bodies of the beautiful girls and women \$he found so breathtaking. It was so fantastic \$he even looked and felt like them, felt them, connected, related to them.

And since \$he was in male mode \$he indulged a quick and completely draining release.

Post climax \$he stood with \$er hand on the bathroom counter. The tiny dribble of cum was barely anything to clean up.

Just eight more fucking samples now you goddam creepy clinic!

She smiled half-heartedly.

I hate how I look as a smiling man.

It felt bad. \$er male orgasm. Depleted. Sad. Unhappy. Alone. The same feeling as \$he's ever known as a man. Unless the orgasm came from the feminine part in \$er. But this was not that. All \$he knew of male was 30 seconds of excitement and then misery.

\$he sighed and knew - the years, how \$he thought and how \$he lived, by now, queerness - at best queerness - was inescapable. It would take probably a couple years to cover over this again, back to a 'male'. And that path was full of conflicts and land mines if possible at all given \$er - if \$he'd admit it - almost anorexic-like tendency to not show anything that looks like a male belly.

It was instructive but the irony didn't occur to \$er that in hours, a day, certainly less than a week, \$he had in fact gone on several occasions from being the most masculine \$he ever was and get back to enough female to feel comfortable that \$he was home in \$er heart and sensuality. But that it would take a disproportionate amount of time to get back to appearing as a man...

A straight man... because that's the only acceptable thing I could be...

To the world.

Would take time. A long time. Well... we can see...

Mali had no real faith in any of this too familiar 'fresh beginning' shit, having been here and done that before then and again, but what else was \$he to do now?

At best at the resort \$he'd have to face some employees here but aside... \$he had a few days. Between the resort and what the little restaurant a few hotels down could provide, \$he did not have to go anywhere else until \$he left.

How small my world has become.

Remembering the words of warning from one of \$er psychologists, that \$he'd do exactly this, become a less expansive being. Not a gender exploration affirming psychologist, that's for sure...

But were any of them?

Where most people on vacation would go and have fun and explore, do things, this was \$er circle of safety. The goal right now was to stay close to the deserted resort and avoid people.

Especially today.

For Mali it wasn't fun meeting people anymore if it ever really was. It was just plain uncomfortable.

Or heartbreaking if they were attractive women. In that case it hurt so much \$he just ignored them and didn't look, averting \$er eyes.

It wasn't that people were generally bad.

But it hurt feeling always misread.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Trying to be a man again. Hmmm...

After cleaning up the remains of the jeans and the sad situation in the bathroom, 'he' went out on to the balcony and found a very comfortable wooden reclining rocker - much more comfortable than it had first looked. \$he took a breath and looked out on the greenery and jungle-like aspect of the resort, with the pool and then the ocean off in the distance.

It was lost on \$er that for so many people simply being in a place like this, under the freedom \$he enjoyed would mean they had made it in life.

Ironically that was the furthest thing from the truth about how \$he felt about \$erself and \$er life. But \$he tried...

As a man this would mean having made it.

Cat would be here... maybe.

There would be a 'we' of some sort, regardless. Maybe a family too... Heck... I was twelve years old by the time my parents were my age.

But no. It's just me here and my small, ever-contracting world.

Sadness crept up. \$he was remembering Cat in those early moments before barely even friendship had sprung up between them. That moment - it was just a second - but it was a look, a feeling, the held gaze of knowing the connection. \$he knew Cat was in that moment too. In fact she'd been the one to hold the gaze.

One of those infrequent moments where life actually rewarded \$er heart.

I'm so selfish.

That's too what one of the psychologists had told \$er - \$he was supposed to focus on the woman and her emotions and wants, not 'himself'... *'You'll only be fulfilled as a man by being that for a woman.'*

Cat turned out to be amazing beyond what Mali had even imagined based on \$er initial attraction. A woman with seemingly endless depth, the ability to talk, a true companion.

Albeit for measured time.

Mali's face squinted as if to squeeze the tears out, like juice from a dry orange. \$he felt for a second almost like \$he was hyperventilating or suffocating.

It was the feeling of loss, but pre-loss where you feel like you have a choice still to not lose it.

Fight.

I can still...

\$he wanted Cat back. \$he wanted what they had had. It was not so much something between a man and a woman, but what they had, whatever it was.

Could I make this man thing work? To have her? If that is what it takes?

It was tempting. \$he was getting used to the idea of shedding the clothes, the makeup. But then came the realization of how far \$he'd come as a feminine creature...

The waxing? No.

\$he hated being hairy.

The hormones and anti-androgens?

\$he couldn't bear to keep pattern balding and the rough skin that would come back.

My unacceptably male face? Being called a handsome man? Called 'mister', 'sir'... 'dad'?

Fuck that.

But regardless, in \$er was this irrepressible pull to bond. It'd always been there. It wouldn't go away just as much as...

I wish I just didn't have to do anything. Just be. And be myself. With no conflict... Like a yoga woman who is simply female. She doesn't even have to put on makeup, just splash some water on her face. She is still seen as female. And a beautiful one.

So maybe I could - should - just accept myself as am and get on with life.

The problem was Mali could not, as hard as \$he tried sitting here, come up with a comparable image of \$erself as a man that could be both analogous and pleasing to \$erself as being that prototype yoga woman. Much less something \$he knew would please Cat and be sustainable.

Each morning, day and month in and out, now for three years, \$he'd made the choice who \$he was and wanted to be. Consciously. Because \$he had to.

You put on makeup... or you don't.

You choose these clothes... or those other ones...

Being female was somehow irresistible. In the high ninety percentile of days... it was the girl who called to \$er. The other days it was no man that called, only the mandate of 'not man' to be enforced.

Eventually she threw out the last of the guy clothes of the latest round - the three-button polo shirts and Dockers... clothes \$he could no longer tolerate to even look at.

So following that logic... shouldn't this mean...

No man. No man for Cat?

If it means not choosing my inner woman?

Hasn't my own life action decided that empirically?

Aside from missing the fact that as a man \$he could be out of bed and out the door in five minutes, could be more low maintenance and agile in lifestyle, there was not much else. The only other thing to 'look forward' to was the residual gridlock, frustration and anger... the only things \$he actually knew about being a man and felt while \$he was *that*.

This morning, visiting 'he-ness' felt good. For a moment.

As a false hope. A false relief from all this psychological pressure. \$he realized at best that moment ended with that fucking unhappy ending in the bathroom.

It was a place to visit but not stay.

And only for perspective.

\$er heart sunk. The 'new beginning' was only another false start, a road already travelled a hundred times. The fact was, there was no 'back' to being a man. There was no one home there. No one was at the wheel. Only the female inside was something tangible \$he could run to... even embrace... and be embraced back by.

Shit, the only thing in me that seems to have conviction and balls is...

Everything that's not a man.

For so much time \$he had conflated being male to eating more and not 'dressing'. Either of which did not make \$er a man. It was nothing like the longing for \$er female wardrobe, form fitting clothes and sensuality, the freedom of play and expression... the only things in life that seemed real to \$er...

As \$he sat there on the deck overlooking life and nature around, \$er mind felt dirty, like it was full of constipated shit.

Mental turds can certainly ruin one's view.

Mali smirked then actually laughed at the image. Pretty funny.

Cat's Heartbreak

"Koona," Cat looked searchingly at her friend. The memory had returned and it was like a knife in her side. It would hurt to pull out, but now discovered, it would have to be exorcised.

This would perhaps be the most vulnerable thing she'd ever have to tell someone.

Koona came over and hugged her.

"It's okay Cat, you can tell me anything. You know that."

Cat nodded sadly, "I guess since we're on a roll today, huh?" The level of disclosure between two already close friends had already reached new heights in just a few hours reacquainted and it was just getting started.

Koona nodded, "I've not held anything back from you today, have I?"

Spill it.

"Your place reminded me of something I forgot. That I just remembered..."

Koona was silent.

"I'm remembering... I don't know why I forgot. Completely forgot. My tutor..."

"Mr. Takeda?"

"No, no, tutor actually, to help me after school..."

"I didn't know you had had one.... you know, there's a lot I don't know about that period of time with you. You never talk about it much."

Cat smirked what looked like almost in pain, then spoke slowly "... maybe this is why..."

Koona raised her eyebrows.

"Koona... fuck," the tears started coming, "fuck."

Koona put her hand on Cat's own softly with a firm warmth, "Cat, it's okay, whatever it is, it's okay. It's okay, I'm here, don't worry."

She held her crying friend again as the minutes ticked by, soothing her with slight movement in her embrace, like a mother helping to rub a wound to make it better.

Cat raised her eyes to Koona, searching.

"Her name was Noriko..." Cat smiled off into the distant past before the injurious moment.

"I got hurt. Actually it was double hurt..." it was all coming back now. The feelings, the innocent impulse inside her young self... and then...

Koona was trying to piece things together. "You were how old when you were there, nine?"

"Ten. Because I remember that horrible birthday the week after when my parents came to visit," Cat inhaled deeply as if preparing.

"Koona, she was young too but older. To me, big. Like fifteen. We spent every afternoon together, you know, because I was new in Japan and there was so much, just the language alone..."

Koona nodded waiting for Cat to continue.

"Koona we were playing. We would play..." Cat looked far off for a moment again, "She was... she was cute. Confusing... Cute..."

"Tell me about her... Noriko."

"I didn't know anything then. She was cute like a boy but she was a girl. I didn't know what a tomboy was then. Barely knew the difference between boy and girl anyway," Cat smiled ironically, "she was just... she was just who she was, okay?" Cat adding the question to see if Koona understood.

Koona nodded. She did. All too well.

"We'd play... ah... in between... uh... we we're supposed to be studying, you know, right? With our time. In the afternoons."

Koona had never heard Cat have so much difficulty speaking, for a woman so eloquent in just about everything. She gently placed her hand back on top of Cat's, and moved gently back and forth in comforting.

Cat looked directly at Koona, yet not being able to control the tears that would afflict her next words.

"So we'd... you know when I'd say something dumb or she'd make me laugh, I'd push her or she'd shove me or something... you know, kind of roughhouse, right?"

Koona nodded.

"So one day... we we're there, alone. Sitting on the bench in the kitchen... working, playing, you know... and... I remember she totally cracked me up about something... who the fuck knows now... but I just shoved her over and... you know, I was a lot smaller. Well..."

Cat started crying fully again as the feelings she'd buried for so long in shame returned.

"I never knew what it was how I felt about her. You know... when you're young... you just... you just feel, right? There's nothing wrong about anything, you know?"

Koona nodded again.

Oh do I know Cat, you have no idea...

"So I succeeded pushing her over and I'm there on top of her... uh kind of... uh... I actually pinned her down you know? And..."

Koona smiled broadly in empathetic joy while Cat gave her a sideways quizzical look.

"Okay, so you pinned her down and???"

Cat shook her head, "Jesus Koona... I kissed her."

Koona willed to stifle her surprise and kept quiet.

"And then it all happened so fast..." Cat was shaking her head, "It hurt so much. She pushed me away. Hard. Like she hated me... and then..."

Koona interlocked fingers with Cat's hand, "Then we weren't alone. Mr. Takeda had arrived. He saw the whole thing... you know, like from the start..."

Cat shook her head almost in unison with Koona's empathetic disbelief. She started sobbing again...

"Koona, I never knew what shame was. You know, in Thailand we have our stuff. But there... in Japan... Kyoto... I'm alone, away from home, my parents... cared for by Mr. Takeda and his family as if he was my own father..."

Koona continued shaking her head. This all was just a lot. If this was how Cat was inside, and this happened the first time she tried... She herself knew firsthand, and even as an adult, how she felt at the pool with her own first 'slip' and Cat's 'push away'... And here, both rejection and witnessed by the man Cat had always regarded to this date as her Japanese father.

"So what happened?"

"I buried everything Koona... I became Japanese. Everything I've created in my life... is around..."

"Not being yourself."

"No fucking shit, of course not. Nothing was okay about me after that moment. I was repulsive... to Noriko and Jesus who knows with Mr. Takeda. We never spoke of it. It was always in the air. He saw me... he saw me kiss a girl. And be rejected for it."

Cat paused then continued, "No fucking wonder he said nothing. He knew he didn't have to. To this date I don't know what he thought really. I never saw Noriko again. I was afraid to even ask less the subject be brought up."

Cat shook her head, affirming her own realization, "So look at me now. It's like after that day I stopped remembering this. Or having feelings. Until now."

"Because of my place?"

Cat nodded.

Strangely, though, Koona felt this might actually be a good thing and even a pang of hope.

"No... well I guess it did bring it back. But..." Cat returned her eyes to rest on Koona's.

"Yeah," Koona nodded sadly.

Hmmm. Hmmm. Hmmm hmmm. Hmmm.

Dangerous. Tread carefully Koona.

"So you never remembered or felt that way again about someone?"

Jesus Koona.

"You know me... everything was just playing from then on. And being Japanese as I can be. It's a great culture to repress as you're served with all the rules of etiquette. Mr. Takeda was so proud of me," Cat smiled. No matter what she loved that man, so quiet, stern in his way but always with this unspoken gentle lovingness.

Aside that he didn't console me. The most confusing of it all.

But Cat's mind and heart was not done processing and quickly interjected with tearful emotion, as if remembering something very important, "I felt good with her. She was a tomboy. But still pretty, just athletic, strong. That's why I liked her," she looked away wistfully and smirked, "why it felt good to pin her down... I felt... maybe like her a bit.. strong... I'm just realizing, I was so naive," she shook her head, "I didn't distinguish. I thought that's how boy's were too. Supposed to be. I've been waiting and waiting... for a boy like her. I realize I've never found a boy - a man - anything like that, the way it felt."

"Koona," Cat widened her now drying eyes, "and now I'm afraid."

"Why sweetheart?"

"Because..." Cat looked down and uncharacteristically slumped, playing with her hands. After a minute she timidly raised her eyes and turned her head just a little to the side to look at her friend.

Fuck.

It was like a second wave of crystallization of what had happened with Mali on *that night*. She thought Mali was *that man*. The tomboy man. He got under her skin, under the radar... But is not a man, Cat scrunched her brows, feeling overwhelmed.

Koona nodded a soft smile, "Because?"

Cat noticed that same hopeful yet wounded tone she had first heard when she reconnected with Koona. Maybe she was imagining it. It was exactly as she herself would sound if she'd ever been herself all these years.

"Because..."

I feel like I've fucked up my life.

I want to pull you close and never let you go.

I've never been myself.

Because I need you.

That's why.

Cat felt a kind of tunnel-vision dizziness come, like disorientation that had often come and gone over the years and lately more frequently since that night with Mali.

"I'm so obsessed with Japan..."

Koona waited in silence, intending to give her friend space, and after a minute, shook her head and smiled. Cat had fallen asleep mid-sentence, sitting up straight.

So typical. The perfect Japanese woman. Wouldn't know she's asleep aside from that she has just stopped responding.

Koona went to the bedroom area and her eyes quickly fell on her soft body-length pillow. With a glint in her eyes she grabbed it along with a light comforter.

The Blackest Sheep

The forth day of solitude finally came...

Mali had climbed over the balcony outside \$er room to a ledge \$he'd found large enough to sit on. It was actually a fence, some artificial division of the property for whatever reason but had a ledge and a back as if it was a bench. It was surprisingly comfortable \$he had discovered in past days, aided by a pillow and a couple towels \$he had brought over.

It was \$er last day of the lonely and unproductive retreat.

Where in the past solitude had allowed \$er to work things out, the current was unworkable no matter what \$he tried. \$he'd escaped Chiang Rai and then Bangkok to this god-forsaken place carrying high hopes.

_ Going to hell _

\$he had written it and now etched it indelibly by going over and over it again and again by pen in \$er journal.

"Going to hell," \$he said absent and dreamily, half aloud, and then angrily...

"This right here is fucking hell... there's nowhere else to go!"

Which is how in recent years, mostly unconsciously, \$he had felt about \$er life... into the gutter... the sewer. Not in small part by being affected by those around \$er who had no way of really seeing what was inside and who saw a man still. All the gay-friend-zoning of woman. The not infrequent noise and pokes on the street. Being called or assumed gay, even by the well-meaning. People on the outside did not seem to get \$er, or see where \$he was going.

Trying to go.

Could go...

For a moment \$he contemplated the magazine model who for all Mali had presumed, caused that fucking Chinese Tune to start playing. __

The 'going to hell' period started in earnest after things broke open a few years back. \$he dropped the external 'help' - therapists, bodyworkers, psychic chiropractors, teachers and whoever.

All this stuff that years had shown impotent against the fem in \$er. \$he'd finally grown wary and smarter. The new age way of thinking that all you have to do is flip some switches in your mind and everything will resolve and you get your hearts desire - to be whole, enlightened, your soulmate, yada yada.

The (fucking) Secret.

Nope.

More like Victoria's Secret.

Mali smiled.

Not only did the shit not work, \$he hated feeling so dependent on others. Not trusting yourself has a deep price and \$he'd begun to feel it as too painful to continue. Too \$he was sick of having to pay all this - money and time just to be 'okay'. Moreover, \$er deep conviction of self-determination was always undermined by being geographically not to mention financially tied to whatever practitioner \$he was currently seeing.

Ironically, 'going to hell' started at the same time \$he started trusting \$erself.

And although \$he did not realize it at the time, within months of taking responsibility for \$erself and \$er power back, \$he quickly gravitated more decisively than ever to the fem and more than not stayed there because there was no one to pull \$er back with their voodoo-new-age-psycho promises of something better. No breadcrumbs of hope sprinkled anymore by the bygone weekly therapy sessions. \$he did just what \$he felt like doing bit by bit more over time, and which brought \$er to... here.

Female clothes, then makeup, waxing and laser... hair-loss meds, the hair transplant...

\$he vividly remembered the moment, years back now, on a walk to downtown Guadalajara en route to the used bookstore street when \$he apologized to \$erself for what was coming,

'Sorry but I've got to do this even if its against you, life and even this dream - the most important dream - in my heart. Wherever it leads me.'

It wasn't a religious thing. It was about himself - herself - dreams and longings.

Going against the core dream.

Her.

The longing for a romantic love with a beautiful and special, warm woman. True connection and deep intimacy. Of a simple life. Maybe a family. In Guadalajara.

This all contrasted with who 'he' was if he accepted he was not a cisgender or perhaps straight man. 'He' still felt more real back then. It was all a conjecture - \$erself against the world basically. This inexplicable pull toward this...

Definitely felt like going out on a limb.

So it wasn't so crazy \$he'd attached the term 'going to hell' to the journey. Because it was a scary thing. To do on \$er own.

\$he knew even then that 'sin' meant only to go against self. So \$he did not need dogma, or any other human being...

Just integrity and an ear open always to what's going on inside.

And trying to ignore the noise from the outside...

To date \$he knew deep inside that in all this over the years \$he was being true...

I have not sinned on this journey... mostly at least.

But I'm so afraid of making a bad and permanent decision.

That's what it was. Albeit against the mainstream world, everything came naturally, on \$er own with barely any input from others. Being a tech nomad already for some time by the 'going to hell' point, \$he did not belong or visit virtually any LGBT or transgender community or events. There was virtually no direct external influence or pressure.

Heck, I've never even been to Pride yet.

Pride in fact scared \$er for the most part and the idea of going made \$er even more self-conscious of being presumed male-gay.

So it really only left one very important question now...

Was there an alternative to ending up here? To going further on this road... where things will permanently change, like it or not.

Mali by this point was pretty sure there were no mistakes in the universe. Who and how we are born. Born gay. Born straight. Lesbian. Bi...

But transgender?

Transgender was the bastard stepchild, the blackest of black sheep. The one with an additional layer of existential problems.

If it was even real.

The last time \$he'd checked it was still a disorder in the DSM.

But if one was basically born transgender and it's a real thing, where is the natural remedy?

If you're gay or lesbian, even bi, you just go about doing you. Yeah, there are physical things you might change. Things that may draw attention to you for good or bad for sure. Certainly could bring ostracism and discrimination, even horribly.

But trans, do you suck it up and accept the original equipment? What about the original biology? Hormones? Do you let yourself be and become what nature will or has turned you into if you don't intervene?

And what do you do if you do go forward and intervene... and none of it is enough to heal the wound?

Is being me more important than having the chance to love and be loved? To love and be loved by the person, the gender I adore?

Everything had been right in \$er before the puberty changes. \$he remembered \$erself in sixth grade photos, around twelve years old, a cute tom-boy... who could be mistaken for a girl. And then \$he had to witness progressively becoming what \$he wasn't, didn't feel to be, even despised.

Before all this I'd been pretty.

It wasn't about being a boy or a girl per-se. As a child Mali felt so much more solid than now. \$he assumed the sexually submissive feelings, even the girls clothes \$he'd enjoy dressing in... were things everyone, boy or girl felt and did. \$he'd even imagine having a girlfriend and being together with her exchanging clothes. It was all possible and all fine.

\$he still carried that sixth grade picture of \$erself in that navy and aqua colored pullover and \$er OP shorts. \$he'd do anything to have the face \$he did back then. Even \$er neck was smooth and soft.

So if you believe biology should not be messed with and then you yourself watch before your own eyes as you become abhorrent to yourself...

You have a real conflict to face.

All the new age and psychologist bullshit she'd bought into could not reconcile that one. There seemed to be barely a surgeon who now would take on bringing \$er back to the 'before' condition.

\$he'd been so insecure. Even spent two years paying some dousche who'd been to Tony Robbins and studied applied kinesiology to 'figure \$er out'.

Fuck if I want to look like a guy! Much less a gay one.

Mali, just accept yourself as you are.

Fuck that.

I'm not a gay dude nor do I want to be seen as one.

No girl wants a gay guy... other than for a friend-zone or a haircut!

Jesus fucking christ!

It was already a pain point, all the friend-zoning...

The assumed gay friend... The assumed 'likes men' transgender friend...

Fuck that and now!!!

In more recent years, before 'going to hell', conveniently coinciding with making good money, \$he did find more women interested in \$er.

Women who wanted to be taken care of.

I didn't fucking sign up for that shit-show either.

Mali's programming, \$he'd realized over time, had never been toward the dynamic \$he finally saw between men and women when \$he did get into more serious relationships.

\$he felt angry and wanted to lash out and hit something.

Feeling so misunderstood and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

I'm not who I appear like in life nor how I am treated.

And the last bullshit psychologist in Brazil \$he'd contacted, \$he'd actually had the good sense to tell off.

'Just do hormones. No surgery. Be as you are.'

A man with breasts?

As in the words on Stuart Copeland's drum heads...

"Fuck Off You Cunt"

\$he'd actually grown balls apparently since arriving in Thailand.

\$he smiled...

I am growing.

Fuck that I even need to talk to someone or present my case to know what I am.

But nevertheless, \$he was the one who'd sought out the others. Blindly following.

Then came the last and latest possibility \$he'd found on the web which still haunted \$er: Attachment theory.

Is all this just some unfinished or unfulfilled issue from childhood? Needing mommy or a woman so much that I need to become the woman I am thirsting for? Because she doesn't exist or can't exist?

Could I be that wounded?

And Mali how much more money, do tell, would it take to figure out this is also not the answer?

Truth was, if this were true, Cat should have solved most of that problem. And to date Mali was no less who \$he was, if not more complexed.

Although \$he could still access the dream, the hope for ever having that *normal* life \$he dreamed of was in shambles.

Too many things had been done. Too much water under the bridge in the 'alternative' journey.

What if I got 'cured'?

In a relationship, with a new woman, 'he' would have to tell her about all this. Not doing so would be a major withhold and against the intimacy and transparency \$he'd always dreamt of.

Even \$er own bullshit indicator red-lined now even to the passing thought that \$he could ever pass \$erself off to a woman as a straight man.

\$he would not give up hormones nor medicine to prevent hair loss nor body waxing. \$he wanted to be penetrated. And to be a woman while being penetrated!

And be so with a woman.

Sarai

Over these days at the resort, one of the visits to the past \$he made was to Sarai, the first transgender woman the 'he' of back then was with, one of the handful of events that started making 'being a man', in romance and sexuality, something that could not be returned to...

They stood in front of each other, the two virtually equal in height. No heels involved.

She was everything Mark imagined from the pictures she'd sent. A complete woman. Beyond even. And in their short coffee date, he already knew she was a woman he'd want to get to know and spend a lot of time with if she felt the same. Columbian with dark eyes and a face which was a mix of feminine beauty, and a masculine streak here and there, especially that angular jawline. She was striking. Perfect.

He had had few real interactions with transgender women and there were still a lot of questions floating around inside, not helped by the web and media, questions like 'are male-to-female transgender women really women?'. And if they were real, 'is being transgender a real phenomena or a pathology?'. Not to mention the body question, 'what is real, and what is just porn and photoshop?' It was already a mess in his head.

But it took Mark less than a second in front of Sarai to know one absolute answer.

If Sarai was not a woman, then you'd have to dismiss most of the genetically female world as 'not women' also.

It was this combination... this mix of feminine energy wrapped and laced with just some masculine, in the physical and all the way to how she spoke and emoted. Her husky voice could have been tell for 'gay' on a man, but was extremely sexy in a female. He'd never met anyone remotely like Sarai and never imagined how he could feel in such a presence.

But the tone changed.

The innocent coffee date had turned into a make-out session right there at the table, led by Sarai to where they were now. It wasn't perhaps what Mark would have initially chosen - to date, get to know each other and maybe become a couple - but there were some things he needed perhaps before and couldn't resist the flow.

The two were already undressed virtually before getting through the door of Sarai's apartment. Mark had been stumbling around to explain his own years of confusion, the 'why' of seeking out to date transgender women, per Sarai's request, as things were becoming increasingly sexual.

"Well, I..." he stumbled, himself at the time at the peak of whatever masculine he was capable, "I guess I feel feminine inside and I just want to..."

Sarai interrupted, "I know what you want," she cooed sensually, reaching down to pull aside the front of her thong to reveal a beautiful penis, worthy of being called female. It *was* exactly what he wanted. She was completely smooth and smelled amazing. It was perhaps even not so much the object, but the energy behind it, her strong hardness the figure and symbol of explicit feminine desire.

How I want a woman to want me.

T_o want to take me._

To be powerful and strong enough to take me.

To be able to surrender in her arms.

Yet in her kiss and her heart, all the softness, warmth and beauty of female.

Things I have never felt for a man, no matter how I've tried.

Most of all and unconsciously to Mark she was the closest mirror he had to his own inner being. How he felt inside and the fact of the existence of his own penis. Although of course there were many differences between them, but regardless this felt...

Like home.

Mark kissed her softly and then slowly made his way down her smooth and very firm body, another major turn on. Under her bra were slight breasts. To him she was perfect, like an athlete, the exact kind of figure that felt so right. He kissed her nipple on each side and continued to make his way down her toned abdomen.

Mark had tried on a couple occasions in past years to be with men, both of which were complete disasters on all levels - romantic, sexual and aesthetic. There was no real turn on, nothing and no one to get lost in. No one he wanted to come back to and hold after making love. But making his way to Sarai's penis, everything was completely different.

He wanted her. Not just her sex, he wanted *her*. It was the first time in his life the sexual and romantic seemed to fit.

And it felt so good to have her in his mouth. Amazing. Natural. Totally natural. Totally free, uninhibited. As good as he imagined it would be. He sucked on her but in not long, Sarai took control and holding his head, thrust herself into his mouth and down his throat. There was something primal in the almost gagging sensation of encompassing this beautiful being, taking her in fully. He would never forget the hard softness and kind of smoky taste that came along with her penis.

There was nothing emasculating about serving this woman.

There was no one there to emasculate.

But nevertheless, this was him. If anything this was the truest part of his nature he'd ever experienced.

This act he'd imagined and run from for so many years, so confused, thinking to feel this way meant he was gay. More confusing was the affinity he felt for beautiful transgender women. But there was always a stop right there. There was no way he could ever become close to what one of these women were. And the almost seemingly impossible task of finding someone in person who was like this. Until now.

But in the moment this was not a thought as he'd checked his mind at the door. He came up to embrace and kiss Sarai, still feeling her steel-like hardness against him still.

Being here was the most life - and self - affirming thing he had ever done.

In just a few moments, Sarai with her gorgeous feminine beauty, warmth and hard penis undid the houses of cards been built by her therapeutic 'support' over the years. All the warnings and cautions, injunctions and tacit shaming for this being his own nature.

As Sarai guided him to the bed for what was next, he breathlessly whispered to her, tears in his eyes, "I don't know why I have waited so long!"

"Why did you?" she breathed, raising an eyebrow, but it was rhetorical.

Now on the bed, she raised his legs, and slipping on a condom, forcing herself into him. It hurt a bit. Too much, too fast. For a second he let it happen and then complained "Ow, it hurts!" His own true fantasies as always in lovemaking were way more gentle, sensual and soft between partners. But nevertheless, he was still riding the moment.

"Take it like a man," Sarai laughed.

Mali winked and gasped, "if you even knew."

But Sarai didn't really.

But he loved how she felt, and how he himself felt. Especially pulling her to him in a kiss as she penetrated, as he embraced her with his legs. He was breathless. He'd never been breathless with anyone.

Something in life for once felt right.

Afterwards, he found a new comfortability and peace with men.

The next day while sitting with his roommates in their shared Upper West Side apartment, the change was apparent. Living there was by convenience more than anything really in common with the frat-types his roommates were. But sitting there shooting the shit in front of the TV with them, he was a different person.

He didn't tell them what he'd been up to the night before or anything. He didn't have to, there was no need. No apologies or neurotic thoughts either. Where always in the past he felt rather uneasy around them - and men in general, the 'am I hiding being gay' question and all that shit, tonight he felt confident and self assured. Even if they came to know, he wasn't embarrassed, in fact was proud of the last twenty-four hours. Something in his pelvis was solid, grounded. Having been used the way it would seem was intended.

He'd be absolutely honored to have Sarai as his girlfriend. Publicly, everywhere with him. And he hoped for that. He was hoping to hear back from her at the moment even.

He'd always been confused with the feminine aspect of himself, especially the desire to be taken or penetrated. He knew now without a shadow of a doubt he wasn't nor would likely ever be attracted to these men, or any man. Only that before this time these strange feelings made him wonder if he was really a repressed gay man.

There was something to knowing and embracing what he was, what had been driving him and once expressed, a certain security had come over him.

Even if it isn't the whole picture...

This was still not who he was - he was not a guy who likes getting fucked.

A girl?

If he could have flipped a switch in that moment and become a woman for the rest of his - her - life, he would have right then. It was that clear.

Being a woman. Loving Sarai.

Of course what would come in the next days was to wax his body, get more smooth and more slender, more female. Sarai was a woman, there was no conflict in his mind about this. It wasn't about Sarai's penis as much as the fact that she could, and did take him.

And because I don't have to use mine, I can just be myself. Use it or not use it, it doesn't matter, not like with being a 'ma_n' _for a woman.

Express.

And be taken.

Feel her power.

Surrender to her.

Feel alive.

Feel soft.

Any woman with that energy going forward in life, that was the kind of woman he wanted. Be they transgender or genetic females, it didn't matter.

He even revised his concept of who could be 'the one'.

But only... they have to see me as a woman.

I don't want to be humored.

A past girlfriend had been game for the role reversal. And she was awesome for it, but Mark knew that was not what really did it for her. And for him it was critical to...

Be wanted. Desired.

Taken.

That way.

As a woman... by a woman...

Sarai lost interest as soon as he started his own way toward the feminine.

Sarai wanted a guy. That became clear. It didn't matter what other things 'he' was.

It was Mark that turned her on, just as it was with every other straight woman over his life. The story held...

The more I express as I am, the more I will distance myself from who I truly want - a woman, be they transgender or genetic.

And I'm not going to be humored by a woman who can pretend I'm a woman.

I'm not going to be with Cat who will see me as a male rockstar.

I'm not going to be with a Sarai, me being outwardly a guy but not inside...

It's just not acceptable.

So of course the problem was then as was now...

Where does that leave me other than with a knife in my hand and a seemingly impossible task ahead?

Un-American

Months before...

Perched as always at the reception desk, Cat smiled as Mali came through the glass door.

Cat's smile, *that* smile. The one that made \$er feel like *the only one*.

The feeling in Mali was a stark contrast to the almost less-than-nobody who \$he felt \$he was the minute before.

Even on the way there, the stares. Just a bit too much laughter apexing as \$he passed. \$he could never prove it was about \$er but assumed it was. \$he swore \$he heard the word katoey. \$he wasn't sure if it was \$er mind playing a game, but \$he heard it everywhere. Even in people's sneezes in passing.

The stares meant that \$he wasn't okay.

\$he'd never really delved into the root feeling.

But to \$er it meant \$he didn't look good. Looked funny. Weird.

Like a man.

Something is wrong with me.

Certainly not beautiful or attractive.

As a female.

Double takes by passers by. They could only mean one thing.

Cat spoke softly as if to ease Mali out of the barbs she felt embedded in her.

"Please have a seat, they're running a few minutes late but will be with you very soon."

She made full eye contact with a smile that made Mali shy and avert her eyes. Cat made it feel as if the world she just came from did not exist. And if that world did not exist, then Mali felt ashamed for the thoughts she'd been holding about people and the emotions she'd been having. The frustration and resentment from all the social noise she read and judged in herself as being hatred for others.

Here she was faced with the root dream, the thing she had always been after, before she knew anything else. That woman, friend, communion that just made the harshness of the world irrelevant. The one that mattered.

The only one.

The one.

Cat rose from her seat at the counter, disappearing through the door to the back for a moment and returning with a pot of green tea and two cups, pouring one for each of them, before returning with hers to her position at the counter. It felt amazing to be around someone whose gentleness and social polish was so impeccable.

A feeling Mali would do anything to hold on to. And to have in every moment in every day with her future love. Something that seemed to be less and less likely by the day, month and year.

This all was very un-American. Cat's gift was that she was - well, seemed - authentic. Unused to such treatment, Mali knew too well that she could easily read something more into it. Friendliness mistaken as friendship. Intimacy meaning attraction. Politeness and grace meaning interest.

Like the Japanese geisha.

Not to mention all the times in life she was naive and simply proved wrong, left feeling the mud on her face. But it still did not change the feeling because the longing could not be erased. The thirst was too great.

"Thank you for always being so kind to me here," Mali smiled at Cat as she returned to the white waiting room couch following her treatment. There was a new cup of tea waiting for her.

She wants me to stay longer?

Otherwise why should she bring me a second cup today?

Of course.

"I know this is your job but you are just amazing at it. I think you should run for Miss Thailand, you embody for me what is the best of the Thai culture."

Yes, let me reinforce a bit more and pathetically of how I feel about you.

Stupid.

\$he felt uncomfortable in \$er own skin in the moment. Everything felt confused... how \$he looked, what \$he was doing - trying to show \$er interest in a woman. The mixed signals felt like they were like a bunch of disparate radio waves in the air.

However being attracted to anyone lately was usual for \$er. It was maybe once a year now. Part was loss of hope, another part confusion, and part homage to all the reasons \$he imagined why no one would be into \$er. And so it had been.

Cat smiled back with a slight blush and turning down her head, shaking it 'no' but yet clearly with a further building smile but hidden similarly as to one who is trying to hold back laughter or tears but only making it worse.

Shyly looking back up just with her eyes, she said,

"I got your Facebook friend request and said yes."

Mali smiled inside poking fun at \$erself.

Oh really shameless stalker... jesus.

Sipping slowly in silence, in a moment Cat asked "did everything go well?".

"Yeah, in spite of the pain I actually got a little nap".

Mali smiled to \$erself at the joke. It was kind of nice barely being able to communicate with the laser operator. As with so much else in Thailand, a kind of permitted ignorance. Except for...

"Thats good. So what are you doing now, are you still getting ready to go to Chiang Rai?".

At that moment the doctor and the other remaining staff member at the clinic hustled by apologizing with a quick good-bye and that she was late for an appointment. Leaving Cat and Mali for the first time apparently alone.

"Well, I'm kind of ready. I really don't have too many things and I have moved so so many times over the last few years that I can pack in my sleep," pausing to try what \$he hoped would work,

"How about you, big plans for this evening?"

So fucking transparent.

\$er feeling of scarcity and desperation not even registering behind \$er generally prevalent mask of tension, especially while interacting with others.

"No, well not really, I was going to take the MRT up to Chatuchak Park and take a stroll, maybe sit a bit and relax. That's one place in the city that helps me refresh."

"I'm surprised, I would have thought you would be out on the town having dinner with your friends, or dessert," once again remembering the photos \$he stalked on Cat's Instagram. Half of them were of what appeared like good times with friends, other half, food. Quarter of those, beautiful desserts.

It was a conscious decision of Cat to open a door for Mali. It was because for some reason she felt more out of sorts whenever Mali came in. Add to that Mali seemed to want to be friends. For some reason this foreigner made so much of her life and home in Thailand seem unreal and lonely, regardless of how generally gregarious and abundant her social life was. Mali was different and for some reason she wanted to know more.

"You would think?" Cat looked down dwelling a moment on all this, "Well you have a lot to know about me yet! I'm actually boring, so I am told," she raised her eyes and smiled genuinely in her masterful reversal of what might have been construed as immodesty.

"Well, for what its worth you wear that persona well - if it's true which I truly doubt," Mali smiled, "I just am what I am and its hard for me to put on a persona, so I envy you. I feel like I'm an open book, it just takes someone to ask me something and I spill it! I would be a disaster at your job!" shaking her head, "Oh, and for the record, I am a horrible horrible liar. My body does not cooperate!"

Cat smiled, shaking her head, "Well maybe I have a lot to know about you too. And at least now I know you can't lie to me, huh?" she paused a beat, "I also expected you to be a bit wild and out on the town, I don't know, with your friends? Or with a boyfriend?"

Mali felt a slight recoil inside, the 'bf' word. An immediate impulse hit to clarify being misread.

I'm not gay.

Not a gay man.

Damn it, not a man.

I don't want you to see a man. But I want you to like me.

Mali's true gayness was not even on the radar yet.

Fuck.

"Well thats one more thing for you to know. I don't like men."

Cat looked down appearing a little puzzled, perhaps slightly embarrassed yet thoughtful.

"Sorry, maybe too much information," Mali added.

But how the fuck could I not say it?

"Hmmm, yes thats also interesting and I bet a story behind that too."

"Yeah. I need a lot of quiet and solitude too, I bet more than you. So I don't forget who I am. That's also why I feel I need to go live up north."

Mali paused for a moment appearing nonchalant and thoughtful but in reality anything but that.

"I don't know, would you perhaps like company at the park? I can be quiet if you just want to relax and contemplate, I promise.", she said with a smile and a little of the trademark Cat 'wink'. For some reason she was always a sponge for mannerisms she found in women she found special.

"You know, I would enjoy that."

Mali felt an edge for a second, worried for a minute Cat was saying this just to be polite.

"I really mean it," Cat added, as if reading Mali's mind, "it will be fun!"

I need someone from the outside of everything to talk to. Maybe you're that person.

There are things on my mind, maybe you can help.

Maybe you can.

It was pretty anathema in her culture to even have this thought not to mention act on it. But it was what she felt in the moment, the seed starting with Mali's friend request.

Mali felt at ease again and smiled, "Great!".

Chatuchak Park

The two emerged from the Chatuchak Park subway station and were hit by the usual wall of muggy warmth of the early evening. Thailand heat could be a menace during the day but one of the prizes for holding out were the evenings. The big red sun was setting to the west, its rays masked and scattered by the proliferation of trees, spreading its tinge through spiky shadows over the oblong lake around which the park of many acres was situated. Green grass, Asian styled bridges over small waterways. A refuge from an urban jungle which at times reminded Mali of New York City, at others, Latin America.

But this park, only could be in Thailand. Not to mention this moment.

Cat smiled at Mali with a little shiver, overcoming the air conditioning freeze of the subway. It felt good to be here and with Mali. There was something natural and transparent about... actually kind of Asian about him...

Unusual.

Although she loved her culture, revered her parents and had a close group of friends, it all sometimes felt like a cage with eggshells on the floor, having to be careful where she stepped. And the thing she couldn't fully understand was that her culture was quite permissive of individual liberty, in its own way. So she was aware on some sort of twilight level of something being off. But she could never say exactly where or what. She was in theory free to be whatever and whoever she wanted. More or less. Just something missing. But something important too. Something juicy.

"So you like to come here often?" she asked.

"Yeah, in fact I live not far, and I walk here in the morning, very early for my practice."

"Practice?"

Mali explained her 'standing still' practice to Cat.

"That's a long time. I like that. I bet it's wonderful, the stillness..." Cat looked over at Mali, processing what it must be like to be still for almost an hour each day, and what would motivate someone to do that. With her head tilted she prompted for more.

Cat is truly unbelievable.

"It just comes from inside, it helps me connect to and remember who I am. Somehow it seems when I do this I feel much more alive, passionate — juicy."

The word juicy not being lost on Cat, "You *are* different," she exclaimed, making Mali's heart miss a beat, of course still reading too deeply as always into everything.

"So tell me more about you?" Mali was finally learning to not talk about herself all the time. It felt good actually.

"Like what?"

"Anything. Whats on your mind?"

Cat knew this was her cue. She barely knew Mali but she trusted him...

"Okay, well you know I did think maybe you could help me with something. It's sometimes hard to talk to anyone here. I mean, if I talk within what's accepted it's fine, but to talk outside of it, you get blank stares and deer in headlights look."

Mali smiled widely as if to laugh, recognizing how ridiculous and unusual was Cat's mastery of English, the beauty that it came through a still moderate Thai-asian accent. Especially in Thailand where at best foreign languages tended to be spoken on Thai-language terms generally.

"Must be something big, huh? Well spill it!", Mali raised her chin and brows. She was starting to feel just a bit more comfortable here with her.

"Okay, well let's see where I start. I am - have always been - a very independent person. I do what I want. Like returning to Japan and living there recently, aside from the other countries I have visited and languages I know. That's almost unheard of here," Cat rolled her head up with her eyes for emphasis, "I mean, doing so on my own, my own money and means, not my family's or a husband's," Cat arched her brows as if to send a question mark to make sure Mali understood what she was saying, "So I guess I have a certain ability to be outside the box... or to want to be."

"That's cool... I like that. There's nothing wrong with that, right?"

"The thing. I have had a boyfriend. Thai boyfriend but we're separated. Everyone, including him, wants us to be married. On paper it is perfect too. He does well in his business - well it's a family business and he inherited it - but he's a smart person but is definitely Thai and not a hybrid like I tend to think of myself."

"Are you truly a hybrid? Are your parents both Thai?"

Mali couldn't either imagine Cat being fully Thai nor not being so.

"It's a funny thing, yes. But somehow, I've always felt different. Especially since I lived in Japan when I was young. My parents sent me the first time, my once poor family had come into some money and they thought it would be good for me to go to school there. And it was."

"I can see that, you remind me of Japanese style and culture. You also seem very awake and aware. I guess in Buddhism, you've been around the block a few times," Mali chuckled, "Well, at least you put on a good show of it."

Cat joined in the smile. "Yeah, I feel that way. I feel like I see beyond many things and can't let go of being that way. But then too there are many things traditional that I do like. Beyond love, I fear nothing. I just fear when I'm confused."

Cat looked out over the lake at the apex of the ornamented white bridge they were crossing, then walking to the rail, stopped.

"About love. You're confused?"

Cat was not exactly a person \$he'd imagine being confused about anything. That way she held herself. Mali as well could hardly come to grips that \$he was here having a pretty deep conversation with the same spokesmodel-like Cat from the clinic. She was the best of all worlds - so cultured yet at the same time showing to be a person who could open up.

To me no less.

Mali decided in that moment Cat was simply not of a single nation or culture. She was the future.

"Yeah," Cat inhaled deeply as if preparing, "So, basically, I didn't want to marry so I made that clear. I am not going to be some man's possession. Not even for a good man," she turned to wink at Mali, "That's exactly what I would be walking into here."

"Why?"

"The culture here makes us property and men can do as they wish more or less, have mistresses, be unfaithful, and the worst, simply not be my best friend."

Cat tugged lightly on Mali's arm to prompt them on their way to the other side of the bridge.

"What I've always wanted is something much more than what I see. I've never had it. The only reason I believe in it is because I feel it. Once in a while I know of someone or hear stories of such loves. But its really just in here," Cat tapped gently on her heart and upper breast.

"I know what you mean." Mali knew exactly. As if Cat was a mirror image. And it made \$er feel conflicted and sad.

Because she could be the perfect other half.

"You do?" Cat broke Mali from the rumination that was beginning.

"Actually yeah. A few years ago my heart broke when I started seeing the real dynamic between men and women. I was like 'What the fuck! I didn't sign up for this!'" Mali recoiled a bit at \$er own swearing. But Cat seemed non-plussed.

So \$he continued "I always wanted intimacy, to be equals. Also, it's kind of like... I didn't realize it for so long, that it was unnatural to be in the man's role for me," and now was the time to disclose that sadness, "But then I still long for a partner, a woman. And I wonder if I'm all screwed up. I'm not what they want," \$he paused, deciding not to go on, "That's what hurts."

"Yeah," Cat looked off into the distance and spoke dreamily, "that's funny you say it that way."

They edged off the main pavement onto a winding and rustic path laid with stone that cut through a more secluded grassy area.

"Why's that?"

"Well, I had never really put it in those words. But I prefer just to be with my friends, I don't really feel like I'm missing anything," once again her vision drifting and her mind apparently far away and then stopping,

"That of course sat really well with my boyfriend when I told him!" Cat laughed a bit huskily, "But it's true. I feel free with my friends. With a boyfriend I feel in a kind of role."

She turned things back to Mali, "So then what did you do when you realized how you felt about the reality of men and women?"

"In time I made it here," Mali smiled.

As if on cue there were a few tones that came from the park loudspeakers that had been playing soft music for a bit. Most parks and public places in Thailand had them. On cue, everyone from strollers like Cat and Mali, the jogging and exercise crowd as well as couples and groups sprawled on mats on the abundant grass, came to a stop and stood in place while the Thai national anthem played.

It was a peaceful moment of stillness and unity with all others that Mali had come to love. It was not like the in your face heart and bible beating national anthem of the USA. If anything, it was quiet, peaceful and polite. The best of Thailand.

They had now made it over to the far north side of the park, now in the dusk shade, they sat on a bench near the lake, not far from where Mali would come to stand in the mornings.

"Why Thailand?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah!"

"It was to see the katoey. Both in my attraction to them and about my own confusion with myself."

"And?"

"Well, when I first came here I tried once more to 'be a guy'. Like this twisted thing in my head that made me think I had to present as a guy here. And that lasted about two weeks during which I even started falling for the woman who rented me my apartment," Mali laughed, "But day after day I felt like I ran into so many gay and katoey - like everywhere - and I saw how feminine and sweet they were. And how okay and beautiful they were with themselves."

\$he hadn't thought of this for some time. But it had been kind of the last turning point for \$er.

"So I put my makeup and clothes back on and never looked back really."

"And the woman?"

"I let her be."

\$he couldn't contemplate pursuing her. As who - what \$he was then. Now. So \$he continued at the time to simply live as \$he had the previous years - to long and hope for but not really believe, certainly not try. Yet, here was the sadness again. And Cat had already stepped miles ahead of that woman. \$he tried not to have the thought but it already had come:

If I could be with Cat - forever - would I give all this up and be a man?

Cat nodded. She understood yet... it was a lot for her. So she stepped back to her side of the story,

"So I don't know what to do now. I mean, he's still seeking me out. My family is in love with him, gosh, for sure more than I have ever have been," she reflected.

"So just let him go, right?"

"But it's made me confused too. It's that I too expected different with men. Kind of what you said. Closer. Transparent. I want this with him but whatever I do doesn't work. I like the feeling of his strength but it feels not close, intimate as you say. But maybe I should try and work at it, it could become that?"

"I'm not sure I'm anyone to consult on matters of successful relationships!" Mali thought of \$er own track record throughout \$er life.

"I cant believe I am telling you all this - do you know what its like in my culture to talk like this, especially to a farang, and someone you just met?"

"Don't call me that I hate it! I hate that word!", Mali said chuckling, "and yeah, I do have an idea and I'm honored. I promise what you tell me is between us and only us."

The combination of this nice tranquil moment in the park, Cat's beauty, polish, intelligence. And the intimacy of all this self-disclosure. It was the best of everything. \$he'd take it over sex or anything else any day. \$he really could get used to this.

"Like Las Vegas, no? I know of that media campaign!", broke in Cat, interrupting Mali's distraction.

"If only you knew,", \$he smiled back.

"Its funny, you talk a lot like a woman I dated when living in Mexico some years ago. About men. I was trying to be a man, more masculine, at the time, doing my best, none of these tight jeans, makeup, all that. On the second date we were sitting there having dinner and she mentioned she liked how feminine and soft I was. Horrible! I was at my peak trying to be a guy!", Mali moved to falsetto and hiding \$er face in \$er hands in mock shame, "She was like 'even the most liberal guys here... in the end the machismo just comes out from under the rug'. And then to go on how she had considered being lesbian but in the end could not face the social stigma."

"They are not tolerant there?"

"There is more now than ever. Heck, her city, Guadalajara is the 'gay' city of Mexico. Anything goes at least in certain areas and circles. So, no, it became clear to me that this was an internal game for her, just as my own is very much about that."

"Like here," Cat murmured, not even knowing what she was saying.

"In Thailand it's even more tolerant, right? I mean, are you attracted to men? Here it's no big deal to be into women, right? Here everyone does what they want - katoey's, lesbian and gay couples..."

"I think I'm not into anyone," Cat cut Mali off, "It's all too far confusing!" She paused, turning the question on Mali, "So you like women or you were just trying because you thought you had to?"

"Oh no, I love women. More than even men do I think. But not how a man wants a woman, it seems. But lately I am not sure who I like or even if I like anyone."

Cat nodded, "Sad."

"Not really, it's just long and far between to find someone who sparks something in me. You know, I don't feel attracted often, and really I think hardly anyone finds me attractive anymore either. I feel like I am doing all this, all for myself," Mali again gesturing to her appearance, "I often think I'm crazy. But I can't stop."

"So when was the last spark?"

Mali at least knew better than to *speak that truth* and just shrugged her shoulders with a grimace.

"Years..."

"And what is 'all this' that you do?"

"Well, women's clothes, makeup, jewelry... hair transplant, starting hormones, thinking of face surgery."

"But you don't wear dresses?"

"No, I guess maybe I don't want or need to."

"So maybe that's just how you are, like the rockstars? That's kind of how I see you. An artist."

Such a description didn't really bother Mali, in fact it was flattering, if only it was the truth. She'd seen such men. They were cool. But what was going on inside her belied a difference.

"Yeah. That's tempting to believe. But I am not sure. I would like to be cuter. I don't like looking like a man. Those rockstars, eventually they lose hair, go bald, have a belly. But they don't seem to care." She stopped herself listening to the words that were coming out of her mouth as they were excruciatingly superficial.

"So, it's that, inside, like in love, let's just say, that I feel female. My response is feminine. Rockstars still want to be a dude in bed. I'm not like that," pausing, and then, "Every time I 'man up' in life, my sexuality... it's the first thing that revolts. Then romantically. Then the rest. It happens over and over."

It was strange but Mali's words somehow elicited a certain forbidden feeling in Cat, almost freeing in feeling. One that she could not fully grasp but for some reason made her think of Koona. Maybe that was it -- Koona was the only person she'd ever talked to like this.

"But what if you met someone with the 'spark' you say?"

"I know," Mali looked away as Cat just hit the nail on the head, "That's the problem and the only one."

That same sadness as before overcame Mali as she looked out and a bit away from Cat.

"Complicated, huh?"

Mali nodded. Being in Cat's presence, this talk, made \$er want to cry. And \$he was actually aware of it this time, unusually.

"Well then, here we are, it's you and I here alone. Each alone - because the tradition has failed to inspire us. Is this good? Are we happy?"

Instead of crying, though, Mali channeled it into aggression. The 'happy' word didn't help.

"I get more joy out of hoop dancing than I ever got having to fuck a girlfriend. And sorry for the language but that is what they seemed to want, to 'be fucked'," all the hurt and disappointment of the past apparently still simmering in the background,

"Oh and they liked my career and money. And add to it that I can talk like this. Intimacy. I was like everything - they had the best of both worlds, that's why I was special, different and why they were into me. Even that my body is slender and kind of female by default. They had everything they wanted..." Mali looked off contemplating \$er next words,

"But... not for me... In the end there was no upside. Work to support them, then when I come home I'm their girlfriend. And then they expect me to be a guy sexually on top of it all because *'that's what I am!'*"

Fuck them.

Now the tears broke.

"I am so sorry. I did not mean to upset you. Just know, I can relate a bit," she smiled and put her hand on Mali's forearm. Which in that moment, the connection making the confusion and hurt of feeling so alone vanish.

"Don't worry, you didn't upset me, this is just me. Upset is when I start breaking things. Like computers. I had this job where I destroyed laptop after laptop and they kept giving me a new one!," Mali's lips turned up in a smile at the memory, "It makes me sad to break things that other people worked hard to create."

The tears fell and a sob arose. \$he couldn't put it in words. But it was \$erself. The broken, the being broken. \$er body. The love in the universe that, just the mere fact that \$he existed, this train-wreck of a miracle in the works, on the path to destroy everything systematically. At least that's how the world and past made \$er feel about what \$he had been doing these years.

Everything given up. Lost. I could not sustain or hold onto... because of... what I am, me being me. And I'm supposed to stop this.

Cat reached out and gave Mali a brief and gentle hug with her arm.

"How about we walk and talk about the weather for a bit, shall we?" said Cat tenderly, reaching to dry the tear that was falling. It was strange with Cat, Mali felt okay, really almost disoriented how far \$he'd opened. \$he hadn't just repeated the words \$he'd said over and over to \$erself in these years, but \$er words were more about how everything felt.

And saying it aloud to someone .

Cat stood and Mali followed the cue.

Mali was concerned that \$he'd gone too far. And that maybe Cat needed to get away from \$er. But the anxiety was alleviated feeling the gentle pressure Cat was pulsing into \$er hand.

As Cat led \$er by the hand it made \$er remember a dream \$he had had many years ago, one of those dreams that for some reason feel most real in comparison to others. Of a beautiful young woman reaching for \$er hand and leading \$er on a path in the forest. A perfect companion.

The one \$he'd trust with \$er life. And dedicate \$er life to.

The walk and lighter conversation did them both good, which turned into a decision to have dinner nearby at an open restaurant that specialized in delicious seafood and fish. As well as, could be expected, spicy. Which was not lost on them as at one point the whole seating area filled with an almost noxious smoke floating in the air of heated pepper, causing everyone to fan their eyes and many to cough and tear.

They were seated in front of each other, Cat still poised as ever - which Mali had decided by then was simply not even poise but just how she was even at most relaxed, and that it would actually take effort for Cat to be any other way. Tears from the fumes were running down \$er cheeks as the coughing started to subside.

Cat rolled her eyes, gently coughing and smiling.

"I know I'm going away tomorrow but isn't this just a little dramatic?"

Cat smiled fully back sprouting a chuckle, catching the reference,

"I told you honey, its over! Completely over, just walk away and don't look back!".

A woman who could not just get a joke but play it. There was nothing better.

"I've enjoyed this afternoon. It's done me good more than you can imagine.", thinking to \$erself that even ignoring the fact that the spark \$he had felt before for Cat had now been exponentially multiplied, if \$he could have this afternoon and this friendship, just like this, forever, \$he'd take it in place of anyone or anything.

"Me too. I'm sad now you're going away. I know its good for you and given the chance I'd do the same. But selfishly, it would be nice for you to stay here so we can talk more, and gosh, have a little fun."

Fun?

Maybe I could stay.

Mali wanted to say it. But that was thorny. Cat had all but asked \$er to stay but, wouldn't that make things worse, more confusing?

"I know. It's crazy to go. But crazy to stay too!"

Cat nodded and they sat in silence for a bit.

"So can we stay in touch? I don't know, sometime I go to Chiang Mai to be with my family. Maybe we could meet up."

"I'm the one who Facebook friended you!"

Once again getting the humor, Cat laughed "Yeah, more than the altar for some of us!"

"I have to come here pretty regularly for my visa stuff so maybe too," Mali wanted to say so much more but was not the kind to be direct, "and yes, I would like to know you better, I don't have many friends and I guess I sometimes blame myself for being closed but in reality, its just not everyday I meet someone I can have a real conversation with that feels good."

"As you say, 'amen to that'".

What blew Mali's mind was, if Cat's English was so amazing - she'd never lived in any English speaking country as far as \$he knew, what was her Japanese like? To Mali at the moment Cat was like one of these people who pretty much master everything they touch, with no apparent effort.

"Shall we get going? I don't want to keep you out past your bedtime!", Mali laughed.

"In fact, its already past my bedtime," remarked Cat. Mali noted one more unexpected coincidence between them. It was actually ten o'clock and the evening had flown by.

After splitting the check, they walked to the nearby MRT stop.

"I don't have words", Mali looked inquiringly at her, shaking \$er head, already feeling the sadness that was to come. But \$he was conscious, perhaps from the deepening of \$er own feminine sense - or the release of masculine acculturation that \$he needed to defer to Cat for all things that would point any further than they had already traveled together. In any case \$he needed Cat to take the lead, if this would go in the direction that \$he undoubtedly longed for. Anyway.

"Nor do I really. How about 'see you soon?'", Cat did her single eye wink, "does that work?"

"For sure", Mali replied smiling. \$he reached out to Cat for a hug. Cat stepped forward into outstretched arms then completely relaxed and embraced into Mali. To Mali it felt so soft like a pillow embrace. Cat too noted how comfortable it felt.

"Goodnight," Cat replied as she pushed back, turned and began to walk toward the subway stairs.

The tall poised woman, a true real life model, beautiful in all aspects was walking away from \$er.

The impulse to yell 'wait' and stop her was beaconing. The urge to sit Cat down and make a different plan. To stay here. With her. Forever maybe. The katoey and makeup stuff... didn't matter.

But it was better to let this - whatever it was - breathe. Heck, let \$erself breathe and process this. \$he knew better. Anything else would not be authentic no matter how much \$he wanted it.

As Cats head disappeared from view down the escalator, Mali turned and began to walk, with a knot in \$er stomach. It was a mile or so back to \$er apartment and \$he needed every step to even get \$er head around even the surreal fact that this lovely afternoon and evening had actually happened.

Away

The strong current of A/C felt welcome against Mali's face as she settled in the cab and peered out taking in the morning Bangkok street. Although the night had ended up being a late one, she wasn't tired at all, nourished it seemed by the essence of Cat. Sleeping in an unusual luxuriousness in the luminance and luster, the hovering of Cat's presence and touch, actually feeling *like* Cat.

To be with and to be. It was her puzzle from ever back in time. Not just imitating mannerisms of women she'd crush on, but viscerally feeling as it was to be *her*. Without consciously trying or thinking about it.

This did not happen with men. It's seemingly impossible to know exactly how someone else really feels being in their own distinct body, but Mali knew somehow that she did know.

The final packing had been a breeze, less than an hour, again with Cat's lingering essence and smile all the way along. Cat winked to her as Mali closed the door to her Bangkok apartment for the last time.

The cab turned onto Tanon Latprao, the big busy street feeding the soi's - alleyways - of her neighborhood. Soon to be old neighborhood. They passed the always boisterous signs in the Thai script, some of which were transliterated to western letters.

This was Cat's world. The stores, the sidewalk food stands with their tables, fruit vendors, the air and essence of Bangkok, of Thailand. It felt like Cat owned it all, she was simply an invited or permitted guest. This city, without Cat had no light or meaning. Before, in making the decision, it was easy to leave. Now, not so much.

Because Cat *was* Bangkok.

Cat was Thailand in fact.

She felt Cat, wanted her, *this*, this life.

It would be enough, more than enough. Full.

If only not for...

Me.

But today Mali was nothing but a longing observer of Cat's magnificence and ownership of herself and her world. She was leaving Bangkok. Doubly not her city anymore, owned completely by Cat. Longing to see her again already, yet feeling a grinding tension between the polarities of friendship that seemed more likely from Cat's perspective and the ache for so much much more from her own.

But too with her identity in play and still unresolved as ever... and so many questions...

Would she just be a man if it meant she could have Cat?

Like yesterday?

But I was not a man with Cat yesterday. I was myself.

Hmmmm...

It had been several years since she had liked anyone enough to ask this question in anything but hypothetical reality. The last time she tried it in reality with a woman, it had been a train wreck.

And so much time and life had passed since then. And so much more femininity had overcome her.

Chiang Rai

_It's a battered old suitcase to a hotel someplace, and a wound that will never heal. _ — Tom Waits

The plane banked and dropped in altitude, in the midst of farmlands and green hills, Chiang Rai came into sight. Mali took a spontaneous deep breath. Somehow, regardless of everything of the last day, this felt good. The plane flight and travel gave perspective, as well as distance not only from Cat but from who \$he was in Bangkok. \$he had already started to become conscious in the last few geographical moves \$he'd made in life, that \$he was in some sort of process of integration. Moving to a new place allowed \$er to see more fully what was \$er, and what was simply an artifact of the place \$he had lived previously. By moving rather regularly, patterns could be seen that otherwise \$he'd have missed.

After a smooth landing, the exit from the airplane was down a staircase onto the tarmac outside. Which \$he loved. There was something comforting and grounding about this. Something more real than the abstraction of climate controlled jetways to airports which isolated one from feeling what was really there in the new destination.

It had been late afternoon when Mali completed \$er 'move in', laid out \$er yoga mat and sprawled on the floor in a starfish position, exhausted. The studio apartment had a high sloped ceiling with high windows on one side, and a larger window on the far side near the bathroom. Allowing light in but also regardless of the time of day, keeping a tranquil darkness and cool over the room.

In many places such an apartment might be too dark or unpleasant but here with the heat it was welcome. Relaxingly quiet and still in stark contrast to the soundtrack of Bangkok.

The neighborhood was mostly Thai, working class, normal people. This building being the exception on the street with a combination of Thai and expat, student and professional tenants.

It was early evening as \$he wandered slowly down the rural Thai road on a mission to find the park near the river \$he had been told about but never visited. There were older houses, showing their years, with wooden shuttered windows, complimented by the newer ones with pristinely fenced lots, bricks, stucco, electric gates, and tinted windows, staples in Thai modern architecture.

Both old and new yet distinctively Thai, with their fluted roofs and ornaments, which for some reason reminded \$er of an elegant woman's styled hair, with a knob, bun or chopsticks. Or a cat.

Cat.

Mali shook \$er head as if to rid the thought for just even a moment.

There was something so poised and feminine to the houses, and to the culture, its love of aesthetics only matched and tempered by its Buddhist heart and amazing smiles. Traditional and modern but all with the Thai mystique. Just like Cat.

Fuck.

\$he passed a building with a few shops and restaurants. A group of Thai men stared as \$he passed by. \$he heard the words farang and katoey. And then laughter. Symptomatic of \$er experience in Thailand, kind of a divide in \$erself as to how \$he felt about the people here. Well, especially working class men but also some women.

On one side, in person \$he was always treated quite politely. The polish and the Buddhist kindness that \$er heart always wanted to be the *real Thailand*. But then there were these moments, and what felt like a lot of them, which made \$er feel frustrated and angry. Like now. Powerless. Because they were passive, indirect yet at the same time hurt deeply.

The fucking laughter. Jesus.

But \$he was in a pretty resilient mood, noted the place and to be wary of anyone there and continued on.

\$he wandered, looked and wondered. \$he could own one of those modern houses, no problem. All \$he had to do was get serious with work, accept to open the offshore software development company \$er current client had been asking about. It was a train of thought that was far from home in \$er own soul and passions for work but resurrected in connection with the question of Cat.

\$he had already walked miles ahead with Cat since last night, not to mention at some point having unconsciously ditched \$er identity by the wayside.

These knee-jerk thoughts even in \$er own imagination which in theory \$he had full control over were a good part of \$er felt craziness. Why \$he'd need to be a guy, the one to buy a house - or the need to buy a house at all! - and give up what \$he was truly passionate about. But \$he felt like \$he had a choice - be a man and have Cat... or someone like her... or... not.

Such had been \$er romantic life to date, whatever there was of it. To live, ruled by whims of feeling, bodily sensation in association with thoughts and senses of things, made \$er a very creative person. Which contrasted and conflicted with such mental designs seemingly required to be a man, which always felt like they needed a lot of effort to keep in place. The thing, though, was that such designs seemed prerequisite to the love and bonded connection she ached for with a woman, according to women themselves if they were being honest. The kind of woman \$he liked. Love was on top of all and as such, gave power to the fabricated and prescribed man-world construct.

Over the years it was always the same. Periods of *being a man* in earnest. But inevitably a moment of deep sensation or some serendipitous brush with someone in the world would trigger a flood, like another person, the feminine, coming over \$er. It was visceral, physical, sexual but very much more. \$he could only describe it as *the way a woman feels in herself*.

It would trigger all kinds of havoc, the uncontrollable sexual desires to be penetrated, equally confusing as men never were attractive to \$er. And only if \$er lover actually saw \$er as a woman. It was not right for \$er to look like a man and have this. It was not that \$he was judgmental about gay men. It was visceral, apart from the mind. \$he wanted to surrender as a woman. It wasn't even about being passive or active. It just didn't fit how she felt and wanted to be seen by \$er partner coupled with how \$he appeared in the world 'as a man'.

It made \$er want to get \$er body smooth and waxed, wear form fitting clothes, and long and often go deeply into \$er own exploration of which for all purposes felt like female sexuality.

And not just sexuality, all the changes, all the higher maintenance stuff of the world of a female. \$he did what \$he could, bit by bit over time. But never coming close to being treated as a female as default by anyone.

Girlfriends on more than one occasion would innocently comment that \$er body, being tall and slender was like a female models. But then \$er face. When \$he looked in the mirror it may as well be the head of a horse. The deal-breaker since childhood, the trigger shutting down any further consideration. Likely even if given the option of 'transitioning' which was a non-existent concept growing up in the 80's in suburban Silicon Valley.

Back then \$he had no idea what *this* was even, and through late puberty had innocently never considered that \$he was any different than other boys. Aside that \$he did not relate to them generally and hated sports. So of course, it didn't enter \$er mind that \$he had a choice to be a different gender. A girl.

\$he would hear the comments like '*body of woman face of man*' leaving others lips. Especially embarrassing when \$he was deep in male emulation mode and doing \$er best. Another of those passive drive-by angering moments \$he felt impotent to do anything about.

What do you fucking say or do? It isn't said directly to you but you hear it. Fucked by the world if I react, fucked by myself if I don't.

\$he'd try to gain weight, do military workouts, but within just weeks \$he'd get sick and lose everything \$he'd gained, not to mention slip back into the feminine mode because \$he secretly liked the more female way about \$erself. \$he longed more than anything for someone to see \$er, recognize and validate what \$he truly was. But no one ever did.

With all the changes, in recent years not seeming attractive anymore to anyone, perhaps save for gay men, in whom \$he had no interest. So then, would she give up the possibility of a relationship with Cat in exchange for the fem, and in the end be alone, and read as more of a gay man than anything else? To be something that felt seemingly right to \$er inside, in spite of the world, at the price of losing what \$he wanted most in life externally?

Someone special.

So it was not so much about the house, work or things, but what they symbolized. The intimacy like \$he'd had only the previous evening with Cat in the park. A life partnership, together. Equality. \$he would do anything for such a relationship. But however \$he tried, the person in \$er who seemingly could attract that slipped further and further away. Upon \$er own body's insistence. Which had recently led \$er to trying female hormones and going on androgen blockers, now that \$he was in Thailand and could buy over the counter. Bringing up an even worse problem because \$er body seemed to like - no, love - them, and \$er small breasts had started to develop.

And it was totally unacceptable to be a man with breasts.

It just was.

But unlike in the past, now contemplating Cat, something in \$er hesitated and even pushed back. Even on this day in which she felt so very enamored with Cat. Regardless of not passing as a woman currently. Even to get back to the semblance of a mans body...

It would take a year or two.

Seriously.

Military workouts.

\$he still saw it, though, an option. What \$he always forgot was that even if \$he did start progressing back toward masculinity, it only took a few days, a week or two at most to feel fully feminine again. Lose it all. But that was beside the point. The world and even \$er face especially seemed to say \$he was supposed to fight against this inclination to be female, and so did a good part of \$er own heart, it seemed.

If nothing else to avoid a lifetime of this bullshit 'farang-katoey'-like ridicule.

But today, as \$he contemplated it, doing this manning up process again was just a house of cards.

Destined to fail.

Because it had.

Over and over.

Empirically.

The accrued pain and hurt of the past actually made \$er heart revolt today. The courting, the promises, the falling of the woman for \$er, a man, apparently at least. \$he felt immediately sad, it made the woman \$he purported to love actually be a sucker for a false hope.

\$he'd never seen it so clearly before.

But could there be something in \$er that could unravel this compulsion with being feminine? Some unresolved childhood issue? It was the type of thought, the only one left, really of hope to hold onto. Something too, which when resolved, \$he could explain to \$er future love, hopefully Cat.

But then again. Being a man. It came with so many anxieties. Would Cat take financial advantage like her ex'es? Would she demand the *he* fuck her or complain that *he* didn't fuck her enough? To fuck \$er girlfriend, that way, as a man, it felt like a chore. More than that, it made \$er totally anxious.

No win at all. Having to support a woman and then coming home and having to fuck her.

Fuck that!

So in the end it was an unresolved draw. \$er heart still longed for such a love. And \$he was not anywhere near being seen by anyone as a woman. But just as well, \$he was neither able to let go of who \$he had become, at best an in-between-gender being. Who \$he knew was too thin to be attractive. Clearly off the female radar.

Meaning too, Cat's radar.

Probably.

Just a 'katoey' friend.

So having made yet another pass through the contents of \$er trunk of despair, coming around the last bend ahead in the physical world in contrast, was paradise to \$er eyes. A park, with shade trees, many gazebos, all along a flowing river. On the other side was rural country, houses and hills in the distance.

\$he knew this would be her new home in the early morning and perhaps too in the evenings, like tonight. \$he took a deep breath and released it. Fully conscious that for some time even deep breaths did not have the same feeling as they had in the past.

There was something holding \$er from full surrender. Ever since taking the 'going to hell' path, certain things, just a latent tension or anxiety were ever present. They'd become the norm. She willed and wished to uncover what that was that was doing this.

The clock of life was ticking and this conflict was not going away.

Skype

Mali had Facebook open. Cat had just posted a picture of a chocolate cake she was about to eat. \$he had already Liked it some minutes before. And had typed a Comment 'Where IS that? It looks sooooo good!' \$he knew better but pressed enter by some force in \$er \$he had no control over. Regardless of \$er inner conflicts this action was *not* not going to happen.

It had been a few days now in Chiang Rai and \$he had not heard from Cat. \$he was testing the waters. Apparently cold. Cat did not respond in several minutes but showed green on chat as online. Mali got up and started \$er pre-bedtime routine which would include a shower, the whole thing which would normally take thirty minutes and forty-five on hair washing day like today.

In the meanwhile Mali began the so familiar process of facing disappointment that itself was a routine: Feel the despair, create an alternative future without the thing or person. Go on living.

The problem was that over so much time \$he'd not developed the strategies to handle if \$he actually got what \$he wanted. Which was counterintuitively frightening.

In some moments \$he heard from the bathroom the Facebook ping and simultaneously felt that also familiar feeling hope mixed with anxiety, ripping off the recently placed band-aid against being disappointed. Shutting off the faucet \$he had just opened, \$he made \$er way out, to the low table on which \$er Macbook Air sat. A chat message from Cat.

Cat: *I'm home now. How are you? How's Chiang Rai?*

Mali felt in \$erself the impulse to think through what \$he was going to say - given all the inner conflicts \$he had been facing and the fact that regardless of them, there was part of her \$he had no control over that no matter what wanted to get closer to Cat. But then, for some reason, \$he let it go and just wrote what came to mind...

Mali: *Hey! It's good. Quiet. Like a writers retreat... I may actually get some things done here :)*

Cat: *That's good but Bangkok misses you!*

Really? How is that, Cat?

Mali: *Really?*

Cat: *Of course. Well, I miss you.*

Fuck.

Mali: *I miss you too. It was so fun hanging out with you and having dinner. I'm kind of sad here, alone.*

Cat: *Well you know there are ways to stay in touch! Do you have Skype?*

Mali: *Yeah, we should do that...*

On Cat's request \$he typed in and sent \$er Skype id.

Mali hurried to open Skype, not sure if this is where the evening was going but to be ready if it did, temporarily putting off \$er shower plans.

And then there was Cat calling \$er via video.

Prepared for this? Not one bit.

But here we go.

Mali answered.

"Hi!" Cat sat smiling into the camera comfortable, knees up and in a night shirt. Mali immediately felt at ease.

"Hey you," Mali smiled back, "Fancy meeting you here!"

"I know it's really strange running into you," Cat played along.

"It's good to see you."

"Same here. It's funny, my ex-boyfriend's already jealous of you," Cat smirked.

"Really?"

Wow, that meant something. Cat was talking about me??!

As if reading Mali's thoughts, "I told him I had a new friend. I said katoey friend - I hope you don't mind? I didn't know what to call you and it just felt easier."

"It's an honor to be called katoey in Thailand and by you," Mali smiled, "That's what I love here, its like being katoey isn't an anomaly like it feels in the US."

"So how's it going? Is Chaing Rai treating you well?"

"As well can be expected. It's smaller and more people seem to stare and laugh at me more," \$he immediately thought of the creepy-guy open restaurant \$he had to pass every time on the way to the park.

"That worried me too. But don't worry about it, you know, Thai people are just pretty light with things, try not and take it personally. All katoey here have their days, unfortunately."

"Really, you have katoey friends?"

"Actually my sister is katoey."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," Cat smiled shaking her head.

If you only knew.

And so now doubly intrigued by Cat, Mali felt so at home in conversation with this woman. And apparently Cat did too.

So began a few weeks of impromptu connections together every few days on Skype. It was that shot in the arm Mali needed after so much isolation and also in this remote place. It all felt so easy and was just a continuation of that first night. They talked about everything friends would, up to the point of family and Cat's first hand experience with a transgender sibling. But not more than that. Which actually felt alright with Mali, as in the end, it was this connection she was after. And Cat was available, interested and they both seemed to enjoy each other's company enough to keep doing it, sometimes a few hours at a time.

And the distance allowed her to continue sitting on the fence with her drawn out life-conflict and keep guessing about what might be going on here.

A Plan

Mali pushed herself up the stairs to her second floor apartment. Hot and just on the edge of sweaty from the late afternoon trek through town in the smoldering orange of late Chiang Rai afternoon sun. Plastic bags of vegetables and other miscellaneous groceries in hand, opening the door, she released them on to the floor while taking her shoes off.

She had been looking forward to a quiet Friday evening and Saturday of unstructured relaxation and reflection, a contrast from how even here in Chiang Rai, she structured her time and productivity so much during the week. She tried to make each Saturday a 'sabbath', her own version of the Jewish tradition of taking a day for reflection and off from work.

Not like all the stuck rules of the traditional Jews, to Mali, the only rule was to break patterns - to not do anything she would normally do during the week, like wake up early, work, shop and run around carrying things in hand. Also no plans or schedules: Do what you want to NOW and then just do what comes next naturally. It was flexible and she would add to the *prohibited* list whenever she would catch herself getting wound up on this day. She too loved the way the Jewish people - her predecessors - started the sabbath the evening before.

And for her, the deal was that Friday night was movie night as she didn't watch tv or entertainment the rest of the week and she was looking forward to it!

Just for good measure \$he decided to check \$er email one last time, as \$he liked to take the day - aside from the movie night - off from all computing devices.

There was an email from Cat. \$he clicked it open. Simply written, with the greeting to Mali in Thai script as Cat had been helping \$er learn during their Skype calls,

สวัสดีคุณมาลีค่ะ,

I'm coming to Chiang Mai for the weekend to see my family. Do you want to come down? Maybe Sunday?

Cat :)

Do I want to come down? What do you think, Cat?

It was perfect, a nice rest day and then \$he'd go see Cat. This would normally have been all sorts of anxiety provoking for Mali given \$er sense of closeness and wanting more of Cat, but strangely, it all felt transparent. To date they just flowed, really like great friends. They had seen each other in their night clothes and without makeup. They had shared some of their own deep wishes and feelings about what was going on in their lives. They even talked about Mali's in between state and how \$he felt. The only thing they did not talk about was what was going on between them, if anything else was.

Certain things Mali knew, and \$he could swear there was something more going on than just friendship.

Mali easily replied,

สวัสดี คุณ แมว ค่ะ,

OMG yes, I'll look forward to it. I'll go and buy an early bus ticket to Chiang Mai, get there about 9 or 10am on Sunday? Is that good?

Mali

For the heck of it after \$er movie that night, Mali allowed the dispensation to check email again, and Cat had responded,

Wonderful, I look forward to seeing you. Maybe we can go to Wat Doi Suthep, it's the monastery high up the hill overlooking Chiang Mai. I have a feeling you'll enjoy it.

Mali texted Cat as the bus pulled into the Chiang Mai station,

Good morning :) I'm here!

It was a bit after 10am. When the phone beeped with an almost immediate response, \$he was pleasantly surprised, then caught off-guard by what it contained,

My father suggested you come to our restaurant today. I think you'll like.

Restaurant? Interesting. How big a deal could that be for a full day?

We come to bus station and find you, okay?

Mali's heart sunk a bit. She had assumed, well, was thinking she and Cat would spend time together - alone. Who is 'we'? It kind of hurt. This is the kind of thing that women do when they *don't* want to be alone with someone. Invite a group. Often it was the point when she'd make the realization that she'd been in the friend-zone from the start.

But it was what it was. She shook her head realizing that despite the calmness in their conversations, she'd never backed away from how she'd felt since day one with Cat.

With the acceptance out of the way, Mali then felt a pang of anxiety and insecurity. Other people - family - restaurant? It was the inner drive that kept her rather isolated from others: feeling uncomfortable. Not so much uncomfortable in herself, which was of course part, but she thought more that she felt uncomfortable that she made others uncomfortable. But then, she had seen the picture of Cat's mother on Instagram and she seemed so down to earth. As if she already knew her. So how bad could it be? Anyhow, there was no saying no.

Wonderful, see you soon!

What else could she say? She had no idea what he was getting into. Aside from a couple other Thai friends she had met through a language exchange website, Cat was the third. But her family? Would they be there?

OMFG!

Cat's polish and perfection had to have come from somewhere. She shuddered and knew she was in for something and it might be embarrassing. Even if they were nice to her as they in all likelihood would be, it could be... awkward.

Why was Cat being so open - at first it was just Cat - but with her family? It seemed that Thai families were quite private, not to mention with foreigners.

All things considered, Mali was thankful that Cat had only informed her of this now and not the other day.

John Lennon

Mali stood at the front of the bus station under its shaded drive-through carport with a green tea latte in hand.

A large black Mercedes 500 pulled up. All tinted windows on the sides and even the front. It always fascinated her, especially in third world countries, the affluence that would show itself on occasion. She continued to sip and watch the morning traffic and movement of cars, tuk-tuks, mopeds and people as they came and went from the station, distracted.

She turned to a familiar voice, a bit hoarse and breathy, next to her "Sawadee ka khun Mali ka," with a bit of seduction and smile in it, even without seeing her.

Cat.

Mali half jolted at the surprise and proximity.

"You didn't see us pull up?"

Cat was wearing a form fitting one piece white cocktail dress, hemmed a few inches above her knees, matching white heels. And everything else black - beaded necklace, earrings and creative ring assortment, all onyx. Which brought out the dark of her eyes and laser straight hair which she was wearing down for once.

Mali was entranced as Cat gestured to the car \$he came from. The 500, of course. Also apparently part of the outfit.

Fuck.

Mali finally came to and turned to her,

"Hey you, *that* is your car?"

Cat nodded, "My dad's actually."

Dad.

"Come on, come meet my sister."

Sister.

Jesus.

Mali exhaled for what seemed like the first time since learning they were going to a family place. As \$he walked led by a Cat \$he could not keep \$er eyes off her. Not like ogling so much as simply in a kind of disbelief of the company \$he had somehow stumbled into. \$he did not feel like \$he fit. The kind of woman and situation that would in most realities would not ever give \$er the time of day.

But here I am.

Cat opened the back side door and chivalrously gestured Mali to get in. Cat followed and pulled the door shut with the kind of vacuum thud that only comes on a precision car. Next to \$er on the far side, was a girl smiling and staring out the window, headphones on, oblivious it seemed. Kind of a tom-girl, she had rather short, wavy hair, an amazing profile, not unlike some of the most adorable Tom's that Mali would see especially around \$er old Bangkok neighborhood. Slender, boyish yet still feminine. Totally hot.

The resemblance to Cat was in her slender Thai figure and beautiful posture, yet with an edge.

Mali looked at Cat and they shared a smile at their aloof unicorn. Cat reached out across from Mali and pulled one of the headphones from her sister's ear.

"Oh, why you do that?" she reprimanded Cat, then smiling again, "you Mali?"

Mali nodded and smiled.

"This is my sister Kwanjai,"

"Cat, say Kwan, not Kwanjai, pleeeeeeaseee!"

"Okay, my sister Kwan," Cat acquiesced, and Mali got \$er first flavor of the sibling drama.

Mali smiled and did the foreigner attempt at a wai, a bow with hands together, which made Kwan smile as she did the same only with full grace.

As Kwan replaced her headphone, Cat came to Mali's ear, "Kwanjay, bpen kon katoey."

"I heard that!!!" Kwan complained, face and eyes facing directly ahead.

"It's okay, we joke all the time. In the end of the day, she's totally beautiful, no?" Cat gestured with her jaw to Kwan, "And she knows it, so it doesn't matter. She's actually very smart too. She's going to study medicine next year. Wants to go to Chula and become a surgeon to help people like herself... uh..."

"Really? Wow, that's so cool."

"Yeah. I'm her best advocate. Making sure she studies and stays serious. My parents - they're not so disciplined. Guess its the partial Japanese upbringing in me!"

Cat changed the subject, "My father got excited and suggested that we take you to our restaurant, out in the countryside, when he found out you were coming to town, is this okay with you?"

Cat looked to Mali questioning for the truth with her eyes, "Of course we'll make sure you get back for your late bus, okay?"

Mali's brain circuits were getting fried at every turn, "Uh, of course! That sounds amazing.", \$he replied smiling.

Cat leaned forward over the front seat to speak to the sunglassed man who Mali only assumed must be the family driver based on his demeanor, dress, and the fact they were all in the back seat, "John, let's go the nice way, okay?"

And with the instruction the car was in motion.

"John?" inquired Mali quietly to Cat.

"Yeah, his parents named him after John Lennon. He was born the day John Lennon was killed. We grew up together actually. He was like my big brother in ways."

"Wow." That was all Mali could say. A million questions which every moment seemed to divide into a million more.

As if reading Mali's mind, Cat brushed \$er forearm, "Come on, let's enjoy the scenery for now, okay?"

The Restaurant

Over the hills and through the woods would certainly describe where they were going. After about forty minutes driving and admiring the lush country scenery from the dark tinted windows, from fields and tree lined roads to foothills and hilly curves, Cat announced that they were almost there, just up this hill a bit more.

The car deviated into a stone-laid driveway, through an arch created by intertwined bent trees on either side, and began making its way up a steeper incline. Passing what looked like a rustic wood cabin, they continued, some dogs catching up and running alongside the car, barking along the way, escorting them safely to a small gravel parking area.

As the car stopped, Cat whispered, "Were here," then reached to open the door, through which she and then Mali stepped out into the warming day. The first thing Mali noticed was the air, although warm, was lighter, and not humid. She inhaled deeply, seemingly for the first time in months, really since being in Thailand. Cat, picking up on it looked over,

"We're higher altitude, it's different air! Good, no?"

"It's the best! I wish I could live here!"

"This is actually where I grew up, my younger years."

"Really? But how..." the million and accruing questions returning to Mali.

"We'll talk later and I'll tell you the story. Let's go in?" she reached gently for Mali's upper arm to coax her in the direction.

The 'restaurant' was a two tiered modern looking wooden building, the top of which was open aired by the grace of large windows that opened upward and latched at the eaves. The top floor cantilevered out from the hill from the long driveway they had traveled, rooted back in the direction of the parking area.

Cat led Mali onto the walkway to the restaurant, followed by Kwan. As they neared, a jolly woman with a huge smile came down to meet them. Mali recognized her as the same woman in the photo with Cat, who she had assumed was her mom. "Welcome to our home," she greeted in accented but perfect English.

As Mali tripped over the *home vs restaurant* question, Cat broke in.

"Mali, this is my mother, Bow. Mom, this is Mali, who I told you about."

After the formality of a wai - Cat gracefully and Mali in attempt - and a smile to Cat's mother, Cat looked at Mali to explain, "Like I said, I grew up here when young. In fact this property is where my mother grew up and actually her and my father met. His family's land was a few parcels over," she continued, a little quieter as if just for Mali, "We were dirt poor. Well, aside from what they could produce. I remember a bit as a child. Different life for sure. And could have been for me too."

As they started walking up the stairs and in to the building, Cat continued, "When my father discovered that grapes for wine could be cultivated here, everything changed. For them, for us. Actually for Thailand. We were the first winery that we know of in the kingdom. I was just a child. It was like over a year or two we went as you say 'from rags to riches', Cat laughed, remembering something, "You know the fairytale books and Disney? I thought they were simply true and that they happened for everyone - because it seemed to be happening for me in reality as I grew up!"

Mali raised her eyebrows. It was an amazing thought and synchrony to have as a child. Maybe that was one reason Cat was a person who seemed like there was no limit or ceiling to anything.

"But the thing is, I hope you will see in my family, it never went to our heads particularly. Well, except for me, just a little, and my dad with his Hong Kong Mercedes" she winked her signature, at which Mali quietly snorted, the fact those were the exact words in her head this morning at the bus station when she first saw the car.

"Well, please come in and have a seat, the best table is over here for you," Bow urged them on, as Cat and Mali had gotten stuck chatting at the entryway. And true to the fairytales, it was a majestic view that made Mali believe in what Cat had just told \$er.

The table was shaded, and really the whole restaurant existed in shade thanks to the long gradually sloped roof overhangs. But due to the elevation, the view was panoramic. Seated at the two person table, Cat and Mali gazed out upon the property, vines, and behind them the road and surrounding countryside. It was another world. It could be Napa or Tuscany. The altitude they had risen to made the air and environment, at least to Mali, a much happier place. If it was up to \$er, \$he would live here over Chiang Rai or Bangkok.

Menu's arrived. One page, on rustic paper. Very classy. What caught Mali's attention was it all looked healthy. No pork, in fact no meat or animal products aside from dairy.

"All the food here is organic, vegetarian and grown in this area... we don't bring anything in. Even the eggs and cheese."

"Wow, I'm not only impressed but this is like the perfect food for me!"

"I thought you'd approve," Cat smiled. They had discussed food and diet at length on one of their Skype calls. They'd both admitted the tendency toward being vegetarian but neither had succeeded yet.

Soon they both ordered, and once the food came, the simplicity and deliciousness at par with the whole of the restaurant experience, they sat, savored and spoke of Cat's family, past and this amazing land. What Mali already knew of the kingdom of Thailand, temples, golden fluted roofs, rustic and modern aesthetic beauty had extended exponentially.

To something real.

To something...

I feel included in...

Through lunch, Mali fell into a kind of relaxation and surrender that \$he did not have so often. Just when the body really lets go, even becoming sleepy. The dry warmth of the day did not hurt either. It was comforting like a nice summer afternoon in a temperate climate, like where \$he grew up.

As they finished and continued to sit and chat, Cat looked over and saw this and smiled. Almost not wanting to break the mood but as well having so much \$he wanted to share with Mali, now that they were here and in person, she broke in, "So are you ready for the next part of the tour?"

"Well off course," Mali drawled and smiled lazily.

"Great," Cat replied as she stood, Mali following. Turning toward the inner part of the restaurant building, through glass doors, an intense black shine caught Mali's eye. A pristine upright piano, the sight of which anywhere made Mali drool to feel its keys. As if they were vanilla-chocolate, and the sound was probably like the rest of the current environment, \$he thought, imagining it to be transparent, crisp, warm and true.

Cat caught \$er staring. "Do you play?"

"Well, I just do what I do. I am not formally trained but I love the piano. It gets to my heart."

Cat arched her eyebrows, "Really. Well come." She opened the door and led \$er into the inner room which was really the internal dining room and bar, right now empty and with a nice coolness complimenting the shaded illumination of the windows which surrounded it on two sides.

Cat looked at Mali, "I want to hear," she smiled.

"Okay," Mali smiled back, excited to share this with \$er but as always insecure as although most people felt something when \$he played, who knows what Cat would think, and it mattered what she thought. Aside from fantasy, music was the place that could exist and be created of the longings in \$er heart. If a girl didn't 'get' \$er playing... it was a total turn-off historically.

\$he pulled out the bench and sat down, Cat joined \$er at the edge, "Is this okay?"

"More than okay," Mali smiled back. Everything felt just like home.

Piano

Today \$he would remember to stay relaxed as \$he played, just feel and stay in the present. Sometimes, well almost always in the past \$he played to \$er liking but ended up tense. Although \$he felt good about what \$he was improvising, \$er body reminded \$er that \$he wasn't completely relaxed, maybe not completely authentic, trying to please perhaps or simply self-conscious.

\$he knew that was not necessary. Just like with women. Things could feel so good and right, yet engaging, connecting, getting closer to loving, \$he could feel the tension and some sort of discord build. Something did not fit, regardless of \$er sentiments, as a man moving toward *this* with *her*.

\$he struck a simple low C with \$er left hand and a major 9th chord with \$er right. Simple but the 9th adding a dash of emotional foreshadow. The piano was perfectly tuned, the keys were in precise mechanical shape. The black shiny piano was not only playable, it was potentially heaven.

As was \$er style, \$he just intuitively moved from chord to chord, slowly, not playing the next until \$he heard it first inside - actually felt it - and knew its harmonic function which would give \$er the relation in the actual scale \$he was in, which was easy right now because \$he was in the key of C. \$he tended to stay in certain scales because \$er hands and muscles were almost auto-tuned to translate what \$he heard and felt inside into the feeling it took to execute the sound with \$er body.

That was what it was all about for \$er. Not the mind, just a feeling, almost bypassing the mind, from the internal feeling, the longing, through to \$er arms and hands and out into harmonies. Almost a passionate aggression. Not angry, but insistent. Knowing. Knowing of all things of passion, what \$he liked and did not like were always clear in music. It was one of those things - musical taste - \$he just *knew* without anyone telling \$er. Same with fashion, same with taste in women.

If only I was so clear on ME.

The sounds, the feelings evoked with each execution of \$er hands, all that was so hard to find reciprocated in day to day life. As if the tones and the somatic feeling which produced them made \$er relate to how \$he wanted to touch and be touched by *her*. The only other thing in \$er life that resembled this was how \$he was with \$er hula hoop, also powered by music on \$er iPod.

What \$he did not consciously realize other than knowing \$er passion for it, is that the piano and \$er own unique way of playing it, really becoming one with it was the third instance in \$er life of \$er way of knowing — somatic knowing. \$er body, muscles connected to \$er emotions, nervous system and brain, in that order. To know what things were.

The first was the feminine sense in \$er pelvis and sacrum. The one \$he still held in doubt because everything around \$er had told \$er to do so. And the second, maybe equally early in life than the first, was *the embrace* \$he longed for.

In theory love and sex should have been somatically understood and driven too, but every connection and relationship \$he had had went a step further beating out of \$er the once-upon-a-time *knowing*. Which was the most disappointing thing on top of all in \$er past relationships - that females from whom 'he' expected high levels of sensitivity and intimacy, seemed far from it, even less sensitive than \$er own innate senses and longings.

So in the past especially, the piano was of coming home for \$er. \$er lifeline to \$er tenuous inner true self and without it, who knows where \$he'd be in life. And from music sprouted dance. And from dance sprouted expression of femininity and authentic movement in \$er body. Maybe femininity came first but in \$er it had to find a path out perhaps.

Hoop-dancing had taken over playing the piano for \$er. With the piano it was \$er heart channeled into \$er hands and fingers. With hooping, it was further, the music \$he heard channeling to \$er whole body, even soul. Where in the past the offering of music was a way to express how \$he felt inside to someone, but now in dance, it wasn't an offering to anyone as much as an embodiment.

*Not **for** her.*

Because in dance I am her.

Whenever \$he decided to be a 'man' again, \$he would always fall back to playing music as an outlet, piano, flute, drums, whatever because the embodiment was proscribed in that role. But now, the embodiment \$he'd reached through hoop-dance, it was \$er, who \$he was. It still - and had been engrained into \$er from past teachers and therapists - that this was really selfish.

"You're supposed to only care about discerning and feeling your woman's emotions, she does not care about your emotions. No woman wants a man whose feelings are equal or primary to her own. Biology makes us that way."

Well, fuck you too then.

It was one of those things that made \$er angry and bristle inside in male-female relationships, of how \$he was 'selfish' for being aesthetic, wanting to look good, slender, sexy in a feminine way. It pissed \$er off what \$er girlfriends could do and wear but \$he couldn't. It had been a long time, but now \$he remembered how upset this would make \$er feel. Any any insisting on it at all was 'wrong', culturally emasculating and a felt embarrassment. When trying to be a man for someone.

The woman was the one who was to be the focus of \$er attention. \$he resented this imposed dynamic from the core of \$er being.

As if today was witness of \$er continued growth, \$he did not tense. For some reason \$he felt no pretension or need to please. Even with Cat sitting right next to \$er. \$he let the feeling and tears come. The longing for a love and closeness and as intimate as these 9th and altered 4th chords, of the play and changes, and the resolution, especially the IV chord over a V pedal, the sound of the most intimate union. To \$er taste the dominant V chord was in so many cases just bare and vulgar compared. \$er playing was never perfect but imperfectly perfect.

All \$he really wanted was for someone else, another, to feel how \$he felt, together with \$er. Because it was so intense and deep. People did not understand sometimes when \$he cried. They tried to stop or comfort \$er. But \$he loved the feeling of crying, it was like life and liberation, if there was a 'water of life' or holy grail, for \$er it was crying. It softened and revitalized \$er body like nothing else. Erasing the cage of tension \$he lived in, albeit for some moments.

And the piano was an attempt at such communication.

\$he checked in and Cat looked like \$he was having a good time, eyes closed and comfortably leaning on her arm, leaning slightly toward \$er. Deep inside Mali wanted and wondered. If Cat's consciousness was placed inside \$er own body, and \$he in Cat's. Or for that matter interchanged with anyone else. Would the feeling be familiar or of a different world of feeling?

We have language to try to bridge understanding between people, and we have touch and senses to lessen the distance and make us think we are all alike. But to one person who gets transported to another - if it was indeed possible - would they find a prison or a palace? Would it seem familiar or foreign compared to 'themselves'?

Do we feel 'normal' just because it's what we're used to? But if mystically transported to another we go from tension, doubt, despair and anger to humor, joy, gratitude and peace? Then whose 'normal' is really 'normal'?

Because even in \$erself, through the secrets \$he found about \$er own body, \$he could go from gridlock to expressive bliss in a matter of minutes. Just by changing how \$he held \$erself, paying attention to symmetry and balance in \$er muscles \$he became a different person.

Can anyone love so much to really be one so you feel everything together and the same way? Somehow \$he trusted this as being possible regardless of what \$he saw out in the world. A knowing not unlike the music itself.

And if it was, this was the kind of place, this land of Cat and her family, the kind of world where it could happen. Maybe the only place.

Cat sat even deeper in herself. Her head down, hands now in her lap, head tilted to the right, almost appearing asleep. She wanted more of what she felt in this music. This flow. She wished she could have Mali playing while she was falling asleep, it for sure would bring her to places in dream that were the best of where she would hope to ever go. The encompassing and warmth she longed for. Even in pain or death presence, these sounds would be light and hopeful.

It was also confusing. This Mali. Rockstar or katoey Mali? So soft and gentle. Yet something very strong. Was it her being selfish that she wanted Mali to be a man? Could Mali be a he? He would be the perfect life partner if he was. The way they could talk. It really was effortless. Not unlike a best girl-friend. But then, was there more?

She found her thoughts on Koona. Poor Koona. Who had so many times been up here with her too. What had happened? So many years of friendship and now this void that apparently neither cared to bridge. A cloud came over her but the music insisted in her heart that she not hide from what she was feeling.

What was even stranger to her is that somehow, in Mali's playing, the feeling reminding her of that last moment with Koona by the pool. Another cloud passed over her heart, this one more suffocating. Being with Mali was also rather familiar, it was kind of like being with Koona, but if she were a man. But then again, is Mali a man, right?

Jesus Cat, mind-fucking are we?

Well, who knew but one thing she did know was that Mali was into her. And she was feeling things too but it was all so confusing and jumbled. Like since that night they walked in Chatuchak Park, this all was something in motion that she didn't have control over but to go with it. Albeit a bit passively, waiting.

Well, too, it felt good.

Like the last week with Koona.

That felt good too. As good.

Better even?

Cat made an unconscious nod.

Everything was always better with my best friend.

Fuck...

The Path

Mali knew her flow and inspiration were coming to an end. Timing was timing and she knew to listen and respect it. She eased off the last resolving chord on legato and looked over to Cat. Who simultaneously opened her eyes and smiled.

"That was amazing."

Then out of the corner of her eye, Mali was shocked. Inclining toward Cat's ear, "Oh shit, look around!"

The room was almost full of diners. They had not been alone for who knows how long. That was a first for a generally hyper-aware Mali.

From nowhere Cat's mother was at their side, "Mali, we want to hire you. Really. Everyone love your playing."

"Mom, Mali lives in Chiang Rai."

"So, he can move here!"

The 'he' hit Mali's heart but \$he sucked it up.

How is Cat's family supposed to know... if she nor I really do either?

Jesus Mali.

English sucks shit with it's built in ability to shame. Even when unintended. And too, English was not Cat's mothers native tongue, so \$he let it go.

Cat looked at \$er mother and then to Mali, "So you want to go on the tour still?"

Mali nodded and smiled.

Cat spoke in Thai just to get Bow off Mali's back,

"Mom, we'll talk about it, okay?"

She knew her mother could come on strong at times.

"Okay."

In that moment Bow was called to respond to another group of arriving diners.

Mali turned to Cat as she led the way just a step ahead, "sorry, I got carried away... this is a beautiful piano and such a beautiful place, I could not help myself."

"You think you need to apologize to anyone?!"

"So you're mom wants to hire me, huh?" Mali smirked.

"It would seem to be the case," she winked shaking her head.

Mali actually hoped Bow was serious. Of course \$er motives would be all twisted... would accepting to come here to work be for the music or just because \$he felt this family was surrounded in light and \$he wanted more of it?

A few minutes later Cat led Mali from the restaurant, back the way they had came. The patrons unobtrusively watched and smiled. Many of them were regulars or those who knew the family. Who knew Cat. And *that* Cat did not lead men around, or even really accompany them for that matter, except for in the most formal and rigid etiquette. It was like she was leading a girl-friend more than a man but that was lost for the most part on the people there.

They saw 'his' feminine physique, but many Thai men as well were pretty, gosh, with virtually female faces, which of course Mali would die for. Slender bodies too. They did not see 'his' makeup or jewelry. All they saw was 'his' back while 'he' played then being led out by Cat.

When they had made it up the driveway, past the little rustic parking area, they turned to the left onto a path which was almost a tunnel created by trees. Light came through but it was shady and relatively cool. Cat turned, smiling and said "I could not say it in front of my mom, but that was beyond amazing! Your playing was like it was from another world. It made me feel so happy and calm. I wish I could listen to you play everyday!".

Mali's heart skipped a beat. What was she saying? No, it was just a compliment, he had received many from women especially as for some reason they could feel and appreciate \$er playing more, and no, they were just sweet people, friends but it meant nothing else, historically. Although somewhere inside \$he felt what \$he played was a message encoded for someone, intended and impulsive for *the one*.

That's who I play for. Only her ultimately.

"That means a lot to me. I don't play much anymore, and when I do I not only miss it but feel I should be playing more..."

"Not just something, Mali. It made me wonder what's under all this, inside you," she whispered just a little lower tone and huskily, gesturing at Mali's appearance. "I mean, oh, I don't know..."

It was the first time Mali had ever seen Cat with even a slight tumble over her words.

"I mean, what else are you so good at?", she stumbled, twitching her head as if shaking off those words, "No, that's not it. I mean, I don't know, do you feel... uh, what do you feel when you play? Do you feel like I felt when I listened?"

"How did you feel when you listened?" Mali chuckled.

Cat was in a corner, betrayed by her own words.

Being true to her name, she gestured "Come on, let's not just stand here, let me show you the best thing about this place."

Mali smiled inside and allowed her escape.

"For sure, lead the way," \$he smiled, feeling a warmth inside knowing that at some point, there was a promise of some deeper conversation. Too, of things \$he wanted to know like...

*What **is** really going on here?*

Of course \$he could guess where Cat was going with her questions but of course too, it was better to let things come naturally. Especially from someone as special as Cat. Mali as well continued to wonder what else \$he didn't know about her special friend.

Cat led Mali at times reaching for \$er hand as if to gently hurry \$er along. Like the woman in the dream, ushering \$er down a wooded path on a pristine afternoon, the comfort of being in this woman's hands felt so good.

The trail was at times sparsely covered with young green trees and plants and at other points around a turn, almost dark with old growth. Light green, dark green, white-gray rock gravel path, sunlight that played with them, threatening to heat, even scorch, but never getting the chance as they made it again to a covered part.

The thing was, \$he was walking behind Cat, alone. Cat in that dress that perfectly fit her slender, toned form, at some point the heels had been traded for some equally cute shiny white sandals. It did cross \$er mind how it would feel to hold and be held by her. It wasn't sexual. Well, it was. But not in the way that \$he'd been programmed to think by \$er culture. Or perhaps by the rare spikes of testosterone based desire. Sexual was supposed to be penetrating but \$he had no desire to. But to hold and bond. Even as friends. But no, Mali wanted to kiss her. And if \$he was honest - to be Cat's. What she'd dreamed of since \$he could remember,

being three years old and embracing that pillow, essentially imagining the same thing. Being with and being. One.

"We're almost there," Cat announced happily as they came up to a clearing, but one which the trees further up the hill were now shading from the sun. In the clearing was a white structure. Some might call it a gazebo but it was not the traditional frilly kind of round or hexagonal. It was a rectangle wood structure, all natural wood with small supporting pillars making it almost invisible under the thick lattices of interwoven grape vines, evident with clearly visible purple grapes! The vines had been arranged to cover the back toward the hill as well as the two sides to the right and left, creating abundant shade and leaving the front exposed with a complete view perpendicular to that which they enjoyed from the restaurant, only several hundred feet higher.

"What do you think?"

Mali was speechless again. It kept getting better. All this reminded her of the long drawn out crush she had had on her best girl-friend throughout high school and how her family had owned a property not unlike this. It was uncanny, and too the same unexpressed longing of so many years back. Then as now, never declared. She simply wanted this with Cat — and this day itself — to never end. Now as if it was also then.

"You okay?", yelled Cat, already inside the structure.

Mali had spaced out. Coming to, she hopped up along the last fifteen feet of the path and up the steps to a new paradise.

Sweetness

"This is so amazing!" was all Mali could say, as she reached Cat.

This is so amazing.

Just words. Regular words.

The last words I spoke to Koona.

Is life fucking with me?

"Want a grape?" Cat offered with a playful arm out, erasing the melancholic thought. Cat had a more liberated and seductive look than Mali had ever seen to date. Mali accepted the grape and as she bit down and found another heaven in the sweetness and slight sour bite of the blue grape. Delicious. Here she saw what seemed like a younger, carefree Cat. Someone in her own element. Not that she was so heavy now, but otherwise was cultured and polished, to a T. This other girl was just — without so much. Natural. Just like the friend she had been secretly in love with so many years before. That kind of ghost in her that seemed could hide even for years but would never leave.

There were a set of wicker reclined 'sun' chairs with thick white cushions, on one of which Cat had taken out a luxurious sprawl, along with her bunch of grapes.

"Sit here and we eat grapes!", the younger Cat motioned to the matching lounge chair next to her. Mali settled down on it and stared out. Comfortable. Relaxing. With Cat. And this place, this view. A sense of being cared for and protected, something she hadn't in years except for fleeting moments.

Since \$he began 'going to hell'.

\$he closed \$er eyes and took a deep breath. The whole scene was still so Mediterranean-like. Too, it reminded \$er of the peninsula on the west side of the Bay Area where \$he'd grown up. So many associations overlapped in the synesthesia of comfort. Albeit half the world away, everything in this moment felt so comfortable and familiar, to a T.

This feels amazing.

Maybe this meant there was something wrong with the path \$he was on? But \$he didn't have time to contemplate and the worry vanished when a few seconds later Cat held another grape to \$er lips. Which \$er snout accepted, biting down with a grin.

"These are so delicious!" Mali intoned allowing \$er voice to rise and quiver just as many women would in receiving the same delicacy. \$er voice still had a lot of work to be done but it had its moments of femininity when \$he would actually let go, which were rays of hope and of encouragement to keep going. In fact the first day \$he tried vocal training practice, \$he found \$er female voice - not a put on pretend voice, but something real. That actually felt less constricted and tense than what \$he was used to as a man.

So it seemed that whatever kept \$er from that voice and that person, was more in \$er head than a real limitation.

"Soooooooo", let out Cat, marking each word slowly, "As I was saying earlier. What are you all about? I just cant figure you out still," then she spat out a piece of honesty which left Mali on the floor, now the one cornered, "I mean, at moments I feel like you are someone who is like a man who wants to get to know me and ask me for dates and all that stuff. Its not like you've done it as much as I feel you might want that."

Mali could feel \$erself bristle a bit inside. \$he for some reason could not stand being seen by a woman like that. In fact, \$he always had disliked it. It felt inherently predatory and wrong. The wrong signal. But what the world expected from a man. Contrary, \$he just wanted to be close and the girl, equal to \$er, not to feel like \$he had pretensions of getting into her pants or necessarily leading her anywhere. That was virtually never what it was about for \$er.

But on the other hand, it was true. Mali clouded a bit, as \$he realized that \$er own confusion was probably causing Cat to have a confused feeling too about \$er intentions. \$he wanted more than friendship with Cat if that was possible.

But Cat continued, "Then turn around and you are this - who are you? - amazing pianist and sensitive person, like someone I can talk to when really in life there is no one anymore, who can ever get in here, where you are with me. And then like leading you up this path, you are my best friend - a girl-friend," she intoned the word 'girl-friend' as if stating a fact, "Like any of my girl friends but just more of a soul sister. So what is it, you?"

Cat did feel a halting moment, as the unresolved Koona swept again like a breeze through \$er mind and heart.

"You want a box, huh?", Mali smiled. Two could play at honesty.

"Well, I don't know. I just want to know who you are and what you want with me."

"Who said I wanted something besides you?"

It took Cat a minute to process the sentence as it could mean more than one thing. First causing her to doubt her English for a moment, and then put her into a kind of spacey place while her mind tried to unravel it.

"Well who said I wanted something besides you either!", she smirked reveling in her intelligence, again not lost on Mali.

"So here we are then." Mali smirked back.

"I guess so." Cat returned. Long pause as they both stared out and continued working on sharing the grapes which Cat had placed on the little table in between their chairs, and trying to make sense of what was 'not going on'.

"All I can say is it's nice, whatever it is," Cat drawled in a beautiful feminine sing-song.

As if on stage cue, there was the sound of gravel, shoes and what sounded like skipping which preceded the appearance of Kwanjai. She bounded up into the gazebo beaming her happy-mischievous smile, as Cat rolled her eyes. At that moment Mali further recognized the humanity in Cat and that she did not just come out of nowhere as a polished Thai-Japanese spokesmodel but had a real family and past. The drama of siblings.

As if to punctuate the thought, Cat remarked, "and heeeerrrrre," she drew out the last word, "may I present my kaaatoeeeeeeey sister!", rolling her eyes again and then into a smile, the one with the squinted left eye, as if letting Mali in to an ongoing shared secret.

"Mom said keep eye on you two. Doesn't know what going on. Not sure who or what Mali is."

Mali almost choked on a grape and a piece of it went up \$er nose.

"They say katoey's talk more than any genetic woman and that they hold nothing sacred. They are often so vulgar. Well, here is my family's contribution to affirming the reality of katoey folklore," stated Cat again as a fact.

And as if not to disappoint, Kwan continued, smiling at Mali, "So are you a Tom or a Dee? You dress kind of like a Tom. But you know what, I think you are really a Dee you just have not accepted it?!", lisping the last few words.

Mali smiled into a laugh at not only the directness of Kwan, only young Thai's could be this way and get away with it since it was all said and done with such lightheartedness, but also her perceptiveness. Too because \$he remembered the conversation and verdict of the two boys at the night market.

Mali knew \$he was a Dee if \$he was a 'she'. Although it was easier transitionally to appear as a Tom. Stronger, a bit alpha. Keep people at a distance who would otherwise be able to get too close. But that was all unconscious. \$he felt like \$he could not dress and act like a Dee and not appear ridiculous... and \$he did not want to look ridiculous. Just like man-breasts. Not going to happen. If anything, it was heartbreaking because of \$er aesthetic tastes.

If \$he wanted it, \$he had so much work to do, even if it was possible, and \$he barely entertained the possibility. So \$he tried to comfort \$erself with the salve of 'in between' and also being just a little too adamant against the concept of 'transitioning' to female...

'I have no transition, I am who I am,' stating to therapists and anyone who needed to be told, again and again. Such a decision historically felt like a relief, to \$er inner-being of not having to do such heavy stuff like surgeries, hormones, painful long-term electrolysis. Not to mention the expense.

But for some reason \$he never found peace. To a third-party observer \$er appearance was to the male side if for nothing more than the fact that \$he stayed on the fence and hadn't surrendered. Doubted that \$he really could, and feared trying. \$he was so used to the gridlock in \$er body and being that \$he almost had no reference how much better it could be if \$he just step on to the other side. If there was 'the other side' for \$er. That was the problem. \$he didn't know if \$he could.

Kwan's words brought Mali back to present.

"And what they don't know either is what you and Cat have. Are you girl-friends or 'girlfriends'?"

At which point Cat flushed to a full crimson. Mali having done all \$he could to hold back, snorted and began laughing uncontrollably, tears flowing freely, even dislodging the remainder of the grape that was still stuck in \$er nose. Cat's disturbed composure was priceless. Paired with the perceptiveness of Kwan's exposure of the elephant in the room that both Cat and Mali had been tap dancing around all afternoon, not to mention months.

Mali was having contractions and pushed off the recliner and onto the floor to lay out the tantrum. It felt so incredibly good, this. Thank god for Kwan. Well for the whole day for that matter. The ridiculousness of *everything* - this day, well just being a friend of Cat's was amazing enough, but the car, her family, the restaurant, the piano... And to top it off the fact that this little katoey was sent to knock some reality out of the two friends and get the answer that they themselves were avoiding.

Coming out of the fit, through \$er tears \$he turned \$er head to the right and looked right up into Cats eyes, which Cat averted. But still Mali could see Cat was also having albeit light controlled convulsions of laughter herself. \$he reached to tap Cat's arm, who turned, making real eye contact now with Mali. Mali smiled. They held their eyes on each other and as if contagious, a smile sprouted on Cat's face also building until she also burst into laughter, still sharing the gaze. Maybe Kwan could crash the party but the party would just continue on a different frequency.

"Well, you two stupid and crazy! She wanted tell you that - she did not want know all those thing - I did. *She* wanted tell you that we going soon to city," then switching to the easier for her Thai, directing at Cat "Father has some business that came up, he wants you to join him as the company counsel can't make it," then back to English, "So chop-chop - Mali is that right how you say it? - hurry up!, lets go?!" She turned on her heels and sashayed out of the gazebo and down the path. The 'chop-chop' thing to Mali confirming the family relation and intelligence shared between her and Cat.

Mali and Cat were left to face each other and finish the laugh, prolonged by Kwan's final monologue and stage exit. The laughter broke through the tension and was probably just as well for now. Interestingly, both felt free to call an end to the beautiful foray to the gazebo and head back to wherever it was they were going back to.

"Shall we?", Mali pulling \$erself off the floor offered a hand to Cat out from the comfort of the recliner.

"I don't want to but, yeah, it's just too comfortable here!" as she got up and brushed her dress, "It's been quite a day, hasn't it? Well, more for you, you had to get up so early and take a bus!".

If that was only it.

"Oh, and I am sorry - I'm getting pulled away - to help my father with business. I'll have to explain at some point".

Mali stored away one more curiosity.

The walk back to the restaurant, to the waiting family and the car ride back was pleasant and uneventful. Aside from Kwan and her attention from the lookout of her left side seat with her equally alternating questioning looks and then mischievous smile. Once on Mali, then on Cat, then on Mali, then Cat and so on, apparently finding this more entertaining than the music she'd been listening to on the way. She had tried to insist on being in the middle but Cat would not have it.

There are just some things that only a katoey can see in another. Something like gaydar. And it was basically never that she had found a hole in Cat's polished surface that had any real potential for exploit, until now. That surface was in place since her earliest memory when Cat returned from Japan for the first time some years ago and they met for the first time. She truly was not mean hearted, but as every katoey had to go through, often in their own unique way, to become themselves, she saw beyond appearances and culture. She had already formulated ideas about her sister. But add Mali to the picture... and it was way beyond what she'd even imagined. She found this supremely amusing.

But how it would actually play out was still beyond her wildest dreams.

And at this point beyond Cat and Mali's too.

Parting

As the Hong Kong black Mercedes entered the city proper, Cat, who had been in a daze watching the scenery and looking just a bit tired, probably just to keep Kwan at bay for the ride, turned across to Mali, "Look, there is my sister's school, Chiang Mai University!", she pointed over to the right as they drove by, "Its a nice campus, tranquil and pretty place to enjoy. I wish I could have taken you there today."

Kwan smiled devilishly.

"Yeah, well we can make a list, right? Add also to that the monastery you talked about."

"Oh yes! I almost forgot about that," Cat spoke and thought to herself, that truly both places would be so nice to continue that chat they had started earlier.

"I don't think a monastery is quite appropriate for you two," Kwan couldn't help herself but was ignored.

"So what did you study, anyway?", Mali had been curious for some time, for some reason there were certain things that never really came up. For that matter, there was still so much she didn't know about Cat, as was evidenced in today.

"I studied, believe it or not, international business law. Very useful to what I am doing now, don't you think?", she paused, "Well, aside from helping my dad on weekends when his own legal counsel refuses to work!"

"So how did you end up where you are now?"

"I floated after school. I mean, a Thai woman from a family with some money, that is easy to do," she paused pensively, "But actually most people would not consider it floating. I went back to Japan to work. In whatever, just because I wanted to."

"That's when you found the Japanese clinic?"

"Well, yeah. I got a job at a beauty clinic in Japan, doing more or less what I do now. I met the owner of the clinic and we got along. It was just a nice match. I love greeting people and I love the Japanese way of things, can you tell?" she made her wink-smile, sitting up ever more in her poised manner, then laughed, "And I wanted to ensure I had access to all the cutting edge beauty treatments... forever... so why would I change? I came back to Thailand a few years ago and helped them open the clinic you see now. So actually, I know I look like the reception but actually I own this one and the other we have in Thailand, in Phuket."

Suddenly many things started to make sense to Mali. "Wow, so you really have made it for yourself, I mean you are in something you like and happy doing it? And doing well at it."

"Yeah. As well, I get a lot of freedom. I don't have to be in the clinic when I want to go travel. So it works out, and I still make money even while away!"

"That sounds wonderful. I am happy for you."

Mali's programming work afforded \$er the life of a rock star, so was the inside joke about such between \$er and one of \$er previous co-workers whom she'd remained internet friends with. Well at least a rock star on a shoestring budget. But that was fine. That \$he had freedom of location and often working hours, generally working when \$he needed money and it paid well. The only thing is that \$he felt like it drove \$er into the ground. Unlike Cat in the clinic in something that was affirming to her person, Mali would feel so anxious and tense after hours of programming.

On one side the work totally absorbed \$er, just as solving puzzles and problems absorbs many. But the focus, it was like it disassociated \$er from \$er body. The same work which sustained \$er and made all \$he was doing possible, at the same time seemed at odds with \$er ever reaching where \$he felt \$he needed to be as a social person in the world. \$he longed for what Cat had - income, ideally \$er own company or product, and feeling alive in what \$he did - at least for a great part of the time.

Cat was lost in thought when Mali looked over again, as if cuing her.

"So maybe - now don't say anything here," she whispered, "it helps you understand some of the things I said to you when we walked in the park the first time. About how I am. Just a bit different. I'm fine on my own and have no need for certain things that many women are looking for," the last sentence even more softly. Which Mali read into, hoping it too meant something about their connection.

\$he sighed internally as \$he realized today's time was running out. The car was now in sight of the Kad Suan Kaew mall where \$he'd hang out before making way back to the bus station.

As the car pulled into the malls 'VIP' carport, Cat looked apologetically with scrunched shoulders, and smiled, "I'm sorry things are cut short. But maybe..."

Mali broke in, "Don't worry, it was a fantastic time. So much! It's okay. I'll see you soon, right?"

"I'll try to Skype later, if that's okay?" Cat offered.

"Totally."

Wow, there could be more today. Incredible.

"Well have a nice time at the mall and safe trip home."

"You too, and thanks for everything, it was wonderful!"

Cat opened the door and got out, with Mali in tail.

She smiled, "Talk soon."

"Perfect," Mali smiled back.

Kad Suan Kaew

Mali sat in the crowded Top's Market cafeteria, which was on the basement level of the mall. With a bowl of duck noodle soup in front of her, she ate slowly, while looking around. It was a surreal contrast to where she had been even an hour ago. But it was Thailand. Where almost absolute contrasts were just part of a normal day.

The place was lit with fluorescent lights giving it a feel that made you not want to linger too long beyond the tasty food. On the perimeter were the myriad food booths where one could choose from virtually any type of Thai regional food, not to mention other options like Indian and Halal.

The crowd there was an overall sample of the population of Chiang Mai. Many Thais, families, young couples, couples with children. Some Thai-Muslim's, and occasionally what looked like more 'serious' Muslim people. The difference to Mali being the combination of colorful dress and lighter smiling faces compared to just the standard black and more solemn attitudes.

And what's the deal with a woman in a black Birka and her guy wearing shorts and a t-shirt???

Then there were assorted expat riff-raff — men or women who looked like they might be more comfortable sitting on a Harley or at a biker bar. But if you talked to them, like Mali rarely did, they all had a story. And expats tended to be quite nice.

Every expat foreigner in Thailand had a story. The Thai culture tended to designate people either as Thai or 'farang', a word originally meaning 'barbarian white person'. It was something perplexing, something Mali often considered at length. Set against the ever present Thai smiles and sensitivity, this us vs them distinction made what often seemed like an impermeable wall. One that newcomers to Thailand, herself included, would easily miss.

The collective sum of expats had a shared culture and experience. Anyone who had to face the monthly visa runs vs Thai language school visa decision, hailing cabs, ordering food, local vs foreigner prices, not to mention the question of love. The concept of which was discussed endlessly in online blogs and forums. Well, about love between men and women. Forums which now were basically academic to Mali.

To Mali up until Cat, she had started to think that as a foreigner she'd always be on the outside culturally. As if there was some unwritten thing floating in the air that categorically created and enforced in every Thai person to be kind and friendly, yet unknowable. Much less, accessible for a true relationship beyond talking about superficial things like the weather, the traffic, or what's good to eat.

Given that, Mali found a fascination in the third group presenting in the food court, the generally older white man with the young Thai wife. And sometimes younger farang men with their Thai partner. Sometimes with baby in tow. From what she understood it was often a mix of economic needs, cultural crosstalk and maybe a good measure mental erase.

Perhaps even split-morality.

Too, once in a while she thought she could see a couple who was actually 'real' -- had actual intimacy -- in this group. But more often than not the Thai woman seemed to lead the guy around, seeming more like a tour-guide doing her job.

Mali chuckled to herself, she'd love to acquire that skill, the Thai mental erase.

For my own purposes.

If she was honest, there was a fourth group represented here. The farang katoey.

Just one of them.

Me.

Albeit today she felt stronger and more secure, Cat's confidence and embrace having rubbed off. Of course in this mall, at every juncture you'd run into a Thai katoey -- transgender woman. It was commonplace. It was one reason she especially liked this mall in particular. And Chiang Mai in general. It was more of an educated katoey population. Many were students.

Real.

But nonetheless, usually she was the only farang she'd in this category. And nothing reminded her more of this than sitting in a Thai shopping center.

Fucking fishbowl.

Although Kad Suan Kaew was one of the most chill from unwanted attention.

But mulling over the familiar series of perceptions, Mali felt between the two worlds today. Because what had just happened this morning had seemingly taken the things she thought she knew and cast them into an unknown reality. Stereotypes and prejudice are exacerbated by isolation. Cat and her family this morning had taken black and white and cast them all into a rainbow.

Jesus, literally!

\$he felt the constriction of sadness and tears inside, now sitting alone, all of the sudden. In the midst of what seemed like now again unknowable chaos, with Cat in the distance being the form that unified things back to colorful coherence and light, combined with the fuel of the ever-held longing and conviction in \$er own heart.

Returning to the bus station, Mali was dazed. The kaleidoscope of \$er inner fragmentation had shifted. But just as a kaleidoscope, it was a new arrangement of light and colors but the pattern that put it in motion was one and the same as before.

Cat was simply mystical.

Almost felt karmic that way.

Too perfect.

What should have made \$er ebullient was now attacking Mali at every place of conflict \$he had.

I think I love her.

If there was one thing Mali knew, it was \$er core dream. And \$he knew how to recognize it.

But maybe I can't make her happy?

Won't make her happy...

Sexually. Like \$er past girlfriends. In many cases they were satisfied with \$er, even very. Well, until they insisted on the gender role. Then was \$he who felt off. Incomplete. It was \$he who always broke things off in the end, like a bull in a china shop, by \$er nature, or what rather seemed to be \$er inherent brokenness.

I'm not enough for her. Even if I tried. Which would still fail. It always comes back to this.

Would I be happy really?

Why would it be any different here?

The only possible way out was the path \$he had not tried, was with a woman so amazing. Such a love that would override whatever was broken in \$er. A woman who being with \$er, so amazing that \$he would have no need or space for this quest of feminine in \$erself.

I could let this all go and just revel in her.

But even as Mali imagined this possible outcome, \$he felt an anxiety build in \$er thinking of being with Cat 'as a man'.

Because that is what I'd be, right?

But Cat is on another level, right?

Maybe it would be different. Like today.

It was true, Cat was the complete package. In the time \$he'd known \$er, there was nothing that made \$er feel there could be anyone else more amazing than \$er. Beautiful, smart, a companion capable of never-ending conversation and intimacy, fun, and a woman who owned her life, independent and self-sufficient. \$he still had a bit of trouble believing that Cat saw what whole rest of the world missed seeing in \$er. Because Mali knew inside \$er depth and how amazing \$he was, despite \$er conflicted exterior. But for Cat to see this and want to be even just \$er friend, was against all odds.

And much less, more than that.

Could be.

Maybe.

Just maybe.

Maybe \$he and Cat could be a match sexually. \$he was conscious that \$he was thinking sexually, not romantically. Because the fact was, \$he had no question they were a romantic match.

There something off with \$er as a man. A hint that \$he was gay? Because being penetrated - as a man - wanting something phallic inside, a penis, made \$er gay? No, that wasn't it.

That does not make someone gay. Duh!

Too... \$he didn't have any attraction to any man attached to such a penis. And that's where phallic transgender women came in.

But then...

I don't want to be a man with them.

\$he did not feel like a man there either.

And... that's how \$he'd gotten here. Right here. In this place, in these clothes, walking in these shoes.

Paradoxically it was this ultra-soft, gentle woman who was \$er last hope. Cat. None of \$er girlfriends to date had been gentle enough. Even after asking for what \$he needed. \$he hated the feeling of being groped. Of the expectation of 'fucking' the woman, it felt like being an object, a machine, to 'perform'. \$he wanted to melt and bond. That's where \$er sexuality - the one that felt good in - came from. The one that made \$er cry when \$he came. If \$he could feel this, \$he could penetrate, but only in the most gentle and soft way. The second the connection weakened or broke, it was over.

So maybe Cat?

But would \$he no longer need to be penetrated? Because to express this deep part of \$er sexuality, \$he couldn't be a man.

It isn't possible.

I'm not a man.

Not there...

And this had been the deal-breaker in the past. And even so, Cat did not feel particularly dominant to \$er.

\$he tried to imagine this but failed. \$he would not have Cat taking \$er that way, as a man. Even if Cat was totally into it.

Repulsive.

But can I ever really present as a woman?

To the point where a woman who wants a woman is attracted to me?

That Cat would see me as a woman, really.

Because that was where it always ended. \$he turned on the camera of \$er phone and looked at \$er face. The male-ish face looking back at \$er made \$er bristle.

No chance.

Would I stop waxing?

Could I?

Mali historically always returned to waxing even after trying to stop for some months. Of course making things worse because the first time back would always be summarily more painful than if she'd just maintained it.__

Will I stop taking the pills to keep my hair from balding?

Stop estrogen and see my skin get less soft? And my body-fat distribute as a man's does?

Will Cat quit work like my ex and expect 'him' to provide?

\$he winced. It was a disgusting thought, albeit totally illogical, given what \$he now knew about Cat.

So regardless of the goodness of the day, Mali's heart sunk.

There was no way out.

No happy ending however I slice it.

Be a man. Or be myself. Be with Cat or be me.

I guess...

In the accompanying depression, Mali's conscious processing petered out and sleepy trance settled in as \$he relaxed in the seat, snuggled in \$er down jacket as protection from the infamous frigid A/C of this particular bus line, staring out the window at the passing scenery.

There was nothing else \$he could do or think. Everything was shit, even at the end of one of the best days of her life.

The late afternoon sunset did its part in the lull, the comfort of that time of day was always so big to \$er. The sunrise was always freshness, but this time of day was romantic time. Of being a bit tired and sleepy even, and a time when it was easy to feel things.

And who I long for.

And how it would feel to be... in her arms... to surrender...

\$he had met with this feeling again and again in the past but missed the lesson in it, just like today. The depression required \$er to first feel who - and what - \$he really was. The point of hopelessness in the 'real world' was only the conduit.

Cat.

The place of making a choice.

Going to hell.

Now with the promise of the unlikely but real Cat, lifting \$er out of that chasm.

My lifeline.

Mali suddenly jolted.

I have to decide who I am.

Now.

So that the lifeline would not be cut by mistake.

Not again.

\$he knew how rare meeting Cat was. The chance of such a connection happening again was...

Minimal on my trajectory.

Cat was beyond all women. If there was 'perfect', it was her.

It was as if \$er real life experience with Cat had now wedged itself into the fantastic dream originated by \$er three year old self - that also now seemed to be unfolding.

And making its demands.

Without thinking, \$he brought \$er hand to \$er heart, feeling gently into the flesh as he would comfort a child,

"I love you. Whoever you are. I'm sorry for ignoring you and worse. I'm sorry for causing you so much pain. I need to know what you really want. I'll let go of Cat.. I'll let go of anything. Just tell me."

\$he cried and \$er body shook, silent tears streamed feely down \$er face, pooling at \$er neck, wetting the down fabric as \$he stared out the now darkening dusk sky.

\$he was glad for the darkness around and in the bus.

Katoey farang nobody.

With the fairytale-like appearance and magic of the Thai countryside passing by, \$he had no answers and was lost.

Alone, in a strange foreign land.

And in an equally remote place with \$erself inside.

Surprise

The absence of expectations results in the reduction of disappointments.

— Buddhist saying

Cat's jaw dropped slightly but perceptibly as Mali entered the clinic unannounced. A moment of vulnerability ensued before she could marshal her poise again. Mali looked different, a bit ragged. Tired, eyes a bit puffy. But as the unexpected feelings floating through her, such perceptions were more in the background.

Mali asked, not saying much, for a different treatment. Not the laser to remove facial hair like usual. Which now was not lost on Cat in combination with Mali's stubbled appearance.

What was up?

To Mali this was not the Cat handing \$er grapes in the gazebo. Professional Cat. Polite as ever but almost cool.

All was the same over the span of the appointment, the courtesy, the tea, just like the first time there before they had gotten to know each other.

HE went in for HIS treatment and then came out.

Projecting HIMSELF into the painful male role.

If HE wanted THIS, it was up to HIM.

HE hadn't called Cat. HE hadn't done HIS part. Regardless that Cat had not called, Skyped or anything in the interim was beside the point: It was up to HIM to have reached out. It felt as bad as ever, but anyhow, there was no time to delve in. So it was clear. THIS was the fucking game. The one HE tried to play. The one \$HE despised.

Post treatment, Mali sat on the waiting room couch quiet, nursing the second offered cup of green tea.

"So am I taking you to dinner?", Cat questioned, on a limb, she knew, but to keep face, a little more harshly than Mali had ever heard come from her lips.

Still Mali smiled inside. She cared. Still didn't know why but she did.

"I'd love to go to dinner, but you don't have to take me! I don't have to take you either, we can just go and have fun, agreed?"

Cat felt embarrassed.

This was one of the more self-empowering things ever to escape Mali's lips in HIS dating life. Cat rarely lost her composure, this really was an unintended reaction from the incessant probing and teasing of Kwan as of late. Not to mention her own apparent paralysis in the situation.

"I agree. I have to be here until 5:30, can we go after that?" Cat said with a calm but a smile hinting at apology and amused embarrassment.

"Sure, I have a little shopping to do - across the street. I'll come back then."

Not wanting to prolong the stay there should anything make Cat need to change her mind, HE left his tea and exited.

Cat's demeanor meant something - feelings, that was obvious. Which was so much more than the outcome HE'd prepared for, indifference. So it was confirmed mutual. Tonight was going to be an interesting one, that HE felt deep inside though not having idea what direction.

So regardless of the fact that neither had communicated to the other in now over three weeks, since that amazing day in Chiang Mai, whatever had been so easy and strong between them - was still there. That was a relief. The last two days since deciding to come to Bangkok and come by to see Cat had been torture to not reach out to her.

Mali felt finally good again in \$er heart. \$he smiled and took a breath as \$he went on \$er way.

Oh, in HIS heart I meant to say.

Suan Benjasiri

Its name was Suan Benjasiri. One stop on the Skytrain from Cat's clinic. Suan meant 'park' in Thai, the formal word being something like 'suansaturna'. It was an easy word for Mali to remember and so perfect, conjuring an image of swans and Saturn, like a big orb with swans going all around it. A perfect word for the most treasured of places in \$er day to day life.

'Suan' to Mali also sounded a bit like 'suay' which meant beautiful in Thai. And today as always, Cat was 'suay mak mak', very very beautiful. It did feel weird to think this 'as a man'. It felt like it put an artificial distance between them. Even a little creepy.

As they sat on the bench by the lake, Cat put her fingers on the stubble Mali had let grow, feigning to pull at it, with a curious and playful smile.

"What *is* this??"

Mali had let go upon returning home after that visit with Cat. It was not a conscious decision. It was strange but like times in the past when \$he'd had been taunted or even mildly threatened because of \$er appearance. It was a pattern \$he had started to see - that within a week \$he'd have an urge to call off the dressing, makeup and be a guy again. But the change if she'd be conscious of it, was not from fear of it recurring as it was more out of despair of her impossible situation.

In this case too, \$he had missed the trigger which would have been to own the despair in Cat's disappearance. And all the confusion between the two exacerbated by that virtually perfect day together.

But in absence of this awareness, the prescription on this twilight level was to become who \$he 'needed to be' for Cat... for the world, *for survival*.

A man.

All \$he had really felt in this few week interim was more of frustration and anger. And to \$er that was 'guy mode'. Those were the 'guy' emotions \$he knew, the only ones \$he knew as a man.

Hence the stubble and eating a bit more, which counter-intuitively actually made \$er body feel more feminine and look sexier in the mirror, because doing so also increased \$er energy and drive for exercise and romance, libido too.

The jeans and button-down shirt HE wore today could be 'either' but with such a slender and graceful physique, more female than male. The gay guys were all over it checking HIM out today. Regardless of how insecure \$he was in \$er femininity, HE was completely lost in terms of masculinity, even more now, back in the big city with all eyes on HIM it felt. HE didn't even know how to move when HE walked.

HE hated the male attention. Every possible wrong signal.

Mali finally answered, "I don't know. I just let it be."

God did this feel wrong. HE felt miles away from the woman sitting next to HIM.

"But all the laser?"

Something in Cat made her question what was going on. It was just a stubble, but they had talked too much, shared too much. She knew too much about Mali to believe it wasn't deeper.

What had happened in these three weeks?

Mali shrugged. There was really no good answer anymore. Or that \$he was willing to speak.

Just let me be.

\$he wanted to cry, this all felt so bad.

The truth is the deepest part inside wanted Cat and would do anything for her.

Even this.

Just being with Cat had always felt like coming home, out of the rain.

And if there was one thing Mali wanted - no, needed - in life, it was to come home and out of the rain.

To be together. With HER.

This gender thing was simply a fucked-up thorn in the side of what mattered most.

Being with Cat, out with Cat, in relationship with Cat would validate HIS life. Show the gay onlookers that HE had other business here. And fill \$er heart.

They continued to sit, shaded on their bench not by trees but by the rather massive high rise buildings at the northwest side of the park. To Mali it was one of the most civilized parks in the city. All kinds of people practicing tai chi and qi gong, the exercise crowd, the lawn sprawlers, and then the sitting couples, including them, on the abundant benches.

Usually HE - well, not HE, \$he, would be the additional rogue: the hula hoop dancer. But not today. As a HE, Mali would just be relegated to eating HIS heart out in the expression of other women's femininity. As well when passing the lingerie store.

Just pretend not to look, not to feel, not to care.

Hoop-dancing was one of the doors she had found to open to her deepest feminine. And the only way to the most surrendered dance was to be more of that. Because even to date, there was so much more poise and grace to obtain. There were not a lot of things she knew in life, but in terms of the evolution of her body, the hoop was the teacher. There was one true path.

"I'm sorry I did not call you," Cat broke in to Mali's rumination and the mostly predominant silence that had lingered over them since leaving her clinic.

Part of that silence was her own. She had also been completely blown out by their day together. Not either being able to completely recognize or admit that over the past months that Mali had taken over the void left in her life by the absence of Koon. And what that meant - about her, about her and Mali, the professed katoey, much less, her apparently dead friendship with Koon.

Something hurt somewhere deep inside, but she could not get there.

"No, I realize I just as much should have reached out. You - and your family - showed me such a nice... amazing... time - I barely thanked you."

All of the sudden Mali felt more sad. Fuck it was hard being a guy. In the moment HE realized that HE was supposed to have been the one to take initiative, and how this must look now --- weak.

"I'm sorry," added Mali, "I hope I didn't tarnish the day we had, it was fantastic. In fact more than that. I've just had a lot going on."

"Going on?"

"Well, yeah. I... I don't know how much to say," then making an about turn, "It was just such a busy few weeks. I have been sorting out a lot of things, work, what I am doing here, all that."

"Why?"

I'm not buying this, Mali.

"Because, it feels like I am on borrowed time. Well, life is borrowed time, you know?" HE said, tears forming in her eyes, "All we have is what is now and I just, well, I want to know I'm not making horrible mistakes."

If there was one thing, however much Mali intended a poker face, she loved intimacy and disclosure too much to withhold with someone she was connecting with in the present.

"How could someone like you make a horrible mistake? I have hard time believing it."

Mali smiled, loving Cat's English with only slight and far in between errors that showed only the careful listener that she wasn't a native speaker.

"It's just hard when I'm not working and don't have income. I feel bad about myself. My self-esteem. Even if I don't need it immediately, still."

"Work?"

Cat's bullshit detector was redlining. But if it was true what Mali was saying, then it saddened her.

"Well, what I've done in the past and want to do in the future. They are not the same and I've been sitting on this fence for gosh, now, maybe seven years. Its too much!"

Part truth, the easy part.

The couple stared at the water and the floating and maneuvering ducks and swans. None of this was right, Mali admitted to HIMSELF. \$he had a lump in HIS throat. HE felt like a fraud, a lie. A black hole. The same black hole that would be in HIS relationship with Cat or any future relationship if HE ignored who \$he had become the last few years. Too many things, tremendous growth, and most of it feminine in nature.

The grace of the swans and the peace of the early evening tugged at the smokescreen. The company of this dear special soul with HIM. How could \$he waste these moments, should they never come again?

Cat also felt heaviness but did not know how to maneuver it. Something was off. Had to be broken. No matter what illusion or bubble was around them, the same bubble that probably held both of them in limbo from eachother the last few weeks.

Even though she wished the relationship between them would not change, for Mali to really be the Mali she thought she knew - the artistic, sweet, soft rockstar. Like he seemed to be trying to do...

Was it for me? All this?

But it had to give. The energy wasn't right.

She also knew deep inside that *this* Mali would never have even made it to their first outing together. Because *that* Mali was different. *That* was the Mali she felt free with, not *this one*.

How could it be?

This Mali was all she'd ever wanted on paper. But in the end not.

After a few more minutes of staring, appreciating and deliberating, Cat spoke in a soft, breathy, huskier tone.

"Mali, look at me."

It was the most feminine and commanding. Irresistible to *that part* deep inside HE was veiling to the world tonight.

Cats head was turned toward him and he slowly let the rigidity in HIS neck and chest allow it to turn.

"Look at me," she repeated as if anything but full contact was not enough.

And \$he did.

"Maybe the problem is another fence you're sitting on," Cat looked intently and directly into Mali's eyes, "Can I speak frankly?"

Mali caught off-guard nodded, cuddling the lump in HIS throat, afraid to speak. HE felt about to be devoured by a tiger.

"Mali, you don't have to be anything you're not with me, okay?"

Mali nodded but averting HIS eyes.

"Mali, look at me, okay?"

Mali shook HIS head, "I can't Cat. You'll hate me if I tell you everything."

Cat sighed and let out a long breath.

"Mali, this is not who you are. What's the point of this? We both know this feels horrible right now. And we both know too that we've never been like this before together," pausing, "And from my perspective, there's only one difference."

"Okay." Mali waited for more.

Cat sat and waited too. She knew to.

"Okay," Mali swallowed.

Time to come to Jesus.

"I just... after our day together. I felt sad you were not still with me. Something in me wants... I feel like you are like bathed in light. I just wanted to be closer to you," the tears coming to \$er eyes, "Out of this darkness, the cloud I live under day to day..."

Cat arched her eyebrows.

Mali felt a surge of anger, "I just try so hard and never get there... You want a man. I was trying. Shit, it's so embarrassing to say this."

What kind of shell of a person am I? Ditching the true me by the side of the road in order to love and be loved?

Mali lost it and tears flowed. Sobs. All this longing. For and within. Seemingly at odds. The wound HE'd been trying to heal over broke open once again. A loosening of all that armor \$he did not even realize had been re-accumulating around \$er heart and neck over the last few weeks.

It didn't matter, \$he couldn't deceive Cat. There was no point.

\$he let go and looked at Cat, her poised yet strongly loving presence. Cat had turned toward \$er and had her arm up on the top of the bench, even in this moment not lost on Mali her slender figure with gentle curves, this most beautiful face, full cheeks and eyes that were now looking directly back, also clearly tearing up as well.

\$he was back where \$he was a few weeks before. But more solidly. Just like every time \$he's tried to be a guy.

It always ends with tears and 'coming to Jesus'.

At that moment a sheet of rain fell.

Not surprising either as they both realized they had felt but ignored the cooling and a gentle but persistent breeze since the time they had sat down.

It down-poured with no foreplay at all, like someone had overturned a bucket.

They quickly broke from the bench.

The gazebo!

Cat was ahead of \$er and gestured for Mali to follow, "Come on!"

There was no chance of not being drenched, only the hope of not being so continuously!

Once safely under the structure which jutted out a little bit into the lake, leaning back against a railing, Mali who had now lost all inhibition, feeling everything, surrendered to the sadness, crying.

\$he couldn't speak at all but gestured for Cat to come to \$er.

Cat came over and Mali looked at her directly, into that poised, and now wet beautiful face with running mascara. As beautiful wet and disheveled as in her finest, \$he thought. \$he latched on to Cat's lower arms near the elbows as she came close, and somehow as if she knew to complete the circuit, let \$er hands fall to Cats. Looking into Cats eyes, continuing to cry, Mali fought for the words...

"Cat, all I have ever wanted is this. Fuck," inside Mali all the pain and torture of a life feeling taunted by this burning ember of desire for such closeness and always seemingly elusive. As was now. It was just unacceptable.

Cat cocked her head to the side in question. Mali continued but cryptically, "I am not a man. I hate being a man. To be myself is to not be a man. But to have this with you... I am supposed to be a man."

"Cat this is my fucking life!" the tears and the coordinating muscles in full flow, "Its cuts both ways but both ways are inside myself. I can be me or I can be with 'her'. And each way cuts into a different side of my heart. I can't win here. In this place. Goddammit. I can't!" then from the depth \$he felt a rage, a rage like being taunted by god. Put in an impossible double-bind.

"Fuck God!" Mali yelled. Not for the first time in \$er life and for the same reason \$he yelled it the first time when not even understanding the problem, years ago, in bed with \$er last ex.

Although it would have been above many, Cat caught the message. And she also knew this was no time to prolong a conversation. So also did what was her instinct but certainly not what her culture and training would say is acceptable. She came closer and embraced Mali with all her heart. Hoping, in some way inside, she could flood away this pain he - she - was buried in. This confusion. It did not make sense to her completely but the spirit of Mali's words did. She held and let Mali hold her back and continue until complete. Which Mali did.

Strangely, a feeling - no, an image - of a smiling Koona swept across her like one of those fluffy white clouds at the pool, that fateful last moment after all those years as friends, all gone. She felt like crying now too.

Maybe it was contagious.

In a few minutes of holding in silence, things soon quieted down in both of them and the rain.

"Mali, can I take you somewhere?"

Mali loosened \$er grip and getting Cat's eyes back into visibility, all \$he could do was nod.

\$he didn't even care to ask where. As it really didn't matter if it meant being together. \$er heart warmed that Cat wanted still to be with \$er after this insanity. Still with anxiety of jeopardy as never had anything like this ever happened to \$er or turned out happily.

They were both still dripping. Although neither could be sure what was rain and what were tears anymore.

"Do you mind walking? Even a lot? Maybe thirty minutes?"

"I love to walk," Mali smirked, the only expression possible moving between tears and smile.

Nodding, Cat began to impulse them to movement out of the embrace and on the way.

Out of the park, onto the street.

Down a block and a turn.

Are We There Yet?

Looking down at the puddles they were walking through, both with reasonably nice shoes, clothes that were virtually plastered to their slender frames, Mali smiled.

\$he felt like a child playing in the rain and being led away by \$er care giver, with tears and red eyes from a tantrum. What the tantrum was about? It was about a purple lollipop, she decided. Remembering an actual time they had run out of the purple ones at the doctors.

\$he smiled an internal laughter and grin sprouting from inside out.

A sweet surrender to the elements. Letting go and just being in how \$he felt and in the weather. With Cat leading the way. Lighter than in ages.

It felt like before with Cat, back to the day in Chiang Mai. Funny how going back to even just ambiguity felt so good.

They walked. And walked. Blocks, puddles, dodging mopeds whose second road was the sidewalk and even more so in rush hour rain. Which on many days was simply annoying if not frightening. But today seemed rather hilarious and special in its lawlessness. That was the best way Mali could understand \$er feeling of being more alive in the 'third world' than \$er own country. It reminded \$er of the true fragility of life and the depth of feeling that seemed to have been paved over in the USA.

After a while and growing listless, in the child spirit which had overcome \$er, spotting a big puddle Mali's eyes widened and as they passed to it, and with all \$er weight \$he jumped into it, soaking Cat, in vein of course.

With her hands up in avoidance and a little scream, Cat succumbed to a laugh, shaking her head.

"No you don't."

She grabbed into her open bag and pulled out a small bottle of some sort of red soda. It didn't take more than an instant for Mali to realize what was going to happen next.

"Noooooooo!" \$he cringed, as the liquid met \$er skin, smelling cherry, knowing how sticky this would be, but Cat was relentless until the bottle was empty, hair, back, front, down \$er shirt for good measure, and tears were now flowing along with the mascara lines, down Cat's laughing face.

People were passing, looking, questioning. A slender farang and a Thai woman, acting strange. As if it was Songkran (the Thai water festival). But it wasn't. One by one, they entered Memory Erase mode and went on, never to recall the scene again.

Mali in \$er own laughter, shaking \$er head looked at Cat from the corner of \$er eyes, "Cat, I don't even care anymore how you take this," \$he paused to emphasize, "I love you. If it were up to me..." She said so lucidly and coherently it switched from the child-play context to something equally special but honest in depth, catching Cat off-guard.

That moment everything stopped. Cat's mouth and jaw dropped. \$he started getting it, the one and only way Cat could lose her perfect poise was whenever it hit close to home.

Mali stopped. No further words, shrugged and smiled as if in apology for the shock but not the content.

As Cat recovered her composure, which she noted seemed to be regularly necessary when Mali was around. She reached to Mali and pulled \$er on with her right arm.

"I think we better get you somewhere where you can dry off. I think you've become delirious."

The dismissal would have been a hard hit, especially from the fall from the clouds they were riding, except for the sideways look and wink smile Cat delivered with the message.

Magic.

Cat could feel something pushing up and above the surface of consciousness, almost through her.

Who was this Mali?

Am I right about Mali?

Really katoey?

Female inside?

What does it mean if I like it... enjoying getting close?

Right then surfaced the moment of that almost kiss at the pool with Koona. Unconsciously her smile and feeling of aliveness broadened. Something let go in her pelvis deep down that she had never felt before it seemed. It was freeing.

"Are we there yet?"

They had been walking for over twenty minutes and Mali had slipped back to fun-child mode. The warm humidity had started to take over again in the wake of the rain, making the feeling of \$er wet clothes, hair and skin to be like a sticky paste.

"Right around the corner," Cat smiled no-nonsense playing the parent par-excellence.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," shaking her head in good humor like a parent being tested.

They turned left and went half a block. They were now in front of a tall pristine white condominium tower which looked like marble. 'Klong Toei Tower' was the sign.

"What's this?" Mali questioned.

"Home."

"Are you serious???"

It was a disbelief that really shouldn't have been by now. It was one of *those* skyscrapers. The one's she always saw and wondered about but from a distance. These buildings had a lot to do with the big city elite feeling of Bangkok. And she'd never been inside one.

Yet another chapter in the unbelievable life of Cat.

"Yeah. Come on!" hurried Cat as she swiped her keycard. As they entered an open elevator waited.

She punched floor 44. At the top they exited and turned left. 4400. Somehow the even numbered '0' unit made it so much more elegant than say, 4401. The thought passed through Mali's ever active mind.

Cat opened the door and immediately discarded her shoes as Mali did the same. Not only a Thai custom to not wear shoes in the house - which was something Mali had been doing on her own for years - but tonight it was just common sense. Rain, city mud, muck, motorcycle grease, red soda...

"Let me see," Cat pondered and seemed to come to a conclusion.

"I have two bathrooms. Assuming you don't need a bathtub, why don't you take the one here to the right," she motioned down a little niche-like hall to the right after the entry, "I'll use mine. I'll bring you some clothes, okay?"

"Perfect!" was all Mali could say. She could see beyond the foyer what looked like a treat. Being overwhelmed in new experiences and sensations once again with Cat, her life shifted once again to a new version of surreal. Complete feast or complete famine and virtually no middle ground.

They parted and Mali entered the all white bathroom and began to draw a shower.

After a lot of warm water savoring, and liberal amounts of cherry soap and jasmine-coconut shampoo that looked and smelled good enough to eat, Mali exited the shower and wrapped a towel. Playing with her hair, there was a light knock at the door "Are you decent?"

"It depends what you mean. But if you mean wrapped in a towel, yes!" her words sending play and smile. It was funny how she'd lost self-consciousness of her voice, and at the same time her true voice came more easily, feeling and sounding so much more authentic to her.

Cat entered with a perfectly folded item which she held and fanned, "It's one of my night shirts, if nothing else it should fit and be comfortable," and then with a wink, she produced some cute boyshort panties, "and these, a bit too big for me but I bet fit you perfectly."

Mali smiled and nodded. The cotton of the shirt felt heavenly soft as Cat passed it to her. It seemed too to mean Cat was holding the door open to keeping her there for a bit.

"Oh," and as if from nowhere two additional items appeared, "Here's a razor and cream."

Mali broke into laughter, she had forgotten about the stubble.

The items proffered spoke volumes.

"Okay okay. I know. Geesh!"

She'd be happy to be rid of it, forever. A spark of warmth permeated through her body, now clean and starting to feel once again normal. The feeling of the soft, plush white carpet under her feet was electric, she rubbed them back and forth feeling the warm friction. She had not done this since her teenage years, and probably never had felt so warm, comfortable and protected since childhood. She pinched herself but it didn't hurt at all, she felt too good!

Mali caressed the white panties which were just as soft as the shirt. She could feel energy build between her legs. They would feel good, and she slipped them on, tucked herself under, they fit hotly, from front and especially back as they perfectly emphasized her minimal but firm behind.

She looked in the mirror, grabbed the comb and ran it through her hair. She looked cute. It worked. Taking advantage of the moisturizer on the counter she had noticed earlier, she coated her face.

"Are you coming?" Cat whined from across the apartment, "You're slower than a wom... geez, oh, okay," she corrected herself. Mali shook her head smiling.

Ready, she opened her door and made her way.

Broken Rules

The main area of Cat's apartment was bordered with windows. The combined kitchen-dining-living room looked out on the Sukumvit area of Bangkok and in the distance the park they'd been at. Sparkling evening lights, the inching along of cars on roads and bypasses in the distance, punctuated by those in sibling buildings near and far. Drops of light rain spattered on and off against the outside glass making all out there seem like a snow globe -- Thailand version.

Cat was in the open kitchen at the far left side of the expansive room. Apparently a corner unit. At the far end of the kitchen was a bar-counter all lined with windows on the far wall. Another counter, the main cooking one, closer to her creating a divider to what could have been a living and dining room but purposed only as living space with a whole bunch of plush white pillows strewn around.

Mali stood in awe. It was the full package and then some. The place, and then Cat, in a white camisole and black leggings, hair pinned up stood at the counter island washing something in the sink. Mali shook her head just observing, Cat not registering her presence emerging from the hall at the other end of the room.

The perfect woman.

Whatever had been surreal already was not ending. She pinched herself again and she knew she was doing it... but it didn't hurt at all. It was like being with Cat soothed and strengthened her.

It was not like such surroundings were totally out of her league.

She had lived - as 'he' - for several years in an apartment in San Diego several stories up and up a hill, overlooking the Pacific Beach ocean. Falling asleep to the sound of waves and the treasure of the cool tinge of the ocean breeze in the late afternoon and evening were familiar and everyday occurrences. Long walks after work to decompress on the beach. Even learning to surf. It was not that she was not accustomed to good things.

But since leaving 'grace' in San Diego, following after *this* inside 'her', not so much. Such occasions since then were more based on perhaps a company location in a high rise in NYC or being invited to the penthouse of acquaintances of friends.

But since imploding - self described words - 'his' life there, it had been on and off. She made less money overall but more per hour. She could have made more. But that wasn't important to her. But the rules were changed, and it was not about that anymore. Things that seemed to matter before - like building a career and a life, even having a home, a space in her life for a woman to enter, no longer had the thrill and hold on her.

What was the point?

Partly from disappointment in the relationships 'he' had had, but also that she couldn't stop on this feminine path.

Something in her longed for the security and comfort again that she had had. Being beloved by her employer, working hard - sometimes to exhaustion - but for something. The last years too had been hard work, but for no one but herself.

A code mercenary.

With the purpose just to figure herself out, continue the path and carry on.

"Do you know how many rules I've broken for you today?", Cat broke Mali out of her trip down memory lane Cat's space had inspired.

"Uh... shall I imagine and count?", Mali smiled, "But do friends break rules for friends? I thought that was a dating thing..."

Busted.

"Well, let's just say on external appearances. If you were a guy and I a girl. Or if you being a girl. Same difference."

Or is it Cat... really?

"If we were into each other."

Their eyes locked for a long moment.

"Keep going, so you were going to count?" Cat saved herself.

"You do it. They're your rules!"

"I am not sure even I can count. Lets see..."

"Being snippy in the clinic," she thought about it, "no, that's not really a rule, only being a bitch... I'm usually anti-bitch, you know..."

"Ah, but, being a pest in the park to you to get you to wake up,"

"Holding arms and embracing in the park. You know decent Thai people don't do that?!"

"Leading you like a child," Cat laughed, "again, arm in arm,"

"Pouring soda down my shirt!" Mali exclaimed.

Cat smiled widely in response, "bringing you home."

"Sharing my clothes, hinting to loose the stubble. Intimate clothes! Well..."

Cat chuckled finding irony, "hardly a man other than family has crossed the threshold of this apartment!"

The last sentence stung Mali for a minute but she let it go.

"I don't know what to say except that, I'm honored. Not only that, I can't tell you how magic this afternoon has been... I promise you I will never forget it. Like when you took me with your family to The Restaurant. Maybe that helps assuage your outlandish actions?"

Mali smiled using Cat's own wink-smile.

"So do you like prawns?" Cat had turned, fumbling with the silver doored refrigerator.

"You know, I don't eat seafood really but fish. But you know also, in honor of Cat, I will eat anything you cook tonight with gratitude and I am sure it will be delicious."

"Okay, so I will surprise you, huh?"

"Yeah. Gosh. Whats happening to me. I am not a person who easily accepts surprise dishes!"

"Breaking rules, huh? Mali turning over a new leaf, in Thailand? Sudh can never be such a bad thing!"

"That's a dangerous statement," at which both laughed. Knowing what goes on on any given night in Bangkok.

A sizzle and spray of steam rose from behind the counter and Mali just let Cat do her thing.

"If you want any help just let me know."

"Do you cook?"

"Yeah, I told you about my rice cooker?"

Mali traveled with a rice cooker and made most of her meals from oatmeal to rice noodle soup in it. She loved it, but it did feel like slumming compared to the current environment.

"But most of what I make is simple - vegetables, rice, noodles, some beef, fish, eggs. That kind of thing. My body is rather sensitive."

"I can tell," smirked Cat with her wink.

Do you like wine?

"A little. Red mostly. Sweeter the better. So you can tell my poor taste."

"So port before dinner it is," laughed Cat, "nice."

"You have no idea. My favorite wine is the Jewish celebration wine. Its sweeter than grape juice, rather viscous and it doesn't taste like alcohol. And pretty cheap."

"Well, the sweeter it is the more intoxicating."

Mali's eyes met hers, "Is that so?"

"So you are not worldly. But you are here in Thailand, half a world away from home. Out on a limb with yourself — am I taking too much liberty describing you?"

"No'm, that's pretty much it," Mali smirked, "the thing is I think in ways I am more like a monk in a temple than most people. I spend so much time alone, I love being up before dawn, practicing my qi gong and stuff. I love the early morning and the sunset, simple foods, long walks, being out in nature, in the forest. I mean, to me that's really what makes me happy."

She added, "But sometimes - often - I feel like I'm not living. Like I'm practicing to live but not actually doing so. And then this whole as you say 'out on a limb' thing. Hard to have someone."

Mali's outburst at the park was still at the forefront of Cat's mind. So touching and honest. Somehow it resonated with how she felt too. Maybe everyone felt that way. But she did. For sure.

"Such a dreamer. But I love it. So tell me about that special someone."

"Cute, playful and fun. Loves the outdoors. Unpretentious, down to earth. But you know... I can make lists but in the end when you meet someone, it all kind of goes out the window, don't you think?"

Cat nodded, monitoring the stir-fry in the wok.

"Sometimes for the better, really." Cat smiled softly.

Now that things had really broken open, she had to know more.

"Have you started hormones or thought about it? Just, I have friends and well, most have liked men forever, and some that didn't, started to."

"Yeah, I've been experimenting with them but low doses. I don't have a doctor so am being very careful. I don't want to look like a man with breasts. That just does not work for me. But my body loves the estrogen and seems to also love having less testosterone in me."

"Has it changed who and what you want?"

"I feel better in myself with the hormones. But out there it takes someone very special to catch my attention. Few and far between. It's always been like that," Mali feeling emboldened locked \$er eyes on Cat. \$he hated being or feeling like a dominant 'he' in such a conversation. The instigator, aggressor or the one with an agenda. So \$he decided not to.

"You know I was wondering, sorry for all the probing questions, but do you think you're too thin? Maybe that's affecting things?"

Mali's heart missed a beat at the mention of the elephant that had been in \$er own room for some time. \$he feared this, especially if \$he was to go for the major surgery. Just that something inside was sending a warning message, a little red blip on the dashboard that \$he just ignored because there was too much else surrounding \$er life situation, not to mention that little 'other problem'.

Even with the increased diet as of late for 'guy mode', still very thin.

But \$he would not have a belly or a more masculine appearing body and that is what more food seemed to do for \$er.

"To be honest - and I have not trusted anyone, or really had anyone to say this to - but yeah. But I don't want to look male," Mali shook \$er head, "Have a belly and still no butt! I mean, I feel overall good and have a decent diet. But yeah, its like something is off but I can't get at it. Not in any convincing way."

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure"

"Maybe if you embrace more fully who you really are, you get on hormones fully, maybe have a surgery to soften your face. It could would work out a lot of these little problems. Too, you might know your true sexuality and romantic preference."

Mali loved that Cat called them 'little problems'. Certainly reframed \$er perspective. \$he didn't like the mention of \$er romantic preferences. They hadn't changed. \$he didn't want them to change. No, not the aesthetic \$he loved women with. But saying anything would have no weight because truly \$he had not been on a full dose of hormones nor for long.

"You might be right. I just have no one here, no doctor I trust."

"Well, it might not be the time yet, but perhaps soon you'll find who you need. In fact... maybe I can help. You know Kwan."

"Kwan." Fuck. This was really close to home for Cat.

"You think you'll get sex change?"

"No. It feels so invasive. I love my body and the sensitivity it has. It would scare me to mess with that, you know, its the nervous system."

"Ka," Cat said dreamily as if in another world all of the sudden, "Yes, oh I am sorry for all the advices, its not my style to be like this, but we've already broken so many social conventions that I feel comfortable, becoming an advising bitch," Cat winked, and then shifted and looked intently back at Mali with a little mist in her eyes.

"In fact Mali, I simply feel comfortable with you. I like you a lot. Its so confusing. But I'm starting to see who you really are. Very special."

Both had their their lower arms and elbows resting on the kitchen island, across from each other. Cat had forgotten about the cooking dinner. Mali had forgotten about hunger. Well, of the hunger for food at least.

The only hunger had always been the same hunger. \$he could not imagine that longing ever changing but \$he had to give credence to what Cat said about hormones. In a split second \$he saw a path - a probable path - where this would go with Cat.

Down the road that is screwed.

I'm so in-between and shouldn't have been by now. Damn it!

Without \$er katoey existence or questioning, this whole thing would probably be something real, with Cat.

Cuts both ways. Torn in two. Not a new feeling. Not a pleasant one either. Not a tolerable one.

But then again, without this journey, \$he'd never have come to Thailand.

Or even be here with Cat.

Suddenly they both caught eye of the cloud of smoke and a flame rising from the wok.

Only You Are Confused

"No!" Cat screamed fanning her hand over the flaming shrimp stir fry. She laughed looking down at the smoking mass as it abated, "how about we order something?!"

She pulled some menus from somewhere, and placed the disaster in the sink to cool off.

"Here, take these, let's sit on the couch and figure out what we want. I'll bring the wine!"

Mali took the menus and made way to the living room area at the other end of the room. The couch started on the side wall and curved around to the wall which ended at the hall entry. The walls backing each side of the couch were normal interior walls, but sitting on the couch in any position one had a comparable panoramic viewn of the city.

\$he sat down with Cat following, taking up a space not far on the other side of the couch curve. Still within reach of intimate conversation but not of physical reach.

Confirming *that path* that Mali had glimpsed a few minutes before.

"What looks good?" she asked.

"I'm stumbling over the duck noodle soup. Can they bring that?"

"This is downtown Bangkok, we can get any kind of food any time of day all days in the year, not to mention what else!"

"Oh, right." Mali smirked.

"Okay, so duck noodle soup for you. How about a second one, just in case? And for me, well I am going to ask for what I failed myself - stir fried shrimp and rice. Good?"

"Wonderful."

"To drink?"

"Anything but red soda."

"Thai tea?"

"Sure! Lets celebrate," Mali didn't drink caffeinated things past mid-afternoon but suspected that regardless, sleep would not come easily that night wherever she ended up laying her head which at the moment seemed increasingly uncertain.

Small talk ensued after Cats call in for the food. It would be thirty minutes.

It was not long before an atmosphere of sleepiness overcame them. From a full day of work for Cat and travel for Mali, the park adventure in all its facets and coming here, it was a lot. There was something about getting soaked in the rain and now warm and dry. It made for feeling cozy and protected. But it also felt to Mali like maybe the magic of the afternoon was ending as Cat seemed to also be in her own world.

Mali's heavy eyes were sandy when the bell rang. Cat seemed more composed and sprung into action. Mali was shooed away while toddling to the door after her like a zombie with money in hand to offer.

"Come on, I'm starving!", Cat exclaimed, bringing the food in.

Now a bit more refreshed, Mali, walking to the table saw herself reflected in the window. She felt good in that nightshirt and it did something for her, accenting her wider than male hips or was it her slender waist? She nodded. It was not unlike a dress really, the way it held to her figure.

This might need some further exploration.

She had held dresses as off limits. She'd not really thought about it, but they felt outside of her tolerance for ridicule. With her face the way it was. A man in a dress. That was the stereotypical image painted by her culture for her. Transgender, crossdresser, 'tranny', the haters didn't give a shit. In Thailand it was different, but then again, Thai males more often than not tended to have very pretty faces. And the 'faring katoey' plus laughter thing was already enough for her.

So wearing a dress felt similar to the problem of being a man with breasts. Or letting a girlfriend have anal sex with 'him'. Just not really acceptable. She'd rather be a cute guy in andro clothes than to look like a dude in a dress if those were the only choices. And at this juncture those were what was available to her.

Just not gay looking.

But the nightshirt worked. And this evening worked.

In the day, she'd pass as female if she'd just cover her head with a paper bag. This conflict, coupled with what felt like a growing intimate estrangement from Cat in the last half hour saddened her.

Settling at the petite glass dining table positioned adjacent to the main window, they were quiet. The conflicted sadness that was building again in Mali, in counterpoint to the jubilation of feeling so free with Cat on the way over made her want to cry.

The world below existed but continued about in silence.

Ravenous, they dug in to the meal and were quiet aside from random slurps, a series of 'mmmmmm so good's!', and shared full mouthed smiles on both sides. The food and non-verbal communication revitalized Mali.

Finally beginning to feel satiated, Cat spoke.

"So you've always liked girls, yeah?," Cat made out between bites of bok choy as if it was something mundane.

God, is this like a roller coaster??!

Mali's hope returned like a hopeful puppy dog, strengthened by the fact that Cat had chosen to continue the topic.

"Yeah. That and transgender women. I mean, my life would be so much easier if I liked guys but I don't. I mean, they're gross! Not that I didn't try a couple times, it did nothing for me, if not repulsive."

Cat unlike many had already traversed the fact that a katoey could like women, not only men, in spite of the general choruses of 'Thai ladyboy only like Thai man'. Only because she had worked through it with Kwan — the epiphany being that Kwan identified as a 'kind of Tom' but the more pretty version, and still a woman. Because Tom's who were genetic women - in trans-speak almost seemed - like female-to-male transgender men, in appearance and etiquette.

It was a mouthful to say the least, and as well for her to get her head around but she had.

"I've never been with another girl," remarked Cat.

"Would you?"

"I think maybe." It was at that moment that Cat noticed for the first time her own shift. As even a few weeks before she'd never have entertained the possibility.

What does this mean Cat?

What about Koona?

Koona is a woman.

She'd not yet revisited what happened with Koona in this new light.

"Women, girls, for me have never been just a physical thing," started Mali, "In fact maybe this is too much information but since puberty I became aware of having really two different types of orgasm - one like the typical male thrusting, penetrating and kind of strong physically. The other deep inside and often up to my heart, full of the feeling of union and connection. I did not call the second feminine then but it kind of is. It is through the body, all over."

"Did it confuse you?"

Mali smiled ironically, "not until it did..."

"I just assumed that all boys were like me. Just like I assumed that they felt and wanted women in the same way. It took me years, even until recently to realize that I'm different or simply maybe more sensitive."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the sexual part aside, it turns me on and makes me feel so deeply to just be close and connected to someone I'm into. Soft, gentle. I don't need the hard kissing and thrusting shit. It's not my nature to dominate, feels kind of wrong or is hard to hold on to if I try. When a woman gets out of that gentle range with me - if they can get there at all - my energy turns off, sexually, emotionally, I withdraw.", Mali described, "But on the other hand a transsexual woman could take me, penetrate me, even strongly and it would totally turn me on. But in that case I am not really trying to be a man, I am in my female sexuality then. Totally."

She continued on a roll, "I mean, only in recent years I started looking around to see what women actually seemed to want from men, add that to my own proclivities, and so many times women I dated saying behind my back things like 'I like him but he is so passive when he kisses!' It made me start to say 'I don't think this is what I signed up for!'".

"So you like to be passive? But with a female?"

"I guess you could say that. I mean I don't think I truly mind being inside a woman, but not as a man. I think its being forced into such a role that doesn't work. I could totally pin a woman to the wall and fuck her but only if I knew she saw me as a woman... that they'd always seen me as a woman."

Cat burst out laughing but then curbed it in.

"Sorry, I'm just listening to you. I think the only one who is confused about you is you!"

But the depth of Cat's perceptiveness was lost on Mali. Because she was distracted with the desire for Cat to truly understand. And in it all, still truly want her.

And maybe she can solve it once and for all.

Mali had been so blown away by everything with Cat that it didn't phase her to once again consider such a possibility...

Complete healing... of this...

"I mean I dreamed of being with someone - this is how I thought all women would be like - and just gently being inside her, just holding her and feeling that connection. Very slow and gentle. Someone who... when were together... it feels complete. That's the only way I can stay hard anyway - the second there is a disconnection in intimacy or the feeling of having to be in the man's role, it dies. All of it. I want away and to be alone. I don't need the release, it goes away anyway."

"I think I am starting to see," Cat slowly and deliberately drawled. Fact was she already saw.

Mali added, having forgot something important to the big equation, "You know, I have never been with anyone in that way. Its just something that's in my heart, in my being I guess. I guess it's kind of sad. Sometimes I wonder if that's why it feels so strong to me to be female in my expression. I wonder if I am creating the woman who I always searched for, just in myself because I can't find her out in the world. Or because those out in the world..."

... like you want nothing to do with me.

"Thats kind of deep. Do you really think? I mean, wouldn't that be lying to yourself?"

"Yeah, that would be it. That's what I was saying earlier, I am so afraid of making bad decisions."

"Now I see, the fence," said Cat thoughtfully, "So if I was a woman who could be so soft and loving, it might be possible to achieve this?" she paused, "You would not have to be a girl... if your hypothesis is right?"

And with that sentence Mali knew for sure that Cat grasped and had summed up \$er entire obsession and complex.

"Maybe." If it hadn't been for the last several years. Before that it would have been a resounding 'yes'. And if it had been then, she'd never be here in Thailand sitting by the window in a 44th floor condo of a woman who seemed on the surface so far out of \$er league.

"I mean just what you described sounds amazing. In this world so many of us drop believing in such things, such closeness. But we all long for them from birth I think, if we are honest."

"Do you think?"

Cat nodded, her eyes now magnetically fixed on Mali.

"I don't know why I don't give up. I do sometimes. But then a person, a song or something beautiful, a feeling reminds me of what I long for and she's still there. Just the way when the season changes or a way a day is will remind me of the ghost of longing that never departs in one."

But even with the thought of being a man and it working... for some reason sucked the energy from Mali.

To be able to be a man.

... if I was healed...

But if anyone was capable of proving it, Cat was. And that was the poignant thing, on the cusp of the big decisions that were floating in \$er mind and starting to materialize in \$er life, that such a woman, the 'perfect woman' appears.

"Do you feel safe with me, Mali? Do you trust me?"

Mali nodded. Cat's eyes were tearing up.

It felt so good to be asked. Even more so by Cat. In this apartment-cocoon of hers. A place away from all places, of people, interferences, \$he could feel it. It was like there was the possibility of that something could be decided here between their open and willing selves and they would never would have to leave.

Mali returned Cat's magneto-dominant gaze with the opposite polarity. For the first time in \$er life, outside of \$er own imagination.

"Let's go sit in the living room, okay?" Cat got up and held out her hand for Mali's and led \$er back to the living room.

No Promises

Settling down on to the plush and soft white suede couch, Cat pulled Mali down by \$er hand, next to her. She reached for the control and dimmed the lights.

Mali smiled, "If I didn't know better..."

But the whimsical comment was quickly extinguished by the intent force of Cat's hand pulling \$er in. It was the force of...

Beyond friendship.

Unequivocally and for the first time.

"Mali, I don't know... I can't promise you anything," Cat whispered in \$er ear, the heat of her breath searing.

"I mean, you make me ask all kind of questions of myself. Things that don't make sense to me about myself either. You know, the day when you were playing the piano, it came to me that you were... seemed perfect. It just came to my heart, I didn't think it."

She still had Mali's hand pinned under hers, which made what she said next feel like inescapable torture.

"But as a man. You have to know that might still be important to me, I don't know. I've never considered that I could be with a woman or... much less a katoey. It's just not..." she paused.

It was just not even a concept - a katoey and woman couple - in Thai culture. Well, aside from Kwan. Which to date was untested and simply academic.

Cat felt frozen. An image of a snow globe of a man and woman couple she'd received from Netherlands came to mind. What was it that was going on here?

With me?

This picture... of life... my life... how things should be...

How I want them to be...

This picture she held...

While everyone around her who she cared for... Kwanjai, Koona, Mali, they were all... writing themselves out of the fairy-tale image one at a time.

And me???

She couldn't process it. Less now with the longing that had been brewing since the park this afternoon, that intimacy she finally had felt that she'd never had before. So she returned to what she knew.

"If you go on hormones, who knows what happens there? People change a lot when they do that. Kwan did. She liked men before she went on them. And now... nothing to do with them."

Cat was looking directly now at Mali, in logical mode, building a partition, but really less one between her and Mali as one within herself.

"What I am saying, is, I feel something strong with you now, in the present but I don't want to hurt you," her eyes becoming glassy with tears, "You're too special, and I'm too..."

Fucked up.

She couldn't bear to say it. She was Cat, the poised and impeccable Japanese-Thai woman.

"Or we can let this go and try to just be friends."

Mali spoke slowly for once,

"You're right."

On one hand she wanted to hold this woman forever on. But there was so much insecurity still in who she was, or wasn't. It felt so unfair. She blamed herself again, as always, for not knowing by now.

"To be close to you, even for a moment, I'd do anything," Mali started tearing up again.

It was true in her heart.

Because for all intensive purposes her life was meaningless and isolated. She'd jump into the fire and not look back. If she loved Cat in her last moment, and they had this connection, it made everything right. Being together and held like it felt right now, close, in the last moment of life would make everything okay.

Would fix everything.

"I just think I know what you feel — tonight — and really, I'd walk through fire to have it too."

Cat continued, "Do you have any idea how alone I feel in this world I've supposedly created?", she gazed vulnerably into Mali's eyes, as she, still holding Mali forcefully in place came closer, "I mean I'm so free, but still..."

She opened light sobs, close enough Mali could feel the puffs of her breath. It wasn't stupid, helpless crying, it had depth. Everything that Mali said she got. The double-binds, the heartbreak.

I'm no different really.

How different, Cat?

"It's just not enough. Like you said, not enough for my heart. Nothing but the other is enough, I know what you mean. The jaydee thing and people being together for convenience, most of the man-woman thing we see, it's sickening, it's not for me. That's all."

Koona's friendship came to her mind. Irreplaceable. Beautiful, tall, loyal Koona.

The rupture and scar that had healed over it was also sickening.

By my own hand.

That was something she'd have to fix.

But not tonight.

Mali moved as she could closer to Cat, also breaking into tears, her full lips pouting, at the moment they came together.

"Is this what it's like to be with a girl?"

Cat pushed Mali back a bit to look at her grey blue eyes,

"You don't make out, you just cry in each other's arms?"

Mali snorted. The two - and each knew - they had been coming in for a kiss and ended up blubbing for the last several minutes.

Mali smiled. She'd never felt safe enough to really be herself with someone. Even with herself, alone, it was a long fought battle.

"I don't know. Only in my mind... in my dreams have I ever known."

Cat nodded and angled her neck to come in for a contact that gently brushed by Mali's lips.

Where she landed left only millimeters of distance, feeling the soft breath of each other. Mali gazed into dark chocolate eyes as Cat into the blue-gray heights of the sky.

Cat reached up to Mali's arms and pulled her in. It was the most close and together either had ever felt. And so much more poignant in the face of feeling both the warm connectedness of the now and the insecure and unknown future, with the monster of culture lurking somewhere in the background.

Finally brushing lips Cat fell over on her side with Mali landing just in front of her.

It wasn't just Cat. Of course Cat was in front of her, irresistibly beautiful, without makeup and in this seductive casual attire, but it was also how she felt in her own 'dress'. Like what things would have been if she'd been able to hold off the effect of the world and others around over her lifetime. The physical gridlock which gated her more complete self-expression felt held in place by the world. As such this perpetual low level anger and tension. But now, surrender in her inner pelvis was with the same abandon which melted the gridlock and tension in her upper body. Cat's loving presence was freeing her.

They were slow in the time that ensued, like life had moved into expanded time and neither when reflecting later could recollect how long. A hand to brush up and land, with gentle pressure on the other's arm or side. Eyes that met once and over again, checking in, gazing, longing. Long luxurious caresses which sent shimmers through the other's spine. Then just smiling, taking a break before diving in again.

It was unlike anything Cat had ever experienced, and exactly what Mali had on so many occasions imagined possible but never found. It was not hard, it was simple. Only prevented by an internalized hell of rules of engagement. Well, and an appropriate accomplice.

What made it right is they both knew that the other wanted the same and that it was okay. Everything they had shared over the months created a basis and depth impossible if this had been a first date. And so through the openness and intelligence of the two, the veil of culture and expectation was lifted.

Because it's possible that two alone can decide their fate together.

If they so decide.

It was as if in this slow coming together they were ironing off any rough edges between them, each body softening, toward the point where the others person, body, even spirit seemed more and more just like their own.

Whether it was a few minutes or an hour later, neither could tell, but the doorbell rang. Cat perked up at the sound and Mali reluctantly loosened what she had hoped would have been a single eternal focus.

"Who is it?"

"It must be a friend coming by to say hi," Cat created a plausible story as Mali's heart sank.

Why?

Why does she have to answer that?

I thought we wanted the same.

The old feeling from her first love surfacing, of jeopardy and heartbreak because the other cared less than she did to be together.

One always wants it less...

Or in my case, at all.

She couldn't move and just sat there staring at the vase on the coffee table, burning the pattern on it into her brain as if it was analogous to this predicament, as Cat went to the door. Not really in a good place to greet anyone albeit a friend of Cats. But before she knew it Cat was back with a pastry box and a large grin.

"Dessert is *not* optional! You must have been asleep when I called earlier. You're gonna love this."

Cat stared at Mali's state for a second and added,

"And now I know you were enjoying yourself as much as I was. Should have seen your face when I told you a friend was coming by!"

"I told you I suck at lying! I don't own my body," Mali squinted one eye playfully.

"I could live with that," Cat brushed her upper arm gently, the words and act, of course, making Mali forget that this was possibly '*just for tonight*'. For a second she felt insecure on another front that maybe this was just how the Bangkok culture worked and what was happening was nothing out of the ordinary for someone like Cat.

I could just be another... flavor of the month... flavor of the night.

Jesus Mali. You know who Cat is. her character, if you know anyone.

In a moment Mali relived the reality of everything to date that had been lived and transpire between \$er and Cat.

"Here," Cat with a wink-smile popped open the box as Mali observed her, slender and luxurious.

If this weren't happening... Out of my league, never even imagine...

The box contained the most amazing looking thing with creamy white frosting.

"We need a fork?" Mali interjected as Cat reached for the cake.

"Really?!" Cat raised her brows, indignantly as she broke off a piece with her delicate hand while sitting back down in the same motion.

With her other arm she pulled gently on Mali to sit up and come closer.

"Here, try this, and tell me picky-eater that you don't like it!" as she raised it to Mali's lips. The white frosting belied a dark chocolate velvet interior, it was light, just sweet enough but not too much, with the consistency of a cloud.

At least if I could eat a cloud this is what it should feel and taste like.

Mali smiled now breaking a piece of it for her companion.

They fed each other pieces of the large slice until it was gone.

"Really?!" Cat exclaimed as Mali had taken the wax paper out and was licking it, as it had still abundant frosting remaining.

"It's the best part!" Mali made a cheeky smile.

Mali in \$er abandon had gotten a piece of frosting stuck to \$er lower lip and before \$he could lick it, Cat came in and gently sucked it along with \$er lower lip into her mouth.

"I think *that* was the best part," Cat looked seductively back at Mali who only now noticed that Cats hand rested on the mid-thigh of \$er left leg \$he had crossed under \$er and was sitting on.

The Actual Dessert

Cats room was secluded and dark. At first it seemed windowless but as Cat fumbled with a switch, Mali realized it had just another angle of the amazing view as the windows seemed to lighten in tone magically.

The trajectory into this *other* room had not been spoken or even decided. Nor with a clear leader. But once there, each on their own felt the unconscious tug of anxiety. Of everything that was *bedroom* and surrounded it, in each of their cultures. Not to mention as individuals. A place that on your own was of refuge and deepest rest, surrender, even intimacy with oneself. But with another - especially someone new - brought along all the explicit as well as subterfuge.

Mali held Cat to \$er, for some reason with the changed environment once again feeling the jeopardy of ever losing her, realizing too that \$he didn't even *have her*. And Cat felt a little afraid for the first time that night. They had crossed yet another threshold.

Feeling Mali's embrace, the same from the distant afternoon and the other room comforted her. In the same moment feeling Cat's embrace back, holding \$er tightly, Mali felt reassured.

"I don't know what could be better than what just was, really," Cat murmured.

Mali nodded. Truer words. \$he'd give up sex itself without hesitation if \$he could feel that way forever with someone.

\$he spoke softly not wanting to disturb anything in the fledgling structure that encompassed them, feeling subconsciously the intruder at their boundary should they not be strong and unified, "I know. How I know. I'm almost afraid to do anything, I feel like what's here is so special and maybe its fragile. I don't know."

\$he secretly hoped that Cat would say something and make it all right, and different. About how she too wanted this, and was sure this would be for much more than tonight.

But that was too far out even for the living fantasy they were in.

Mali released gently as Cat pushed back so she could look Mali in the eye.

"What do you think?" she raised her brows.

It was strange suddenly, as for some reason to Mali the way of the question brought back their deepening friendship and how much they shared together over the few months. And \$he could feel this thing, both the fact that Cat and \$er agreed 'no expectations beyond tonight', influenced by the dark thing that was around them and wanted in.

\$he felt sad all of the sudden and teared up, "I'm beyond words right now."

I can't see the bottom but I don't care.

I'm gonna jump.

As Mali made \$er decision a smile arrived, "Come here."

How could we possibly go in any other direction at this point? It would be the worst of all the possible regrets.

They embraced again. Once more with no leader or follower. No man or woman. Just them. Mali knew \$he had never ever aside from in \$er imagination felt so close and tight with someone. It was literally the dream \$he'd held since childhood coming true in \$er arms.

The perfect woman.

\$he started to cry, now in earnest. Because to \$er, this was the first time ever with someone that actually felt right. Bonded it felt on all levels, a companion, playmate, intelligence not to mention...

How she feels in my arms. How I feel. How we... this feels...

Cat neither had never felt this kind of closeness and equality with any of the men she'd been with. She felt Mali convulse softly as \$er tears streamed, and knew exactly the feeling as she held \$er back in reciprocity.

Out of nowhere she wondered how Koona must have cried that night after the pool at the resort.

I never considered that.

Why?

Their bodies were gently upon each other. An electric charge pulsed between and through their clothes. They were of the same material which wanted only to melt and fuse.

Warm and close.

For all Mali had been exposed in culture about passion, *this* was \$er version of what romance... love... even sex should be. It was never grappling or anything forceful like the movies made it seem. It was soft and gentle, it was the only way \$he felt \$he could really connect to someone... and wanted to. Everything else was just vulgar and in the end unfulfilling no matter perhaps a momentary high.

\$he felt Cat's arm under \$er nightshirt, soft, almost like silk, brushing \$er inner thigh. A contact, then pulling away. A test to see. And when Mali's own body responded, re-seeking that contact from her arm, Cat emboldened, grasping and massaging Mali's upper inner thigh, now anything but ambiguous.

Desire had come and gone over the evening, and now \$er inner sex was building again - not the penis that \$he could never really read nor understand - but where \$er sexual longing and surrender seemed to originate, from deep inside \$er core. As such \$he could feel highly aroused but not know if \$er penis was actually hard unless it made contact with something.

That something now was Cat.

\$he had never hated \$er penis but simply felt let down in its use. It seemed to steal the focus from that deeper place inside by its whispering of irresistible pleasure involving its stimulation and penetration. But the denouement was always a betrayal.

And without knowing something better, this could be accepted as *reality* aside from the fact that Mali knew something better. Even from childhood that fire was present. When \$he did orgasm from \$er core, it was full body, and after it \$he only wanted more of the person \$he was with... to be with and close to \$er partner. To spend the day... or forever with *her*. Whereas in the use of the penile appendage, \$he would feel sad, repulsed and want to be alone.

So, normally at this point, \$he would be worried with a woman, about being able to stay hard, condoms and all that shit only making it worse. It was like \$er sexual energy could take an abrupt turn at any moment at the slightest sense of feeling disconnected with \$er partner. Which often happened, particularly in relation to the use of \$er penis.

But not here. As \$he continued feeling Cat's silky touch make its way up \$er back, \$he hadn't noticed Cat simply and transparently lifting herself up, embracing Mali's hardness between her thighs. Cat looked up and smiled into Mali's eyes while pouting her lips for another soft kiss.

"Come here you," Cat dropped her hands to Mali's wrists, leaning backward against her natural resistance, intimating the direction of the bed. Mali just let herself relax as Cat's inertial momentum moved her forward a few steps, falling onto the bed beside her.

Mali, feeling encouraged, sat up as her nightshirt dress hiked above her thighs. Her knees sinking softly into the bed, she pulled Cat up and put her hands on Cat's slender waist. She needed to be closer to this woman and even these clothes were now too much in the way.

She pulled Cat to her, caressing Cat's low back then hooking her hands under the fitted white camisole pulling upward as Cat raised her arms in affirmation. From what she could see in the dim light, Cat's body was creamy and tight. Pulling that beauty again into her, she dropped her hands down and traced upward the front of Cat's thighs, causing her an involuntary arch of her pelvis and lower back in a luxurious shudder.

She had to be with Cat. It was an interesting place for a human to be in. She had a penis and the acculturation of a male. But this desire no matter how programmed over, even in Cat's receptiveness, wasn't about penetration. Even the brief passing thought of it deflated her a bit.

Mali was resolute, and curved her hands inward, over the black leggings to Cat's most intimate parts, again causing that brief arch-shudder but then as if in retaliation, Cat thrust her pelvis forward, causing even stronger and more direct contact against Mali's hands.

Cat moaned with a little spasm of orgasmic energy up her body. Her mouth dropped open and came in for Mali's lips as she hooked her hands on the waist of the tights and pulled downward.

"I want this Mali," Cat whispered, breathless.

Mali nodded.

They helped each other liberate the leggings, leaving Cat in her silk black bra and thong, exposing a new musky sweet humidity between them.

Cat reached up to Mali's shoulder and pulled herself up to her face, her body pressing fully on Mali's still clothed body. Which in another few beats became intolerable so Mali broke the kiss and in one movement liberated herself from the shirt-dress.

They were a perfect match, both slender, toned and smooth. Feeling Cat's skin touch full frontal against her was the electric heaven she'd been after.

Roles

Cat turned over and was on her knees and hands luxuriously in front of her. And with her what was left of Mali's inner imaginings of hope as a male, the embodiment of gentle bonding. Penetrating and holding a woman who was soft and viscous. The last part left that held the hope...

Of being released of all this vanity...

It wasn't about the woman being weak or even that stupid repulsive brand of the 'helpless female'. Rather, it was the only way \$he could conceive of loving as a man. The gentleness of \$er partner needing to at least match \$er own sensitivity and softness -- requisites for reasons apparently different than why other men sought an ultra-feminine partner.

If that woman existed, she was in front of \$er: Cat, the last possibility of liberation from \$er apparently twisted up and almost broken soul.

As Mali came behind Cat, \$he gently reached around and cupped \$er small, firm and silky breasts, pulling her upward towards \$er, causing a delicious feeling of surrender in Cat, who was actually surprised by the initiative. Mali held her there to \$er. \$he'd never been harder. Because \$he could be here. And to the amazement of both, and thanks to the abundant lubrication that was already seeping down Cat's inner legs, Mali slipped inside her without even an effort on either part.

Mali moved gently as there was much more to go to be completely inside and encompassed. Hitting a place of stuck \$he moved with a nudge and some urging as Cat moved her hips to accommodate. \$he felt the power now \$he'd never had. Not to penetrate or dominate, but the power to be with. Such was \$er life, to feel powerful depended on another to be with who could feel it back and be soft enough.

\$he slid into Cat millimeter by millimeter. In a bit, a little out and then further in. Cat was receptive and just felt 'with \$er', like everything else with them, what had always been difficult for Mali with other women had become simple and effortless.

"You're so delicious," Mali sighed as \$he fell forward to whisper in Cat's ear, now confident with enough penetration. \$he felt \$er chest softly but fully against Cat's back. They were now super close and enmeshed, "you feel amazing. I love being here with you."

And for a moment it was it's own kind of heaven, as Mali held Cat and moved so slowly. It gave \$er the feeling that \$he wasn't *with* Cat but wearing her. Diving in closer, not even to be with or possess but to be. To be owned by.

Which felt amazing to Cat too but also the ultimate tease as she longed to clamp down, push Mali back onto the bed and grind on \$er. The thought of which felt great to Cat and she smiled, almost with a laugh, as she had never felt this way with another man.

Another man.

But just like the first caress or the first lick of ice cream being the most delicious, the moment was unstable. It could not stay as it was. Something in Mali momentarily deadened in combination with Cat's perhaps telegraphed longing for stronger contact. The non-physical aspect of being with someone, where it wasn't just the body, \$he - the situation really - responded to and evolved in the connection and harmony, or disharmony of the feelings and thoughts of both involved.

It always seems that way.

If they change I change. Or maybe its me...

Historically Mali would always blame \$erself for such changes if it was a decrease in sexual energy. But \$he knew better by now.

"Hold me Mali", Cat demanded, at which \$he arched \$er back and raised from all fours to knees, falling back on Mali. \$he felt the tremendous connection of the grinding coming to its furthest potential of meeting.

"Fuck me Mali, okay?" Cat whispered as she held \$er close from the back.

Still the perfect combination of intimacy and primal desire, Mali was invigorated. It actually felt good to go harder and a bit faster, with a little slap against Cat's ass as \$he was completely inside her.

The primal fucking feeling taking over irresistibly in both of them as they sped up.

But almost at the same time, something in Mali tensed. A puncture actually, and it was bleeding out magic. \$er heart recognized it and sank. Crashing upon reality, the past calling \$er back.

Like \$er last girlfriend.

"You never fuck me."

"You don't fuck hard enough..."

Feeling like a 'fucking' object. Being asked and ordered to fuck. And more and harder.

And being criticized when \$he didn't or was deficient.

Not enough.

Not good enough.

Something was getting lost here with Cat. Despite what felt good, \$he did not want to do this 'fucking' and then cum. \$he just knew that. \$he wanted more than that here. It would be so disappointing and incomplete, regardless of how good this felt right now.

Even though there was part of \$er that still wanted to just fuck the shit out of Cat and cum, \$he'd been there enough times to know where it led and it was not a happy ending.

It was the place where Mali had been wounded over and over doing \$er best to be a guy with a woman. Because it all went well - so well, even according to the moans and pleasure of \$er lovers up to this point - but this is where Mali held. In earlier years becoming overcharged and needing to slow down or stop to not go over the cliff of orgasm. As what happened after orgasm was always a fatal blow to how \$he felt about \$er partner, and really, if \$he was honest, \$erself.

What hurt worst was not about \$er own satisfaction but that the place \$er lover was arriving could never be reached because \$he couldn't bring her all the way there. If \$he tried, \$he got there way too fast and too soon. And when \$he tried to slow down and hold on, \$er girlfriend's energy always fell and \$he felt or was made to feel as not enough, not like 'other guys'. And in turn, Mali's sexual energy would decline, the part growing flaccid and it would be yet another moment of feeling impotent and inadequate.

It sucked either way. It was in bed too that \$he'd dropped - more than once - to the level of cursing god and \$er mere existence. Because that's how it felt.

As then, now.

Except with Sarai. The only different time.

Because \$he was the 'bottom' basically there.

Cat pulled herself away from Mali and pushed \$er over backwards, more fully taking charge. The action authentic and innocent but it connected with all this darkness Mali carried.

Of being deficient. Of being fucking groped and pulled on like I'm some sort of object without feelings.

"What the fuck are you doing?" escaped \$er lips before \$he knew what \$he was saying.

Cat had \$er pinned and was riding \$er.

Like a man and a woman.

It was repulsive. The latent aggression from all the aloneness and sadness inside Mali resisted and pushed Cat off \$er, separating them physically and emotionally the furthest they had been since meeting for the first time.

\$he immediately felt afraid and ashamed. \$he was not supposed to be like this. In the past \$he would suck it up and become passive-aggressive in later days, but now \$he seemed to be acting out the feeling in real time.

To embrace or to push away, a double bind \$he could never seem to fucking unravel. Or rather, was on the fence over. Still.

As if reading Mali's emotion, Cat walked to Mali and voraciously pulled \$er into her. What was soft in Cat emotionally becoming hard and ferocious.

Mali resisted and while resisting, Cat pulled and embraced harder, with all her strength.

And in a few moments with increasing intensity from Cat, almost magically, \$er body released the fight. Not just the person in the now but all that \$he carried forward from the past. \$he was being held, even dominantly, and the messages to \$er brain were now correct and in alignment with who \$he was and what \$he needed.

Surrendering with the involuntary shudder arching \$er pelvis and lower back, \$he felt submissive. \$he didn't feel bad about it, angry or hurt. It just felt right.

Is this where Cat's taking me?

Does she know?

All \$he could wonder and hope was that Cat wouldn't relent. \$he wanted to cry but was still not sure.

"I know what's wrong, Mali," Cat spoke softly in her lions-hold. She paused slowly, whispering huskily, "It's okay. I know what you need now. I'm sorry. I got carried away."

Words which resonated as if plucked and pulled out from Mali's own past, the last time \$he felt right sexually. The first and only time. So \$he let go and allowed the tears.

Cat stood with \$er and continued to hold her. Not submissive. Steadfast in her hips and pelvis. With dominant fire in her eyes as she locked with Mali's questioning blue and white through the tears.

This was a different Cat.

She nudged \$er and walked forward, as Mali backed away to not lose contact until hitting the wall. Pinned. Cat's arms trapped \$er against the hard surface. \$he melted further into it...

This was a new experience with a genetic woman. Something in Cat's way made it all okay. Mali felt like \$he had come home.

"I think this is who you really are, Mali," Cat smirked, seeing \$er shift.

As Cat realized the words escaping her own lips she realized too that they needed to be applied to herself as well.

She still did not understand all this, and though it did not feel perfect with Mali, she was ready to follow it. Because too, something here felt more home than anything in the past. Even more than the pure physical desire from a few minutes before.

Something... emotional... felt...

I'm not a Tom though...

Oh fuck it

As she held Mali in her power-plant against the wall, feeling \$er soften, Cat knew something new about herself. That feeling such in the *other* made her feel good. The *other* as a reflection of the self she thought she was supposed to be.

The shadow of culture leered as it slunk back into the periphery.

As the moments progressed, the only constant was the force with which Cat kept Mali against the wall.

Pinning \$er shoulders back with her elbows, Cat held Mali's jaw, pulling it to her as she strongly pressed her lips against \$ers.

Cat's leg pinned between and upward on Mali's inner thigh, as a hand came down forcing Mali's hip at the other side against the wall. Between the elbow on the shoulder and hand on \$er jaw, the pinned leg and hip, Mali was immobile and felt the surrender run through \$er body as Cat's hand moved to \$er pelvis.

Instead of going for the usual girl-handling of \$er penis, Cat caught the base of it between her thumb and forefinger, pushing, forcing it downward, a motion maximally erotic for Mali, in turn surrendering further in the arch of \$er low back and pelvis as \$er parts moved downwards and back. There was no need for any of that pulling, friction or anything, everything good, wet and orgasmic was deep inside.

The fem.

This was always how it always felt. But \$he'd never gotten to this place with someone. \$he could let go now... because everything was easy. The signals to \$er brain were right.

Cat returned to pressing her lips against Mali's. Mali's chest relaxed and deflated, ribs loosening and falling as if cascading over \$er spine, softer than \$he knew they could feel. It didn't hurt that \$er shoulder was still pinned by Cat's insistent elbow, as if suspending \$er body.

\$he kissed back but in a way \$he had never known. Not like an instigator or aggressor but as a responder. Longing for and seeking \$er lovers lips back, hoping to entice them further and closer to \$er. Cats lips were a silky wet heaven.

Cat with her fingers was gently massaging in the area of Mali's testicles, but between them, inside, in the place Mali always had intuitively gone to find and trigger the deepest in herself, the most explosive and full orgasms. The place that had nothing to do with her penis. In fact the exact place the entry to a woman's vagina would be.

As Mali surrendered breathless, Cat knew she was on the right track. What was strange is that it felt so good being this way with Mali. She'd never conceived - less actually experienced such intensity and dominance. She too felt strong, powerful even, but desirous and loving at the same time. She was receiving but also giving in a way she's never known. She'd never even considered the possibility of such a combination...

Feeling so good...

Cat had been a bit hesitant, after being rough with Mali earlier, but the only thing that felt right was to dominate her sex and penetrate hard *that place* in her. She aggressed and was rewarded as Mali pushed her head back and moaned.

"Fuck Cat, don't stop," Mali breathed, "Just take me. I love you. Please. Take me all. Make me yours."

The words which hit Cat's heart and brought tears to her eyes for some reason she didn't know.

Cat sped up her pace and pushed harder on Mali everywhere she had contact. Her own pussy was throbbing and all of the sudden she realized that was being helped by Mali's hand which had unbeknownst joined her. She looked into Mali's eyes with that amazing combination of dominance and longing.

As Cat sped up, Mali increased her own intensity on her, one finger curved a bit inside, coming and going against her g-spot while her palm moved in a constant but rhythmic contact massaging her front outer lips and the soft goodness under it.

Delicious through her dominance and yet feeling that flutter and release of something deep inside herself that had kept coming back to the surface since the afternoon, Cat could feel herself coming close as Mali's hand held her, the dichotomy of sexual surrender yet at the same time being strong where she never been before.

The feeling of such overpowered her as the first wave approached. She fingered harder into Mali, with another finger reaching her anus and kneading into it as she too cupped her.

In Cat's mind all of the sudden they were both the same. Two women.

And she wanted her partner with her as she came over the waterfall.

Cat could feel Mali clench and her breath turned ragged as she alternated resisting and submitting to Cat's aggression.

"Fuck," they both gasped almost in unison.

Energy shot up through Mali's body. Arching her back it went up to her heart, neck and through her head, sending almost what looked like stars into her visual field. Her throat releasing, an unintelligible high pitched vocalization belted from her as she simultaneously surrendered and clenched everything.

Cat had lost herself feeling the female body in front of her: Tight hips, soft belly, surrendering at her insistence. And in a moment as she lost control, Mali became Koona, back in time, right there, then when that kiss... could have happened. And all that would have happened after. That scary but exciting feeling on the periphery back then showing itself more fully.

Koona's hand and fingers felt like they had loosened up her pussy to just being soft and pliable as multiple fingers now sunk in to her g-spot one last strategic time.

Like a submissive dominant bitch. Against my true love...

Cat felt whole, complete. Amazing.

Her sexuality never having been opened this far or wide, and she came, not releasing Mali without one last final thrust of her pelvis as the second wave ran through her. With one last push from Cat, Mali succumbed and slid down the wall to the floor in a sitting position against the wall. Cat, losing her footing staggered backward and fell onto the bed as the back of her legs made contact. Having fallen over the edge, on the other side was this warm feeling that missed its object. And now she knew it wasn't Mali.

Cat cried silently, deeply convulsing.

She was with Koona now.

But Koona was not here and would never be.

I Think I Should Go Now

The two sat across from each other at the sun-swept kitchen counter-bar.

At first to Mali as \$he emerged from the bedroom, Cat was soft, quiet, shy. Coming to grips with the past hours, for both of them, now in the light of day, with a world below that still insisted on existing, it seemed.

How comforting and alienated the night had been from that. A night where no one else - nor culture nor rules nor their own complexes got their way. As if suspended.

A return to innocence.

Everything up to the point of orgasm had been amazing, and Mali emerged hopeful that \$he had only been imagining what felt like a change in the dynamic between them - in the closeness - afterwards.

\$he had passed through the bathroom, had already faced in the mirror the reflection of a person who was so much different from the woman \$he had felt to be in Cat's arms. That feeling still was more real than the reflection. \$he wanted so much more of that 'her'... and in connection with another.

Coming out to the kitchen Mali had thought for a moment - hoped - that today might mean spending the day together. And maybe more!

Much more.

But as \$he sat there in silence now, the moments passing, in front of Cat, it became clear something was up. Outside the day appeared cloudy which gave still the feeling of isolated togetherness. But Cat was unreadable.

She could hardly move. Being completely confused, knowing deep down why but *going there* being too arduous a task, especially in front of Mali. So then settling for the default of feeling lost and deflated. Shutting off. There was none of the intensity that she'd penetrated Mali with only some hours ago. As allowing anything near that would bring up the whole thing she was not ready for.

As well, as if the clouds betraying Mali's hope, a bright sun pierced through and made it known that today would be sunny. As with Cat's mood, it hit with a harsh reality, along with the distant sound of the road, horns — the everyday reality of Bangkok traffic.

Just as the world outside insisted on a continued existence, so did the inner conflicts of each of them of which the night had been a well deserved vacation. Or exacerbation.

Reality felt wrong.

Mali wanted Cat to say something. But she didn't. So she searched for her own words which also made themselves scarce. What had felt perhaps fragile last night now felt solid. As what had transpired - and even was now - at least to Mali, inevitable. It had only excavated what was already there.

It was nothing like the future Cat had imagined for herself, even as recent as yesterday before Mali appeared unannounced at the clinic. Too, the reason she herself had not called Mali, as even before yesterday, after their day together in Chiang Mai, she was feeling confused about everything in relation to her.

Also conflicted with the fact that she was astonished, speechless even, for being with a woman or someone who is like a woman - or turned into a woman in her embrace. And that she'd enjoyed it immensely. A little tingle of the way she came last night still lingered. If she wasn't so twisted up in the head, she would have paid more attention to the fact that that she too wanted more, much more, feeling a depth in her sexuality and expression she had never experienced before.

Mali knew it had been the night she'd dreamed of, longed for, Cat bridging her seemingly eternal inner conflict. The fear that being who she truly was would mean she'd never have such a relationship with a woman. Cat had gotten through and deep. To be lovable by an amazing other. Filling the unconsciously empty void of how she truly felt about herself.

Now if Cat could only, in daylight still see inside her! The prospect of which seemed to be dimming by the minute.

Once fluke, twice maybe, three times a pattern. The score was twice now in her life the feeling of authentic loving and expression through her feminine self. And zero for her male persona.

So much for the perfect woman fixing me.

Feeling - remembering - being so receptive to the woman in front of her - and that that woman had aggressively taken her was Mali's comfort in these moments. She loved Cat's emotion, and in that she'd take and roll with whatever she dished out, the good and the difficult. Because it felt good. Even now, just to be in her presence.

It felt sexy to sit here with her. Knowing how they had connected, this woman knowing and seeing who she truly was and still wanting to be with her.

Always avoided, always wrong in and to the world. Always wrong in the mirror. But once again, not in her deepest expression, as last night testified.

They ate in silence the fruit, juice, croissants. And coffee for Cat, declined by Mali. There was no way she needed caffeine or any other body-mind altering substance today.

She tried smiling, which came out weak and shy. Cat returned an equally disingenuous attempt.

Mali's heart dropped. She felt like crying. It was the saddest and most painful feeling. They had both gone into this with eyes wide open but neither was expecting what had actually transpired. Although in a way it felt inevitable between them on the course they had set.

Just a matter of time.

"Cat, are you okay?"

She just wanted to hear something, anything, from Cat about what was going on before she dug herself deeper into this sadness.

Cat smiled turning to a lump in her throat and a tear, shaking her head.

"Mali I know nothing, I just know nothing. It was amazing, wonderful, perfect," she looked down and shook her head, "But I don't know anything. What to say. What to think. You go back to Chiang Rai tomorrow, right?"

"I have a ticket."

"I think you should go," Cat spoke slowly and deliberately. But the words hit Mali with the feeling that this was about leaving *now*, not about her flight tomorrow. Cat smiled the *I'm smiling but am really dying inside* smile. The beauty of the Thai culture showing through her, with a way to smile in practically every circumstance.

She added, softening what she knew had come out quite harshly, "I feel like a mess. It's not about you. I just don't know anything. Maybe I need time."

I need time.

To Mali 'time' meant '*no but I just don't want to admit it right now*'.

The fact was Cat had made it clear that last night was just for the moment. Despite her want of something else, Mali knew this and had agreed to it.

She wanted to leave too now. The change in atmosphere hurt too much. Also because she felt at the brink of throwing herself and begging Cat to talk to her. She wished to let the clock back twelve hours and perpetually keep it there, in the world of no-promise togetherness.

Mali nodded to herself.

"I've never felt what I did last night. Regardless of what we said, my heart still hoped. Hopes. I think you reached my core. I am not sure I'll ever be the same," Mali returned the dying inside smile as the tears started.

She tried to voice how she felt, "I..." But more words would not come, only tears.

Cat got up and came around to where Mali had started to stand and embraced her, speaking tenderly with a tear in her eye.

"I know. Believe me," she tightened Mali in her arms, for a moment returning her to feeling the cherished stability and love in her arms, and for Cat, the connection she too deeply needed, "I am not sure I'll ever be the same either. I'm just really confused now. I'm sorry."

She wished she even knew what those words meant in reality for her, but knew they were true.

"I can't help? We can't talk about this?"

With the visceral jerk \$he felt from Cat \$he knew the answer was negative and again wanted to get away in lieu of feeling further hurt. There was nothing else but to let go and give Cat her space. In \$er own vulnerable state it was also self-protective and keep whatever dignity \$he had.

Mali whispered as using \$er voice any more would just lead to breaking into more tears.

"I think I should go now," as \$he pushed back and was released from Cat's arms. Breaking away felt empowering, albeit the last option of power \$he had in the situation.

The clothes were on the bathroom counter.

Laundered and lovingly folded by Cat, who knows when. Was it thanks to the colluding rain, getting soaked that brought the two of them into this intimacy and heartbreak?

Seeing the clothes made her want to cry. The tight jeans and androgynous tank top. Black socks. Combat boots. They now symbolized everything wrong with \$er, with \$er life. They were women's clothes, but to \$er now, a uniform of insecurity, confusion and indecisiveness.

That in which \$he met Cat the first time. A discordant set of attire given who \$he had been last night. And too, an outfit that spoke volumes of \$er relationship to Cat.

They were unhappy clothes now to \$er. The best these clothes could bring \$er to was what had just happened. No further.

She took them, feeling them softer from Cat's touch and care as \$he ran her fingers over the rather coarse denim.

They even smelled good.

Mali knew better than to look back as Cat gently closed the door behind \$er. \$he heard the solid click of the lock into the well engineered frame.

Like everything in Cat's life.

Mali felt sick.

What am I doing!!!

How can I leave???

But there was nothing \$he could say or do. The die were cast.

If I was a man, had been a man last night, maybe... I could turn around and make Cat know that I'll be a guy if I can be with her.

\$he shuddered at the thought.

Jesus Christ Mali!

How fast \$he'd turn and sell \$erself out.

No. \$he would not change a thing about last night. It had been perfect. \$he would focus on that, and how \$he felt in Cat's embrace until whatever needed working out did so.

Because everything that Cat and \$er had lived last night, and in the time they had known each other was all predicated upon her being \$erself.

Last night was the only time things have ever been real for me.

And I'm not there yet in daily reality.

As \$he walked away from the building and down the street, shaking \$er head in disbelief once in a while. What was most ironic is that \$he'd always imagined how being with the 'perfect woman' would play out. \$he'd be able to be a man with the perfect woman. But last night it organically turned into just the opposite.

Everything that came out of \$er naturally last night was \$er feminine. It felt easy and right on. The polar opposite of \$er encounters as a 'man'. It was an easy, primal surrender. Just like the first and other time \$he'd been *taken*.

Authentic.

Back Alone

Cat sat on the sofa passively staring out the window as the minutes passed by. There was of course all that had passed with Mali, and that of course needed attention. But she was inclined elsewhere. She felt kind of cold to push Mali out, but she was glad \$he had left. She was feeling suffocated.

But then, the sexual opening and release in her pelvis. It felt like an elastic band had been cut inside her. Something in her now felt more open, out and exposed. Sexily exposed. Longingly exposed. With all her heart involved. Yet none of this seemed to tie back particularly to Mali or wanting this again with \$er.

You'd think...

And over and over as the sensations, emotions and thoughts passed through her, was a building desire kindled by the freedom she felt the night before.

But could Mali be a man and this just be the way we love together?

She wondered even if that was the case that rock-star Mali could be a stable thing to the outside world and to \$erself, could *she* handle it? She too against that wall in the shadows felt a female against her and it turned her on more than anything she'd ever conceived.

That was probably the most disturbing thought.

She'd already mental-erased the Koona part of her final rapture in ecstasy.

Yet without remembering this, her mind then turned to Koona. If one thing was sure, she owed her an apology.

Yes, Cat, just an apology.

All of sudden she remembered. It was definitely an inconvenient vision that broke into her being last night as she came. She now recalled it in the daylight. Though it was disharmonious, she knew better than to put it back and deny it.

But it could mean anything, right? People have all kinds of fantasies and imaginations. It doesn't make them real or important to fulfill, right?

Cat thought about her estranged friend. About her seemingly liking her... *that way*. From which she assumed meant Koona liked women. Previously there had been something shocking to her about it. Something so progressive, worldly and sophisticated. It had scared her a bit but she did not know why.

Yet now, it didn't seem so crazy after all. Almost comforting. In fact, now that the whole topic was personalized — at least in a way — it was fascinating and she wanted to hear Koona's story at least.

She smiled warmly for the first time today thinking of the fun she and Koona had had those last days they were together. Just like all the times before that, together, sitting, loosing track of time, talking about things, listening intently to her friends words which were always so real and perceptive. Oh, and laughing together. She really wanted that again and hoped it wasn't too late.

Cat sighed as she rose from her mudra of contemplation.

But before that, I need time.

To get back to life, restore a sense of normalcy.

Readjust. Then see.

So although she often laughed at her own culture for so easily doing away with the uncomfortable, winging away to 'just being', as if whatever had happened wasn't really here and now anymore, for today she'd invoke the tool. Some farang had written a book and coined the term 'mental erase' and it caught like wildfire among the expat communities something that was just prior an unnamed coping mechanism.

She smirked.

She would put out of mind completely what had happened with Mali and all these other confusing thoughts. For now.

Move forward, make something else of the day.

As such was one of the most remarkable yet shocking aspects of her culture. But, then again, it was part of what makes the Thai people and the country so strong and resilient.

And even happier. What's the value of problems and worry anyway?

Mali laid on \$er yoga mat as \$he contemplated things, stretching and twisting her body. It was true, how much there was to unpack and process from last night. Most of her mind since leaving Cat's was on the alluring sparkle of some new possibility in \$erself, regardless of Cat's continued romantic interest or even friendship.

\$he re-lived the first or many times the feeling of being held against the wall by Cat. As \$he relived it viscerally, \$er body felt more together, more aligned and solid. More \$erself. It felt to Mali like confidence and self-esteem. If \$he were really a man, that would be the last thing one would think would bring such - being taken, drilled into, penetrated, dominated, surrendering.

What made it such a turn on and so attractive was that it was Cat, with all her beauty, her tight body, but not just that, the secret sauce was her kindness and warmth, and that they had mental and emotional intimacy.

Her strength.

Mali needed more of that. Anytime, anywhere. This was the way that got inside, key in lock.

Would she 'be a man' in the world if it meant having Cat? Like this? Over and over?

"Fuck," the word drawled out of \$er lips as the reality of the situational setup between them now became clear, and \$he collapsed back on the mat letting go of \$er stretch.

Just like what would probably show to be the romantic gender taste difference between them, the only thing in common between her hotel room and Cat's apartment was that they were mostly white, clean and a place to sleep. It was - had been - comfortable enough for Mali. Before last night it had been a luxury for \$er to sleep here under the nice comforter in an air conditioned room.

Cat's apartment was like being in a little corner of heaven, thought Mali, and chuckling, that it was high enough in the sky for it to be a plausible theory.

\$he looked around \$er room.

Compared... this is ghetto.

Maybe it was a portal, the whole thing yesterday, last night, the apartment, an alternate reality to realities. Maybe this is a dream still.

If I never hear from Cat again in time I know I'll doubt if it ever happened.

Still laying on her mat in \$er underwear, \$he pinched \$erself and it seemed to hurt.

Such Misery

"Owwwww!"

The pinch in the relived memory had barely hurt, but reality was worse. Mali released a strong flick of \$er middle finger at the subject as \$he felt the bee-sting dig into \$er forearm.

Mumbling to \$erself, "Shit, I'm really out there, huh?" As \$he took action to get the stinger out and away.

Here \$he was again.

Back in 'reality'.

Besides the sting on \$er arm, \$er ass hurt too from sitting so long.

What the fuck am I doing here?

Stuck in the depth of it. This fourth day at the deserted resort \$he was not incredibly different or further along solving the same problems \$he'd arrived with.

The sperm-fish kept up their vibrant life in the happy brook below as \$he had deliberated and fixated.

And come up empty.

Reliving the past had medicated \$er emotions and that's all. It had provided no more information to help or clues than \$he already had.

Like watching the same goddam movie over and over.

As with such, \$he felt a kind of hangover from it - like riding a roller coaster in your mind that you can never ride again in reality. It had that kind of sting in it.

Clinging to something you can't have.

Ever have.

Like having the urgent impulse to have done things differently. The moment you're dying.

Or maybe the realization that you actually want to keep living... the moment after you jump.

Most of \$er life Mali lived in an emotionally and romantically creative heart and head, in a world that provided almost no fulfillment to \$er creations. Ever since very young, imagining a girl with \$er. Whenever \$he was down or felt the coldness between \$er parents, or whatever despair from the outside, this is where \$he'd gone. Always believed, always hoped.

At some point do you start giving it up because it's not happening?

Uh...

It had happened.

Cat!

And it's passed.

\$he felt in her bones the ache, knowing that no further thought or introspection could solve anything. Cat had disappeared. Cat for all practical purposes \$he had to consider over.

And another thing was for sure: In past flirtations with the fem, \$he could compartmentalize and put away the episodes. Because they were days, weekends, maybe a week or two.

But this had been two years.

Body changes. Feelings. \$he could never ever again sit in front of a woman and with a straight face profess to be a man. Unless it was a man who wanted to be feminine and act and be as a female, sexually and in dress. And to \$er, that was not acceptable either.

I won't be a fucking man in a dress and seen that way. I'm not a crossdresser. Power to them...

Mali had met crossdressers over the years but never understood how they could return to being a guy and living in the world. Or wanting to. Some of them were gorgeous.

But \$he still felt hope just for a simple, pure, down-to-earth relationship.

I'm not a woman.

No one sees me as one.

I'm a joke...

She knew how people in the USA seemed to view 'people like \$er', and in Thailand...

Constantly stared and often laughed at.

Then Cat, who seemed to embrace \$er and then dropped \$er.

Cat wants a man. Well, at least a rockstar.

Would that be so bad?

Mali opened \$er eyes again, which were already open but now back to reality and where \$he was. Truly, \$he had been sitting here for hours. Since the morning. It was now dusk and the sultry air with its soft warm breeze was filled with the tunes of cicadas and not much else. The surrounding turret huts were still dark and mostly abandoned aside for one in the far distance, the only sign of life.

If \$he knew to go deeper, \$he'd have felt betrayed. Cat, who could have anyone - man or woman - it felt like she led \$er to the ledge though \$he jumped on \$er own accord...

Without fucking parachute.

And \$he'd only made it so far, crashing and getting scratched through trees and branches...

In the end deserted by the one who'd given \$er the go ahead to jump.

And now I'm in a ditch in the middle of nowhere.

May as well not even be alive.

A tear fell and a soft, calming sob let the river flow.

\$he was not out of the woods but had to go on. \$he was in a corner. \$he needed help. \$he could go no further doing what \$he had already done, living how \$he'd already lived.

Maybe it did mean just embracing 'the middle' in between genders more. There were a lot of things \$he loved about \$erself and \$er life. \$he was smart, \$he loved to hoop-dance which fulfilled \$er in many ways. People who know \$er embraced \$er, those whom \$he let in. Albeit not any women, Cat aside, and well, now Cat too.

Theres no further I can bring myself. I'm at the end.

It's time to get help.

Even in four days in solitude here she had not resolved a thing beyond that was known:

- I am not going to be a man with breasts.

- If I continue hormones its irreversible and I'll become sterile if I have not yet.
- I could get face surgery and maybe it would all get better.
- But will any woman have interest in me, even love me? Would I even pass as female? At all?
- Will hormones change me and I still want a woman? Because I couldn't stand wanting a man.

\$he could see the surgical masks, smell and feel the anesthesia running through \$er veins, and what felt like the dark side loom. The Chinese Tune .

A vision of a feminine looking poised man entered \$er mind, sitting having dinner with a woman in Mexico. It could be. Maybe that was the answer. But the vision quickly evaporated emotionally when it came to sex and intimacy.

I'm too far gone...

Mali finally made \$er way to the small outdoor restaurant that \$he had made \$er favorite while there. \$he wore the same cut off jeans still and a button down shirt tied at the waist. As \$he sat and looked over the late evening road and seaside, over time \$he saw a few couples and families coming in. The last was two women together.

Maybe they are a couple.

Looks nice.

\$he was distantly envious and didn't let \$erself get too close to that story, as anyway \$he could slice it, it was a world away from \$er in possibility.

Regardless of being dressed completely androgynously, no makeup, \$he felt a sense of belonging there, as something. That something which was kind of ever present with \$er but seemed to crumble the moment \$he came into contact with the world.

Tonight was no exception as \$he looked over and caught stares from a couple of the tables further in. Nothing hurtful, just too much attention. It meant something was wrong with \$er. Otherwise they would not be looking. It felt like everyone \$he came into contact with was pointing out a fundamental flaw in \$er. Either more directly or trying to hide that they saw it. \$he felt the heat of futile anger rise inside.

It too was the pain point set in motion from \$er decision that maybe \$he could let go of all this fem stuff. As was always the case, when \$he let things go, it became apparent that regardless of how bad things might be while being dressed and in makeup, the difference of going back to male mode, \$he had simply forgotten how bad the full monty actually was.

And that was for now the only way \$he could track \$er internal progress with \$er identity.

I don't want to be seen as a guy and be invisible.

I'd prefer this always.

After \$he paid the check, \$he took a walk in the dark along the road bordering the rock beach. At a point up ahead \$he saw some cars being parked on the road, and a couple men who looked like parking attendants for the cars.

As \$he passed one stood and stared at \$er. Just stared. \$he made eye contact. Mistake. He just stood and stared. \$he could feel it as \$he passed as the tension of anger and frustration built. And worse when \$he heard the burst of laughter that followed between the man and his friend. \$he'd become too used to it. It sent \$er into gridlock in \$er sensibilities - to react and lock \$er body up or to let it go. Male conditioning does not encourage letting such things go.

A dog came out of nowhere and started barking at \$er. Already on edge from the men \$he angered further and grabbed a rock and fake-lunged at the dog. Which stopped it. But only until \$he turned to go on \$er way, as it started again.

\$he threw the rock hard at a sign and screamed, "fuck this fucking place... fuck these fucking people".

\$he kicked a piece of wood hard, one that \$he judged would not fight back. It broke and flew a few feet away, defeated.

In the aftermath of \$er catharsis \$he felt edgy and tense. Unfulfilled. Alone. Everything felt dangerous in this world.

Fucking eggshells.

Yes, something was wrong with \$er and everyone saw it. Even the dog. Young children averted their gaze. Women made eye contact and then looked away or gave the look of fear.

Even Cat.

Rejected.

There's something so wrong with me.

What I dream of I can't be that to have it, and I do what makes the dream impossible!

One last scream escaped Mali, absorbed into the wind as if to confirm \$er overall impotence in life.

"What the fucking goddam hell is this shit?!!!"

Approaching \$er resort an older couple was sitting on the porch of their traditional yellow rustic house at the lot next door. Mali had noticed them in passing moments while sitting on the wall that afternoon.

The man spoke in Thai to his wife, "What's the point of such misery?"

The old woman shook her head.

Mali understood nothing.

The full plastic water bottle exploded against the wall. As if in slow motion \$he watched the water scatter, then what remained of the vessel ricocheted and as if in a final fuck-you landed on the bed where it emptied its remaining contents.

"Fucking testosterone, I fucking hate it!"

It was easy to blame things on something that you couldn't get away from. A slippery slope.

Like my fucking shadow goddam it.

She had needed - actually counted on - finding some tranquility here and and come up worse than empty. The evening out had only accelerated the conflict and dysphoria \$he'd sat in stillness with all day. \$he knew things were advancing and it might be the last chance to...

Get off this train.

Before it was too late.

The maleness. The anger. The years of stuckness. So many years of feeling like \$he was all wrong. Being told by therapists to 'man up'.

Fuck.

I'm not a goddam dude. I don't want to be a fucking dude. It's not what I am.

And regardless of how much she wanted this, \$he was crossing the line that did not have a way back.

Would I take a knife to the fish down there?

Emotion swung and \$he started to cry.

Killing the fish once and for all.

"Fucking goddamit!!" \$he yelled, losing any inhibition left.

In a moment of sobbing \$he looked up at the dripping water from the sheets.

She cracked up, "Fuck! What are they going to think tomorrow!" she shook her head as \$er laughter turned into crying again.

Sad and twisted up and alone.

"Fuck. Oh well. They should have known already that I'm insane, ever since I arrived."

She lay on the floor shaking her head. Still laugh-crying but also starting to feel the bitter tinge of the aftertaste that such outbursts of anger and adrenaline brought. Rage always did that. There was always the crash. It felt bad in the body, and the soul.

It hurt so much because...

This isn't who I am really.

It wasn't a defense. It was actually true and she knew it.

\$he closed \$er eyes.

And slept.

On the Moon

Cat stood in front of the mirror, in the reflection behind a pile of clothes on her bed, all outfits she'd tried and discarded before finding the perfect one for tonight.

She smiled ironically, shaking her head.

Really Cat?

All they were doing was meeting some mutual friends for dinner. Big deal. Friends. She and Koona.

Friends. Just friends.

Jesus Cat.

She had no conscious backtrace of how she had gotten to this poi_nt._

Maybe it's the Thai mental-erase.

She smiled. The mental erase idea had started to wear in to Cat's psyche, as of course, being Thai until it had been pointed out, she'd not known the better. It always made her laugh too.

She'd seen Koona every evening this past week. Which she had rationalized as making up for lost time. But now, had crept into seeming like a pretense.

That's what it should have been. Best friends reconciled. But the tone, the background felt different whether she wanted to admit it or not.

Finally pulling herself together, she threw on a light white cashmere sweater over her black silk bra, and unlike her, a pair of slender fitting jeans and some black sneakers.

Fuck it.

Friends, Cat.

Friends.

Dressing to go out with friends.

The night was cooler than normal, only a mellow heat remaining to the day which had turned a bit windy and overcast, and strangely lacking the typical humidity.

Sitting in the cab, looking out the window on the short ride, Cat couldn't stop the thought as it hit her...

What if Koona finds someone? Or has someone.

What if she tells me today she has a girlfriend and is in love?

A feeling immediately cast a dark shadow, mirroring the actual clouds over the early evening. Koona had not spoken about having anyone in her life or not.

Maybe she has someone and this...

Cat shook her head, because at the same time, how in the world could they risk this? Could their renewed friendship weather one or the other of them realizing it was a mistake.

The taxi arrived.

White restaurant building, flanked with green plants. Definitely upscale.

Definitely *us*.

Us.

Us!

Fuck, Cat.

Friends.

Ever since that first night visiting Koona's flat. She remembered having nodded off, the last thought she reluctantly remembered was wanting to cling to Koona. And Koona asking her why she was so afraid. Although she felt like it was obvious after revealing to Koona the disaster in her youth. The next thing she knew, it was the morning and was sleeping alone on Koona's couch, covered with a light sheet and embraced with a body length pillow that somehow Koona had snuck in there while she slept.

"Who were you holding so close, Cat?"

Koona had taunted her playfully the next morning. Which of course caused Cat's face to flush in intense embarrassment, in the moment of the mental erase of the immediate thought of who she was actually embracing.

The fact of that pillow was not lost on her as she worked on it, over the days, what Koona had been thinking when she said that. If she was not mocking her just a little.

Because fuck if Koona too had not felt that - that closeness that wanted to be that evening. Cat had not even told her the whole story of how she came to call her, and some important details of the night with Mali. But they had just hung out and chatted, more lightly than anything the last few meetings. Like old times. Despite all that floated around in the ether, they really were best friends. Time and separation had not changed any of that, it seemed. Despite whatever else was floating around, at least that had been constant.

Best friends.

It was like the melancholic day and weather simply was a mirror of the feeling in her. The kind of day that reminds you how alone you really are in life. And makes you feel the tears at bay for how much you long for company.

Enduring company.

Company like...

Like this week.

Perfect company.

If she could fix it so neither of them would find someone, they could just stay like this. No problem. Happily. It did not have to be more necessarily, at least it seemed to Cat.

But, if Koona met someone???

Now that was not a pleasant thought.

As their two other friends chortled over some recounted situation, Koona turned to Cat.

"So what, Cat?" she whispered quietly, catching her friend, again off in another world. This weird spaced-out distance seemed to be coming more often with her. She stared at her. Into her eyes. Cat couldn't go further nor let go, so she met Koona there. Well, better put, the feeling was submitting to Koona like an open book.

No choice with those eyes.

It was not like she could even say anything, they were in company of other friends... friends who knew...

Nothing of this.

This.

What 'this'???

Cat broke eye contact first and shook her head. How much she wanted to say something. But the moment the impulse would arise, the thought would come to interrupt it. Because, how much more damage would she cause if she was wrong. Even if she could say it right now.

It was weird to her. Like mixed feelings... but yet, something seemed so clear and unequivocal.

What my body is saying. My heart.

In that moment she wanted to just cry.

That's what , Koona.

Right Cat, just friends.

You're so full of shit.

Because every night, without fail, arriving home after spending time together there was a void. It wasn't like before. As friends. Because before, even if she did feel lonely at times, she knew Koona would always be there for her. The next day. The day after. And always. Even if she had someone in her life. Or Koona.

But not now.

It had crept in like thoughts, images driven by longings in her that almost seemed better kept at bay because of the problems they'd cause. The feeling of getting into bed, her *own* body length pillow melting into her and embracing *her* back.

Koona's embrace.

Her.

Cat's new, 'whimsically' purchased body-length pillow being an extension of Koona's own, and then connecting to Koona herself. The feeling of closeness and warmth that was just seeping out of her heart and desire, as if from under the carpet.

She kept it at bay but she was not stupid enough to pretend it didn't exist. Because it did.

Mental erase or none.

Cat smirked to herself forgetting where she was, that she was the object of Koona's immediate attention.

So I feel things. That are not conflicted... except...

But what if things fail? She wondered too, if she was uncomfortable being seen as a lesbian - in a Dee-Dee couple, rare in Thailand. But no, it was so unusual but contrary, in fact if anything she wanted to be seen with Koona, as Koona's woman, even possessed by her, not unlike a Tom would be with a Dee, but in Koona's case despite her newly externalized strength, was still a woman. Not only a woman, a striking woman. A woman who captivated her but still a woman. Feminine. Beautifully feminine. And she loved that. She wanted that too. Feminine and strong.

And to be the same back.

Wow. I'm coming apart at the seams.

It hit her that all she knew - and saw - about female romance was Tom and Dee's. Two feminine women together, it wasn't looked at so well. It was if Tom's weren't seen as women in Thailand, but like katoey men, transmen, male.

"Who cares anymore," Cat murmured, to Koona's amusement at the long delay and apparent randomness.

"Fuck Cat" she whispered laughing, "you're really on the moon tonight aren't you?" a smile Cat that felt so seductive it hit hard and brought her present again.

I'm so screwed.

Is Koona taunting me?

Does she see it?

Is this how girl-friends communicate?

She did not honestly know anymore. She realized she might be very well losing her grip on reality.

Cat, in the pain of conflict and despair whispered scathingly, "So, tell me about your girlfriends?"

She immediately regretted what she said and how disingenuous it was. And she felt sad. She was torturing her friend, who...

Koona raised her eyebrows to the ceiling as her own heart sunk. She had caught herself - albeit subconsciously, hoping again. How long had this been going on for?! Something she swore she would not do here with Cat. A mixed emotion of that sadness coupled with a bit of anger too.

Which unleashed what she actually whispered back...

"Well, I'm here with you, aren't I? Every night this week if I'm counting right. That tell you something?

Which she did not mean to sound anything like it came out, either, her anger betraying her true feelings. It was supposed to mean that she was sacrificing. It came out anything but that.

Because it was the truth.

Quietly and secretly Cat's heart smiled.

At least... I'm not crazy.

It felt real. This was a real thing. A could-be thing. She was not imagining things or hoping for what she'd already turned away and could no longer have.

Cat smiled her Thai 'teasing' smile, Koona returning her Thai 'devious achievement' smile.

A win.

A dance the Thai could play par excellence. Cat winked back at Koona as they both returned to the general conversation for the rest of the evening.

Parallel Life

Omaha, Nebraska

Sometime near the present.

The group sat on the steps of the Crossroads Mall, 72nd and Dodge, just west of midtown Omaha. It was a clear, slightly cool late afternoon. Just normal, down-to-earth real Midwest girls, although facts being, any one of them would fit in just fine in New York or London. And each on their own would have made it in such cities. They were the *different one's*, outcasts and rebels in their own way. But the smaller city kept them close in ways that maybe would not have happened elsewhere.

They were all busy and had gone their own ways in the paths of their lives but they made time at least once a month to all be together and do what they knew -- to make mischief. At the moment the only thing seemingly in common besides their friendship was that they had all miraculously become single within the period of a couple months. As if it was contagious. Neither one complained. They each wanted out for their own reasons.

Sitting up on the higher step to the left was Anastasia. Slender, with a slightly long angular face but a curved, upturned nose and wide, expressive big blue eyes. The poised dancer of the little group, she loved jumping around gracefully and playing with movement. Everyone had thought it all was something she would grow out of, but now having passed 40, not a chance. As a young girl they tried to have her channel it. Ballet class... well... was a disaster in her youth and she had been extracted, the actual event was one which was never discussed

publicly but only in the quiet intimacy among the dance teachers of Omaha and surrounding areas for time to come and *not* something Ana ever would talk about herself.

To anyone.

She was smiling, laughing and lightly waving her hand at her friend -- an apparently tall, even while seated dirty blond -- 'get out of here' as the apparent cause of the hilarity. That was Jessi and she was just the clown, driving them to tears, always. And Natalia, wide smile over to the right, as if biting her tongue. The quiet one, shy with a few years on the other two, but always on call to join the fun. From early on age meant nothing to any of them.

They had been friends most of their lives, seemed only yesterday Jessi on the nursery school playground was still working out the pronunciation saying 'Anaia' like a sing-song, meaning Anastasia, a very difficult name. They were like twins only from different parents, and they lived next door to each other. Always inciting the intrigue, Anastasia could never resist. The irresistible love of laughter and the smile brought them together and whatever they could do to bring it on, it would be done. But they were kind too and never mean. They just liked to have fun and it wasn't fun to see someone hurt or cry.

So that day when the two came on a crying Natalia, their hearts bled. Natalia was *big*. She looked to them like an adult, she was in fifth grade, they had seen her! But now she was sitting by the big oak tree with her head down looking at her knees as the tears fell. The other two approached at a distance and stood there. They both were a little afraid, even the apparently fearless Jessi.

Still was a big girl even if she was crying.

Was this okay?

Jessica, the clown, put on a big stupid smile and stood there waiting for her audience to look up. Ana stood there watching Jessica and the crying girl wondering what to do. Then Ana had an idea. She walked over and sat down next to her, her back also against the tree, looking over, with kind big brown eyes just said, "are you okay?".

The crying girl turned and looked at her, tears running down her cheek and sniffled with her nose, "They are so mean to me. I am just new here. Why do they hate me, they don't even know me?", she sobbed, "They pushed me and spilled my books and didn't let me pick them up. So I came to the tree.", she continued, the words 'the tree' as if it had a special meaning.

"Where did you come from?", asked an approaching Jessica, still with some remnant of a smile.

Natalia looked at her for a second, as if maybe there was danger and if it was okay. She turned to Ana to check, "This is Jessica. She's a bit crazy, but she's my friend, it's okay."

Then as if on prompt, Jessi broke in, "Well, this is Ana - and she likes Tigger, you know, the tiger?" Natalia nodded quietly as Jessi continued, "she's also crazy."

Natalia smirked at the two, "Like Tigger? Really?"

Jessica sat down in front of them and looked at the new girl. When she did, Natalia smiled, "I always wanted to meet Tigger. I thought Tigger was a boy though?"

"Tigger is whoever they want to be!" smiled Ana. Which solidified the deal and brought a real smile to Natalia.

"I'm Natalia," she said, "My parents, we moved here a few weeks ago. We always move. I hate it. I have no friends."

"Well you have two now!" blurted Jessica. Ana nodded.

"So they took your books?!" asked Jessica, adding, "Who?"

"Over there, those boys." They could all see the little group of about five boys and there were in fact some books scattered on the ground. Third graders.

"I'll get them for you," Jessica turned serious. Kids in her own class.

Over time, it would become known to never mess with Jessi. An unwritten rule that had yet to be unwritten.

Walking the length of the school yard, she approached the boys, "Did you take away Natalia's books?", she questioned. They looked at her, and one scruffy face boy piped up, "Who's Natalie?", pausing, "and what if we did? Then what?"

"It's not Natalie. It's Natalia," corrected Jessica, pausing, staring at him, buying a few moments, "and those are her books!", she pointed to the scattering, a few with bindings spread open, face down, a couple others flat. "She's my friend and you don't do that to my friend!" Jessica filled with indignant emotion, which was like the combined feeling of being able to run fast - faster than all the boys even a few grades up - and that of falling off the edge on a roller coaster.

She bent down to pick up the books, as the boy, asserting apparent dominion over the mess began the motion to kick her away with his right leg, more like a shoo than a kick, "get away, we can do what we want. Go over there with the other girls," he pointed at the far side of the yard with a group playing hop scotch.

Jessica saw the leg coming and also saw red. Like in slow motion, and instead of accepting sure impact, however light, she sprung into her legs and at the same time grabbed the approaching foot, standing up. The boy fell over on his butt like he had been knocked over with a feather. The rest of the group chortled at the fate of their leader.

"I said," she continued, "you don't do that to my friend. Got it?", as she put her little black closed sandaled foot onto his chest like she'd seen in the movies. The boy said nothing.

So her legacy began. Jessi. Sweetheart. Protector.

Without opposition, she picked up the books and started to walk away, turning her head to watch her back. Some things are innate. Wherever she got her talents, it was not learned, it was a gift. One which would be tested, often not to her choosing, repeatedly.

And so was the glue that bound the little triad, on that fateful day. And set up Jessi for a learning moment that influenced her up to this day.

As she approached Anastasia and Natalia, she smiled holding up the books like a trophy, depositing them at Natalia's side. Natalia looked up with big brown eyes of thanks, smiling.

"What's she doing?"

Jessi looked over at what Natalia meant. Ana was standing over on the playground stage with her arms and chest open, head tilted slightly back.

"Oh..." Jessi thought about how to explain this, "You best just watch what comes next..."

"Its time for dance time!" announced Anastasia, sprouting up to her tall poise, "hey, there are hoops, lets get them!" as she ran over toward the building as if others were in a race and they were at risk of missing out. Grabbing the hula-hoops as the other girls approached, she handed-threw each one as she ran past back to the shade of the tree. "Now look at this! I'm Michael Jackson!!!" as she put the hoop up at her waist and proceeded to do successive twirl-pirouettes gracefully moving across into the tanbark with a moonwalk, stirring up a cloud of dust. She was smiling fiercely and completely alive. Anyone could see, this girl was nothing normal, not in motion.

The other two joined, Jessica as a background dancer and Natalia shyly alternating holding the hoop like she was looking through it as if what was going on in front was a TV show, and shyly twirling it above her head.

Natalia's family never moved again. Jessi was challenged but never defeated - in smile or in physical prowess. And Anastasia became, well stayed herself, generally known as Ana. Tucked away in time, in Omaha, waiting to be discovered.

Ultimatum

The two were now sitting in a comfortable cafe-lounge. It was Friday night and conveniently, neither had other plans. Each professing no desire to do anything crazy or stay up late.

"Let's just go hang out, okay?" Koona had suggested at Cat's unusual ambivalence in plans, apparently continuing her regular trips to the netherworld where she seemed to be spending more and more time lately.

Maybe Cat has changed.

Koona too knew that she herself had changed a lot over the year lapse so gave it not more than a passing wonder.

"Sure, why not", Cat wanted nothing more than to just be around Koona, ever since their reunion. Despite the fact that she was clearly having trouble keeping herself on planet earth.

So here they sat, in the dim lighted mostly wooden room of the cafe, each in a big wood framed chair with plush pillows, perpendicular to one another. Koona was staring out straight ahead, watching the passers by on the sidewalk strolling the Ari neighborhood, one of the more posh areas of Bangkok. It was like she was in a trance too. The couples conversation easily came and went all evening. Very dreamy.

Now Cat was watching her, head turned to the side as she nursed her tea. Koona, sensing the attention, breaking her daze, turning back to Cat. Something in Cat would not let herself let go of the gaze. Their eyes locked and Cat smiled, holding the gaze still.

"What?!" Koona intoned, raising a shoulder and smirk. She'd also wondered about the different feeling going on since the re-encounter, but neither was she going to make any kind of move.

I will not do that again. To myself or to Cat, to our friendship.

But she was enjoying it, lack of physical intimacy and sex aside, more than the company of any of the women she had been in the past year. The thought that she would even trade the sex for this anytime came to her. Fact was tonight she actually was, turning down yet another invitation from who now only seemed to be another flavor of the month.

Koona's mouth dropped just perceptibly with Cat's words, "you're beautiful."

At first her heart flushed with warmth and blushed. The same sending the love to other parts of her body, which she quickly ordered to behave nevertheless. But then she felt angry, not knowing why. She felt in a bind. Kind of ruining the chill flow of the evening.

No.

I'm fucking tired of this.

Because it now dawned on her that this whole week she was still hanging out, waiting for Cat.

Like in the past.

And we know how that ended.

She had been hurt badly by her own holding on.

Stupid.

They could be friends but she was not going to do this to herself again. Cat knew where she stood. Cat could do or say something if she wanted to.

And she hasn't.

The fuck if that isn't obvious now!

She felt the need to stand, the inner turmoil driving her.

So she did.

"Where are you going?" Cat felt jeopardy, disconnected, feeling a little hurt at the response.

"I need some air," and without eye contact, Koona walked out to the front of the cafe.

Cat took a deep breath and a minute later followed her friend out. She found Koona leaning one knee up and foot against the front wall, holding a lit cigarette casually in her dangling left hand as she looked the other direction, oblivious or avoiding Cat.

Another piece of Koona 2.0?

No matter how repulsed she was by smoking, something about Koona smoking was kind of sexy, much less, like that against the wall. It was tomboy-like and Cat found it extremely hot.

Koona spoke without looking at her or changing her focus which must have been on some faraway object straight ahead.

"Cat you might not want to hear this. But I'm your best fucking friend. Forever, right? Through everything. You know that. And you know what pisses me off the most? Really?"

Cat was speechless. Koona had never spoken so strongly to her. She shook her head, breathed in and held it, because one way or another she knew this was going to hurt.

Cat could see Koona's eyebrows raise to the heavens, filling the gap which was to have been her own response.

"Fucking Mali. Why did you run to me to talk about him - her?" she paused, still staring directly ahead and making no eye contact, "And how in the fuck am I supposed to feel, you meet him - her - whatever - and you spend the night just like that?"

She turned abruptly now eyeing Cat, intending laser fire projecting from her eyes to break through and break this all apart even if it meant total destruction of their friendship, so was the rage running through her.

Cat did not totally get where she was going. Did not want to, truth be told. She did not like this path.

And then Koona went in for what she thought was the final blow,

"And you know me forever but wouldn't even venture a kiss, instead you disappear for a whole year and show up because your confused about yourself," and then going on a limb albeit one that felt very solid to her, "you know, if you don't feel anything for me then fuck it. Just go away and stay away. I feel like you're just toying with me. Probably how you toyed with Mali. Just like a Cat with a ball of yarn. I'm afraid that's what's going to happen here. When you get bored or what you want you just run away. I'm sure that's how Mali feels. Because you haven't professed anything of substance or real feeling to me..."

But she was not done. Cat retained her breath.

"Look, I know you were hurt. I get it. It was bad. I get that too. But Cat you're an adult now. Adults have to know themselves and try to get things right, you know?" Koona arched her brows in the rhetorical question stating the obvious.

"You know, if you're not into me then you should not be here hanging with me, you should be out with a guy or whoever you're into. Fuck, it's Friday night. And I should be with someone who is..."

Koona slapped her forehead no-duh.

Then a random thought hit her...

Is Cat infected with the Tom and Dee crap like everyone else Thai?

Truth be told, that's why she now stuck to foreign women.

Hmmm... But back to business at hand...

"So you know what, make it fucking right Cat. Get clear with yourself what you are and what you aren't, Jesus Christ...", Koona was remembering Cat's revelation, "Even take your time," she paused as if gathering wood for the fire, "But no matter-fucking-what, go clear things up with Mali who I am sure feels right now like a piece of shit."

She actually really felt for Mali, simply because she knew what Mali had ahead to accept her own nature, from what Koona understood. Not to mention what dating would be like probably.

“And if there’s anything left for you to say to me after you do all that, you know how to find me. But I’ve had enough. It hurts too fucking much and I’m not going to let you do this to me again. I’ve paid my dues this year. Go pay yours. Whatever the hell they are.”

And with that Koonaa pushed away from the wall and stormed off into the rain.

Cat, having stored up some of her own hurt and frustration from the hard but truthful words yelled after her, “well you should cut your hair shorter and stop wearing makeup, so then at least I’d know where you stand!”

Of course with immediate regret.

*Cat... jesus christ what’s wrong with you??? You like... **more than like** how she is... as she is... and you fucking know it!*

Koonaa stopped dead in her tracks and turned around as if in slow motion, a furrowed and questioning ‘what the fuck’ expression on her face.

I knew it!

_The fucking Tom and Dee. _

And for a split second her heart warmed as it at least meant Cat was thinking of something...

More than nothing...

With her.

Then she let it go and kept on walking, not looking back.

Fuck it.

Fuck this!

The Motley Crew and Thailand

Fate was set in motion at the LGBT dive in downtown Omaha. On the outside was was the rainbow flag, and in small almost invisible letters were the words *The Dive Club*. It was their place. A place where Jessi got along with everyone including the guys - *well they’re gay guys... gay guys are cool* — and well... it was not like the West Omaha sports bars, or what Jessi would call, *prick gardens*.

“I bet none of us have the balls to get the fuck out of here, not even for a minute!” Jessi placed her beer down in punctuation just a bit too forcefully, “I am so sick of all the bullshit. You know, even since that stupid thing on the playground, its like every man in town has to come after me. Thinking they have *something* I want. Or fuck they are so studly they think they can ‘change me’ and their goddam Christian fuck-face conversion therapy bullshit,” the last words in air quotes, “And then turning rough when I turn them away as if the idiots are still trying to avenge their playground-retard ancestor. Because... because... they should freakin already know!!!!” she ranted, “You know what, you know what? We should go somewhere where people smile and are just freakin happy! Whats the deal with this place anyway?”

They all knew that for some reason Jessi brought a lot of this stuff upon herself. The Omaha world was not overall horrible or angry. In fact it was an often unknown friendly gem of the Midwest, with a thriving liberal and LGBT community. The west-side conservatives aside. But the one truth is that Jessi did fight, if she had to, for equality and things that meant something. Aside from being attacked, then woe to the idiot. But also from some internal impulse of rage that even she couldn't really understand fully. It just felt like she was being held back and frustrated by something.

Natalia smiled, humoring her, although she too would leave for her own reasons, "so where would that be?

Anastasia broke in excitedly, "I know, I know! Thailand! They say its the 'Land of Smiles'," she made finger quotes in the air, very happy with her recall.. from somewhere.

"Hmmm..." Natalia leaned over to go into her purse hanging on the tall chair and grabbed her phone. Clicking at the browser 'images thailand'. And there they were.

"Oh my god! Look at this?!" she overflowed, the other two pulling themselves almost on top of the tall bar table just like children, to get a view and the phone now placed flat in the middle, "Its beautiful! Yeah, I would smile all the time if I lived there too!" Pictures of pristine beaches, temples and smiling people filled the scrolling screen end to the end.

"Well, Anastasia doesn't have to go there, she's, well, she's never not smiling!" Jessi piped in.

"So maybe she will get all serious and forget how to dance there!"

"I think we should go. I mean, we're all at dead ends, right? You want to quit your job," Anastasia eyed Natalia, "and you, miss warrior, you are tired of fighting, and me? Well, I just want to be alive finally and it feels like no matter how much or how hard I dance and jump, I get nowhere. There's something in here," motioning to her heart, "that tells me there is more than this. Maybe this is the chance?!"

So it was settled. The three sat there, hovering over the Expedia site on the pathetic little screen, booked three round trip tickets to Bangkok departing the next week. To hell with passports and visas, they'd figure that out later. Done and done.

Jessi grabbed the phone, as the others complained, "Hold on! Hold on! Shhhhhh..." she admonished as if she going to dredge up the secret of the universe.

Images Thailand lesbians

"Oh my god!!!!", Jessi crooned, "they are soooooooo cute!!!! I'm going and never coming home," she touted the phone to the other two, "they're boyish and prettier than the women here at the same time, no freakin way!"

"Well I wouldn't know about that, are the boys there cute?" asked Natalia.

Anastasia, the apparently more worldly one broke in, "The ladyboys!!! I wanna to see the ladyboys!!!"

Everything went silent. The other two looked at her dumbfounded.

"I'm just sayin!" Ana intoned a whine.

The phone was silently passed to her with pressed eyes.

Thai ladyboys

“Oh my god!!!! Bigger oh my god than your oh my god, Jessi!!!!” she almost shrieked, discovering that ‘safe search’ was apparently off on this phone “Check them out, they are hot! They look like total girls, except for...” pause, long pause as she scrolled down, “Oh my god, next to some of them I look like a freaking guy!!!” she laughed full out, tears surfacing, “How about you Jessi, you’re going to get shown up! We’re going to have to *show ourselves* to prove we’re girls!” The hyperbole not missed as all three were beautiful women in their own right. And another thing for sure: successful.

Natalia grabbed her phone, “Geez, its going to look like I was surfing for porn!”, she tried hard at the comeback, reddening with embarrassment as she realized mid-sentence she’d made a tactical error in the current company.

“Well, you’re the one with safe search turned off!” returned Anastasia, pausing for effect, “nnnnnnnnnn... Nataliaaaaaaa!” ending the held syllable into a smile-laugh, “I mean... watch ya holding back from us?!”

They were all virtually in tears not from any single thing but the combination. And so was the magic of the triad. The alcohol not hurting things. Nor the apparent craziness of their reckless travel plan. The three friends headed out of the club. There was nothing more that could be done that night to top the last hour nor were they going to attempt it.

Jessi pulled on her leather jacket and got on her motorcycle. Anastasia in her black BMW 500, her ridiculous character foil, giving Natalia a lift to the start of the road about a mile from her house. The answer always being, ‘Why? because I like it, I like to walk’.

‘Insane’ thought Ana as she dropped her off. Natalia was of all of them the most successful and owned a small acreage at the edge of town.

Ruminations

Cat called in sick for work. Something she virtually never did on impulse although had full prerogative as owner. But it was Saturday, they could manage without her. She felt so bound up she could hardly move. It had been one of those nights, of a kind she had not had for years, where instead of consciously relaxing and luxuriously getting into bed, instead, like a teenager without any pre-bedtime routine, leaving makeup on because nothing mattered, she crawled in and curled up in a ball. Willing sleep or simply to disappear from existence.

Now sitting on the couch mid-morning she caught a glance of herself in reflection on her phone. Not a pretty sight. But beyond that, foreign. “Who am I?” she asked, shaking her head. Because the woman she saw was not the polished person she’d created herself to be. She now saw a woman with an edge. A woman who makes mistakes. Hurts others. A woman who...

Feels something mad intense for her best friend.

If they were still friends.

Cat had been on the edge of reaching out to bring Koona close last night. But the way Koona put it, there was really nothing she could say or do that would change anything in that moment. And it hurt bad.

Not the less because Koona was right.

And she did want to make this right. But that also meant coming straight with herself. So to speak, at least.

Because - and she realized it - from the 'girlfriends' question the other night to toying with her last night, she was playing with Koona the way she had with Mali. At least that is how it appeared. With Mali as a feeling, leading to an exploration. But with no deep regard to the other as a statement of anything in her heart. Not because it was not there. But something that although she did not know why she would - she could rationalize and walk away from as an 'experiment'. Making the actual thought conscious... it stung. She did this to Mali. Would she have done that to Koona? Without Koona's tough love last night?

A 'piece of shit', those were Koona's words. Cat started to cry. She'd never ever ever think so lowly of Koona. Nor Mali. Heck, anyone!

Cat had thought herself to be an open, honest and caring person. Who was this person she was now confronted with?

It was only noon and she needed a nap, her head felt like it wanted to burst apart.

After a long nap, she decided to get out and take a walk, clear her head.

It had been raining most of the afternoon but had cleared. Bangkok was fresh, even with a slight coolness, something to cherish when it did happen. She had made her way to the path along the lake at the long park along the road near her condo.

If I'd only listened a year ago.

I hope it's not too late.

A deliciously fresh late afternoon had resulted, and the skyscrapers loomed on the other side of the park accenting a now clear blue sky. Somehow the open space and clearness helped, it seemed.

She kept coming back to the moment when she had gazed at Koona last night. She could not get out of her head that woman's beauty. In all the mess, in that moment she was most clear. And just about to declare herself. Which made it so ironic.

It was that moment when she came clear on everything. Because it was actually quite simple once she saw it. Life gets simpler when you stop avoiding and running. She laughed how maybe the messenger with the greatest gift was one in the same as her most feared outcome. She needed to see Mali. The sooner the better.

Mali was looking forward to packing her belongings, and finally the moment had come.

And to getting the fuck out of dodge.

Thank god that was my last night here and I'm leaving.

She chuckled, *back into the costume of insecurity*, remembering her reminiscence. Today these clothes, and the makeup and jewelry she put on felt good. So much in comparison to the attempt at 'guy mode' the last few days. As so it always was, changing to more feminine clothes - even andro clothes that were *made for women* - always felt better, like coming home.

Soon \$he'd be in Bangkok. By bus and then boarding a plane back to Chiang Rai. Finally Chiang Rai didn't feel like such a horrible place to be. In fact, for the first time felt it as \$er true home.

\$he had left \$er computer out for last, now making the one last check of email, just because.

And of all goddamn ironic things...

A message from Cat.

Just fucking because it had to be.

Mali, I try to find you but can't. I wait for you on Skype, your phone does not answer. I really would like to talk to you. If not see you. Please let me know you're okay?!

Cat

Mali felt distance now from her.

It was like putting these clothes back on, knowing this direction once again was confirmed right, inside \$er. It allayed the neuroticism of recent and and the whole situation over Cat. As well, after this hellish weekend facing \$erself, \$he realized too that Cat was not out of her mind at all for saying no to \$er. Who in the fuck shouldn't say no to someone in the place \$he was in life? \$he could hardly handle \$er own red flags, how could anyone else?!

So the answer was easy and \$he sent it off.

The Free Fuck-You

Porque el vuelo de las aves se parece

Pero el viento que las lleva no es el mismo

"The flight of the birds appear the same but it's not the same wind that carries them."

— Alejandro Lerner

It felt like deja-vu except the past time had been real. As such felt \$er life, bordering on the surreal. Just alone, floating around Thailand out on the limbs \$he was treading.

And Hua-Hin.

Just one night away from that place and that whole experience already felt like a dream... itself was like an experience from a book...

That someone else wrote.

\$he was dressed in black yoga pants, converses and a black tank top. After the walk over to the park, \$he felt strong and powerful, even grounded. The same which of course would erode generally after daybreak as \$he walked back home through the growing morning crowd, sidewalk gridlocks and curious or other emotion expressing eyes. Once again the unfortunate part of 'body in the world' and soul not feeling as one.

And today - as despair often seemed to do - it made \$er feel sultry, want to be fucked, surrender, taken. Not some mental fantasy. The feeling. The feeling that never made sense unless \$he was a woman. And that same slippery slope \$he'd futilely spent the last several days trying to unravel once again. And in the face of passing men on the street especially this feeling felt uncomfortable.

And the one thing that \$he still did not allow \$erself the hope to consider - that \$he could physically transition, including \$er face and even come to embody to the world everything \$he felt.

Well, more of it at least.

Mali shook \$er head. \$er life was beyond surreal by now.

Not to mention Cat. No matter how sliced, that was the most surreal of all of it.

That she exists.

That they met.

Found a friendship.

That it happened.

Fully happened, regardless of how it ended.

The last time here was with a high hope.

This time, \$he was simply listless. Almost directionless.

Like there's just nothing I can do or give a shit about at this point that would make any difference.

But Cat had asked \$er to come.

Again.

Plus there was a good degree of anger. Cat had made it clear that nothing was promised on that night. \$he had agreed. But it still hurt. They had gotten so close leading up to it. And Cat didn't deny the depth of the experience.

Just another time of not being that which the other wants.

But good enough for some passing moments I guess.

\$he did not hate Cat, but just felt ambivalent, fueled by the anger to destroy something of it, if it were possible. Although \$he was also curious what Cat was going to say.

What more could she possibly say than what already?

\$he would just sit and listen and stare.

\$he'd hold \$erself close now.

That's the plan.

I'll probably suck at that too.

Cat was now coded as danger in \$er system.

But Mali also knew how fast \$he seemed to forgive anyone.

\$he'd look like a rockstar, at least tonight. Not because that is what \$he felt but seemed to be what Cat liked, \$he'd intuited.

Cat can eat her fucking heart out.

Then I'll go.

That was the best possible outcome.

I've earned a free 'fuck-you'.

Mali smirked to \$erself contemplating \$er own psychobabble.

\$he didn't care, and in \$er mind and heart \$he was already thinking of being back in Chiang Rai.

And of a session with \$er dildo that \$he'd not brought on what was supposed to be a two day trip. Fact was that the fem had come over \$er this morning, as it always did when \$he'd try for a period to 'be a guy' and it was enough in Hua Hin of built-up misery that flipped \$er.

It wasn't a frilly or foofy feminine feeling. \$he'd never in \$er life had the desire to to be a 'sissy' or put on ruffles or a tutu. Or be demeaned or taken as a 'less than'. It was a raw sexual feeling that was larger than \$he was. It was not even about \$er sexual identity as a concept but simply about feeling and expressing something that came as nature.

Secretly inside under the anger \$he was hoping for a repeat of that night with Cat. At least an offer of such from her. But too \$he knew that even if offered, \$er anger would win and \$he'd walk away albeit with veiled tears. \$he always had in situations like this.

Yeah... integrity and self-respect preserving anger.

Albeit the outcome being a little regret at times...

The time flew on the thirty minute walk to the park in \$er own world of thoughts and feelings.

\$he was now in the same place. At the same park. Same lake. Same time. Same blue glowing 'TMB' sign. Except that today \$he held \$er purple and gold hula-hoop in front of \$er as \$he appreciated the stillness of the pre-dawn.

Cause today is fuck you day.

A fuck you day.

Why in the fuck am I even here? Being Cat's bitch?

\$he almost was going to just practice \$er standing like normal. But since \$he'd missed hooping for the last two days, it felt better to do a hybrid practice - hooping and then whatever else felt right after.

Especially given the pool of emotions and raw desire \$he was swimming in.

To Mali hoopedancing really had nothing to do with showing off as others often made it be, or even being seen, although it could feel good if it just happened. \$he hadn't chosen hooping for any reason other than it felt amazing and taught \$er things about \$er own body no other exercise could.

Even on an off-day, it was still the favorite part of \$er day. It was more like hoopdance chose \$er and \$he just kept doing it - because it reinforced itself in feeling.

What \$he didn't realize - and wouldn't for another year or so, is that hooping was the place in which she'd carved out a daily activity that allowed \$er to be totally \$erself. Because for \$er, being authentic, meant being at one with \$er body. And that \$he had - even up to today with the problems \$he had - had come a tremendous distance. The world was just too spiny to be *that* all the time in it.

'Being a guy' in Hua Hin, even with all the time on \$er hands \$he had not wanted to hoop. The proscription was authentic from the persona \$he'd worn.

Yeah, as if being a guy for me is fucking life affirming...

Growing up she had pinned it as feeling like there's like a million volts of electricity in her but running through thin wires. Causing gridlock. Those thin wires replacing the flowing and authentic conduit of life energy. Except that \$he couldn't remember ever feeling that original vitality but \$he knew it existed.

Every day as \$he danced with the hoop, it was a day further toward having more authenticity than \$he'd ever had previously. Since childhood \$he'd been after just this, something no-one had told or taught \$er. Standing meditation and hooping themselves also being organic gravitations. It was one of the few things \$he 'just knew' - \$he'd learn from people, teachers but then move on quickly once \$he realized they were going in a direction that was not what \$he knew to be right for \$erself.

Hooping was the apex of the somatic system \$he was creating for \$erself - and \$he hoped, would be applicable to the world. A hoop session was only as good as it could start slow. Connecting to each area - the bottoms of feet, knees, hips and pelvis, lower ribs, shoulders, collarbone, neck and head.

Having gone through the slow, methodical but equally passionate warmup - and it was still to music where \$he just disciplined the emotion to work through each of these individual areas, then \$he could let go.

And know and be who I really am once more.

Not just who \$he was today. But always. This place - of embodied expression - was always the same, always true, always the highest. And really had a lot to do with the true reason \$he'd ditch pretty much everything else in life - money, power, things - to follow.

It was the inner guru some people talk of. It was the conviction to dismiss body workers, martial arts teachers and pretty much all therapists one by one when eventually their guidance did not match this solid reality.

It also helped to be out in public. \$he did not understand it fully yet but it was an affirmation of \$erself. It was a form of defiance.

With \$er iPod shuffle clipped onto a headband, blindfold around \$er eyes, \$he slowly eased into movement. Not much different than as \$he would have eased from standing still into slow motion. As it was in the minute movement and immediate feedback from this higher knowing part of \$er brain - the part \$he had been courting \$er whole life - where the secrets to authenticity resided.

And true, those whispers, the same whispers were those that called her to the fem. Without them \$he'd right now be in Mexico probably. In love with a woman and married. With a family probably. It was still heartbreaking the possibility of this other world - of which \$he still felt too much like the current was the dark alternative reality \$he'd chosen.

Be it as it may, the dark alternative had this. A daily affirmation of life. Dancing with the hoop to music, was the most life affirming thing \$he'd ever had, on every level. It compensated in a way for the social and romantic void, the dreams that were getting further and further away on the horizon of possibility in the rear-view mirror.

In the past the passion, when it tried to emerge through the physical, would overwhelm \$er body. In earlier days it meant being even more tense, head forward and feeling stuck in a defense posture than at the start. Which actually seemed to be a vicious cycle. It meant punching things - both from the caliber of the passion \$he had inside but also from the anger and frustration of not feeling 'at one' with \$erself.

Or even just okay in the world.

Back then it seemed to have little to do about gender.

It made \$er think of - and actually feel - in \$er being and reactions - like an angry teenager. Over time \$he did start understanding that the gridlock was nothing more than opposing muscles and muscles that should work one at a time were contracting at the same time and then fighting each other to decontract, but the fight actually was making them both more tense. \$he wondered if \$he communicated this as an educational program if it could help people - people like \$er - who feel stuck and at the end of their ropes. Angry people who don't know why or how to fix it, and feel it in their bodies.

It was only \$er ex-chiropractor and girlfriend who had started breaking the circuit. But as if some part of \$er knew something much wiser, \$he found hooping and other methods of working out this problem on \$er own, as the boyfriend-girlfriend thing showed to be unsustainable as \$he grew.

The hoop was the perfect complement to standing. It speaks. It doesn't lie about the degree of embodiment, poise and grace one is in and able to attain while one dances with it.

... and listens.

Mali knew first hand that there was further to go with the hoop. There were things \$he saw women do, that \$he couldn't do with the same grace. Because the defense posture was still there. But the hoop was the barometer, and the path. That \$he knew.

The curious thing is that blindfolded, as \$he generally practiced, \$he did not need a mirror to tell \$er what needed correcting. The more natural - and often proscribed the movement (for a man) - tended to be exactly what looked best when \$he looked in the mirror when the blindfold came off.

It was as if \$er body could feel a parallel existence and it already knew how good \$he could be. Maybe \$er body knew \$he was a she. If \$he had been willing to trust that more and turn off the mind, maybe this all would have come down sooner.

Really.

I even told those fudge-packers I liked Michael Bolton's music.

— Character 'Michael Bolton' in Office Space

Mali wore tight jeans and one of \$er signature black andro tanks. Combat boots and the usual makeup and jewelry except that both were taken up a notch. All silver jewelry, thicker edgy rings in \$er ears and even a larger nose stud. \$he didn't know quite why \$he did this or the real cause of the mood \$he was in other than it felt like aggression.

The lovechild of longing and frustration.

A 'fuck-you too' I don't give a shit anymore attitude.

Yet \$he felt feminine - \$erself - tonight. That was the thing, for \$er andro clothes were fem. Having begun back on the light dose of estrogen and anti-androgen on whim \$he'd picked up at the pharmacy upon returning to Bangkok, they seemed to be helping.

It wasn't a bad mood, if anything was a devil-may-care one that got \$er to do things, take action and risks. The same which also got \$er through the 'fuck you' phase of not caring about outcomes, as \$he'd learned through life experience that anticipating disappointment was important to \$er emotional survival.

But it was not without a pang of sadness as \$he was ironically led to the same table as last time. Cat was not there yet. And the realization that \$he missed Cat's friendship, even more now after the long four days of solitude. With all the disharmony within, \$he desperately needed someone to talk to.

Could that person be Cat? But...

"Nice table", Cat smirked as \$he was shown in.

What was not so good was that...

All the feelings \$he'd distanced from were here now, back in the present.

\$he shook her head internally...

That fucking night.

As Cat seated herself, gracefully as ever, but she was different. Well, she was in jeans and sandals. She just seemed looser, not so tightly wound. Less Japanese-like and if Mali had her druthers, just a tinge more counter-culture Thai. Not like the flimsy ultra-feminine women that were the staple there with their helpless end emotional airs. Not that Cat was ever this as... simply just polished.

Always with substance, unlike so many of the ultra-fems.

She was still polished but there was a little grit and some sand in it. Mali liked the change.

Maybe it meant that...

Cat too noticed Mali back in the middle-of-the-road rockstar mode and up a notch. And so typical of Mali, not trying to be feminine actually for some reason came across that way so much more, in stark contrast to the gay-ish outfit of their last meeting here which helped no one.

That was interesting too.

Especially given what she needed to say.

Cat put her elbows on the table and looked into Mali's eyes moving the mood immediately to the business of what seemed like utmost urgency.

It came out like a confession... No dinner, no small talk. Just the truth.

"Mali, I've not been a very nice person, I know I've hurt you and I owe you an apology."

She stopped, sat back, and looked down, shaking her head.

"I don't know where to start".

How should she tell Mali about Koona? She had barely ever mentioned her to \$er. She'd not thought this out, words usually were not an issue for her.

"Wherever you want. You have as much time as you like, I've no plans", Mali smiled. Regardless \$he liked that it felt like Cat was veering back to the authentic openness they had always had before *that night*. But too, \$he still was upset inside.

"Sure. Well..."

So Cat proceeded to tell Mali about her youth in Japan, about Koona, the vacation, the last moment by the pool, their friendship, the year of lost contact and just up to the night Mali stayed over. But not about the last week and the re-encounter. She suspected that would be simply cruel.

"Mali, this is the hard part, and it's something I don't understand, but it's something I want to tell you. You might hate me forever, but I'll be at peace because it's the truth. And like it or not you helped me get here..."

Mali nodded.

\$he took a breath. This was probably going to sting.

"Mali, you showed me I am - I was - a repressed lesbian."

Jesus.

Of all possibly worlds Mali had imagined for tonight, this was not one of them...

Did this mean that...? And now...

"I know this now, and without that night together I might have taken a lot longer to realize this".

Mali was connecting the dots but needed everything explicitly laid out now.

"But what was it? Why?"

Although still in shock, \$er emotional eagerness for even the breadcrumbs of something positive for \$erself, \$he secretly hoped it would be that \$er softness and being had been seen and recognized.

"Mali, the only thing I can say is that you, the way you are, how soft, how you were with me, that we could just be together, feel, explore and let go, somehow..."

Cat paused because here was the hurtful part.

"It's just that something happened in me. It started in the afternoon and then when we were together more. But I kept seeing Koona. Okay, I mean even before sometime when we were together I'd all of the sudden think of her. I didn't understand it and why. Now I do. I think you brought it up in me... let me feel more free than I've ever let myself..."

Cat paused, taking a drink of water and a breath from her run-on sentence.

"You got in because I wanted you to be a guy. A guy with such a way of being. I feel cruel but I didn't do it on purpose..."

"The thing is, when... when we went over the edge, you know", she winked, "I realized I'm in love with her. And have been for a very long time. Long before you and I met."

Cat paused and added for emphasis, "In that moment I knew who I am, how I feel, how I want to love... and that it's okay for me to be this way."

The other foot had dropped. Mali knew the whole thing now and breathed. Cat was silent.

Okay, this was not everything \$he'd hoped for but...

"I'm not sure how I should take this. I mean, I thought we we're getting close. Even as friends. Was anything real? With us?"

That's what hurt. It was not just a hookup. There was so much between them. But then at the same time... what Cat was saying, it also felt validating. To know Cat liked women, at least a woman, felt like it went along with how \$he felt inside. And after the last few days \$he needed this validation badly.

"I know. I have to take responsibility that my confusion has caused this."

Mali looked at Cat who now had inclined her head to her lap.

"So you're not into me regardless of what gender I am then?" Mali smirked.

Fact was even in this moment Mali was still conscious that the entire friendship and relationship with Cat had been a gift, something that came to a confused in-between person who had...

Still...

Not worked \$erself out.

Nevertheless, \$he was a human being, with feelings.

Or so one would think.

"So now you've rejected me both as a woman and a man. I'm not sure how I should take that," Mali smirked again. If nothing \$er sarcastic sense of humor was never too far, especially in disappointment and defeat. Cat raised her eyes and caught it.

"Mali, if Koona were not in the picture, this might be another conversation. Do you realize that? Do you realize what I'm saying? Forget about me, think of what this means for you."

Koona wasn't in the fucking picture a minute ago! She barely ever mentioned her.

"Looks like a shit sandwich from where I'm sitting..." Mali couldn't help it, "It would just be someone else. What woman is going to want me as a woman looking as I do?," Mali paused, "You know damn well you could have anyone you wanted. You would choose someone else."

They sat in silence. Mali was just shaking \$er head internally.

"I know it sounds awful, and very Buddhist, but maybe you ought to trust life to show you?"

Mali nodded.

"Like us. You trusted life... me... and something happened. You learned more about you, right? You think too much. I mean, that's good, that's what makes you different. But maybe you just need to feel. Accept and move forward?"

It was like the theme of \$er life. But somehow it made sense still.

It also makes sense to get the fuck out of here.

Now.

The emotion and anger was starting to boil in Mali. It did make sense to get out of here. How could we ever have a friendship at this point? How could I ever have any face in front of her? And have to see her with Koona?

"And maybe it didn't turn out as you'd want but..."

"I think I should go now. I wish you the best, I really do," as the tears welled, because the connection \$he felt to Cat was still there, but \$he was far too pissed to care, \$he still carried all of the last four days not to mention years, "I need to turn the page. I understand what you've told me. But this is ridiculous. What the fuck do you want from me anyway?"

Cat nodded as Mali got up and turned away thankfully before the tears really started. The sobs at least did not come until \$he reached the street. It wasn't sad crying per se, but being ripped apart.

Realization crying.

The kind of crying that happens when you've lived a lie and lost your bet.

Home Again

On the cab ride back from the Chiang Rai airport, it started to rain. Pour. Cats and dogs was actually a better description. The airport was quiet at this night hour, and felt remote from the small city, and the city from Bangkok. Traveling in the taxi on the country road leading into town, the buildings and streets, evening, Friday night quiet. Felt like \$he had been away for ages.

Only a week. OMG.

Strangely, all this felt good. Familiar. Calm. Known. A refuge.

Home.

It was the first time Chiang Rai earned that feeling in \$er heart.

As they wound around a few dark corners, over the little bridge and around the last corner to Mali's apartment building, the sky truly let loose, pouring. The stopped car only a few feet from the building entrance still left no chance of not being drenched.

Jesus, only less time of it.

Mali cursed making the manic bag-grab and run to the overhang after paying the driver.__

All wet, \$he pulled \$er bag up the stairs to the second floor, to apartment 18, at the end of the hall.

With dimmed lights, \$he entered, put down her bag and began a shower. Once clean, dried and clothed, it was time to settle back in. This was home. At least for now. As much home - really more - than anything had been in the last several years, since San Diego. A place of comfort. Not huge, but more than big enough, with a lot of floor space. Perfect for stretching and hooping when it was too hot or as now, wet outside.

So full of everything - emotion, energy, \$he picked up her hoop and put on a headband to which \$he attached \$er little red colored iPod shuffle

Switching on the music, \$he blindfolded \$erself and settled in to the sound and the movement, beginning the orbit of the hoop around \$er hips. Home. This was home. \$er body, this music, the pathway to what seemed like all the light of the universe, freedom, expression. Connection, to everything and not one way, a conversation...

Words came from inside \$er heart...

Hi. I am you. I am part of you. I feel. I long to love. I love being free. This sound, this movement...

Mali reached one arm up at a time, lengthening \$er torso and neck, longing for the sky.

Being this, and dancing, it makes me feel alive where nothing else does... or did.

I Need Help!

After it was all said and done, Mali laid down on \$er yoga mat in the darkness of the night. In a different world now, \$he could breathe. Windows were closed as the rain continued to be relentless, cooling the air to something that brought Mali to verge of the long lost sensation of feeling cold, for once relishing the warm air still trapped inside.

Inhaling deeply, at the point of exhale a smile coming to \$er lips, as \$he shook \$er head. It was just all too unbelievable. \$er brain was beyond scrambled. Bankok then the escape to Hua Hin and then back to seeing Cat this evening. Then back home to Chiang Rai.

Cat's a fucking lesbian.

Jesus christ.

Saying it out loud to \$erself. Shaking \$er head again. Smiling. It made \$er laugh, the crazy irony of it all.

And \$he was into me.

Well enough for that night.

Fuck.

She found herself because of being with me.

I was the trojan horse so to speak.

Some fucking trojan.

Mali cracked up laughing at the double meaning and \$er hate-hate relationship with condoms combined with the mediocre practical use of \$er male anatomy over the years.

And then it dawned further...

if I'd had my shit together by now...

I could have been in Koonas place right now...

Maybe.

Before this... such a relationship... involved \$er being a man.

And this thing that felt so feminine inside, longing to be taken, penetrated, to embrace Cat... on the surface was so tense, a protective mechanism preventing entry to the package. So often regardless of what was really inside \$he felt so unfeminine, and the world... seemed to agree with this state, reinforce it and make it worse.

And unfortunately I seem to live my life at the whim of the outside.

The inner feminine was always there, always driving \$er but always eclipsed by the world and the resulting lockdown of \$er person.

But now it hurt more because it was maddening.

Fuck me for betraying myself and not delving in deeper.

Fuck the fucking world.

So \$he contemplated. Why didn't \$he, hadn't accepted who \$he was? \$he felt like \$he'd been doing things in that direction for years. Always going further and trying something new. But always like the timid child sitting at the edge of a pool, swishing \$er feet, waiting for it not to feel cold anymore.

And it always still felt cold.

But jump in?

Because \$he was afraid, the world was always against \$er and \$he didn't believe.

The fucking problem is that the goddam pool always has felt cold.

So now what?

\$he had felt so lost after Hua Hin.

But strangely in this moment, \$he felt a bit better and more coherent now from knowing how Cat had *seen* \$er. That was itself a gift.

It's all about how others fucking see me.

Just because Cat saw me for good then I'm okay.

Tomorrow when someone ridicules me I won't be.

It was all about others.

How do I see myself???

Really see myself?

What do I really want???!

Because now, she was freed from the 'perfect woman', Cat was now out of the picture. And strangely \$he did not feel sad about that, in fact relieved. They could still be friends if \$he wanted - potentially, eventually maybe. It was one of the amazing aspects of \$er personality to flip to platonic, often in just a moment.

The 'perfect woman' experience that should have 'cured' \$er turned into the biggest possible disaster with a clear answer to the failure of \$her hypothesis.

Despite all the turmoil, \$er heart was open now. And the connection with Cat lingered but \$he knew \$he needed someone else now to connect with.

Someone unbiased.

Someone who can see beyond these conflicts in me.

Someone who will call me on my shit.

Also hopefully someone who understands attachment theory and perhaps as one last bastion would either cure \$er of the repressed shit that went down in childhood that has caused all this.

The last ten years of my life. The wasted time, energy, implosion of work relationships and a potentially stable career, the economic cost. The reversals...

Not to mention the social cost, the void I live in.

As for social Cat had been pretty much it - for this year certainly and also making up in spades for the void of the past few as well.

It was time to get help. Enough of psychologists. \$he had been there and done that and they had failed.

I need a real friend. A smart friend. Someone who won't lie to me.

But what friend? No one came to mind.

\$he laid there, spacing out, breathing, reliving, processing.

Somehow \$er mind wandered as tiredness overcame \$er to a flash feeling of how it felt walking in the sunset warmth sun in San Diego.

Open-soul.

The email.

Oh shi_t!_

Mali felt the flowing heat that only comes from a major screw-up.

She'd never responded.

It was like in \$er mind \$he had because \$he had written, but just not sent it because \$he couldn't complete the thought yet. Well, and \$he'd gotten distracted by the trip to Bangkok... and then the Hua Hin mess.

\$er heart and stomach sunk. That heat of the screw-up in reconnecting with K felt like a fever running over \$er, combination of fear, anxiety and excitement.

Jeopardy of missing out.

Having offended a friend. Not just a friend, or anyone... K!

\$he pulled up the terminal application on \$er mac and logged into K's IRC channel.

The consoles green text against black was ever sexy and in the day's of K in San Diego, logging on to her chat server felt like magic, a break from the constipated Microsoft world with GUIs and shit that had the tendency to get fucked up since the user never really knew what was going on under the hood.

\$he was actually nowhere near sure that this would work. It had been years since logging on to the IRC.

But if it still is... it will be faster than an email. Cause she's always there.

Although Mali often had trouble remembering names, phone, street numbers and IP addresses for some reason could stick for years and years. They had a certain feel or flavor to them.

Mali: *Hey K. Its Open Soul...*

Karina

Mali held her breath. Unsure if K was there, or would talk to \$er. But the fact that the connection seemed to be working was encouraging. Seconds seemed like hours but then it came...

KO: My god, is this who I think it is?!!

Then quickly followed by...

KO: So you got my email?!

Mali exhaled and relaxed back in \$er chair and smiled.

K's IRC, she seemed always to be on, going on six years back, in a different place, different life. A life, a place, \$erself another person almost. Where they'd actually met for the first time. As well as the last time they'd chatted when Mali decided to move on from \$er San Diego life.

The surreality of a past long ago juxtaposed with the sights and sounds of Chiang Rai outside \$er window, with who \$he was - had become now - was almost too much to coalesce.

Our last in-person conversation...

It started out with K pretty much going on and over \$er head about the benefits of PostgreSQL as a database over MySql and Sql Server. Standing outside the datacenter in the middle of the night waiting for a deploy to finish...

And then K's little aside about the strange sounding Ruby on Rails web framework.

"Its a different way of thinking and interesting, you should check it out."

Ruby on Rails - RoR as many would call it, came to enable \$er career in passion and freedom, enabling everything that came next. Up to becoming a contract worker, getting a decent hourly rate, enabling remote work, which seemed to be possible further and further from \$er original home, then abroad... anywhere with a connection.

Mali shook \$er head.

This was all back in 'his' San Diego days, more or less, while at least trying to appear as a man. Surfing. An apartment overlooking the ocean. April, 'his' doctor turned girlfriend.

And the implosion of everything \$he had still not gotten over.

All in contrast to sitting in this darkened room in a remote Thai town, in the middle of the confused and broken signals inside \$erself and with the world that had only multiplied since that time.

Karina was known as 'K' to the world. Not 'Kay' but the letter K, as she would emphasize.

K had been mostly only a work colleague - in fact not really that exactly - K was on the staff of a hired consulting company brought on to help Mark and his company maintain and keep the servers for the application he created online. Basically K saved Marks ass and his job over and over and made him look good.

They'd had had a few closer conversations, to know that Karina the woman existed inside her geekily impenetrable and unapproachable exterior and intimidating persona.

She was average height, but her face, the distance between her eyes and brows was close, giving her a serious, dominant rather masculine aspect. Then countered with irises of what seemed like marbled brown, perceptive and enchanting, and full feminine cheeks especially when she would smile. She was truly beautiful to Mark, and completely off limits in every way possible.

Not only out of his league and not to be approached. Not to mention ridiculously intelligent, quick and ever so professional.

And not to mention gay.

Mark had learned this one late night, around 3am at the datacenter, waiting for a painfully slow system patch to be applied. Like it was yesterday. It was Mark who saw something sad about K that night. She had been kind of off, snapping at him and sighing, as if he was such a burden, or the task maybe.

Ah but of course to Mark... to me... everyone's displeasure is about me.

K always kind of had him on edge. But that night was something else though. Perhaps because something had broken in K's own facade, one surfaced in his. He genuinely liked her, like maybe a grad student to a brilliant professor just a bit older and so attractive that not even the idea of possibility ever entered the picture.

"K? Can I ask you something and not make you mad?"

"Well, yeah, of course, you know me, when have I ever bit anyones head off?"

"True. Um, that would be me normally and that is my concern. But tonight..."

"Yeah, you know you are like very out of place in IT not to mention a datacenter."

K was always ridiculing him but always with a good natured smile that he'd take it and wait for more. It felt like it meant she cared.

"I know. Still working that out. But now, don't avoid my question."

"You have yet to ask it", K smiled.

"Its nothing just you seem a little sad tonight, just a little quieter, a little more pissed off, like a little something you're holding in", he reached and pointed to her heart.

"Sad? You think I am sad. Here I am frustrated and almost swearing at you and so where does that come from?"

Mark then almost regretted having started this.

"You are not acting like you. If I did not know you better, well, I would let it go. But all these hours we've spent together, never seen you like this. If it were me - because it is often - I would be covering up that I am sad."

"What the hell. You think everyone is just like you? I have news for you."

"Then what is it? I mean you can just go on being as you have been tonight but I am trying to offer you an alternative."

Mark, where the fuck are you going with this?

Where were these words coming from? He was much more of a nutcase and emotionally reactive than anyone he knew. And would chase the tail of his own mind way more often than is happy or sane.

But it was only a second and Karina - Karina the woman, not K the uber geek - held her laser gaze at him.

"Ok, fine. She left me yesterday, my girlfriend of two years... we broke up. I guess that tells you a little more about me than you knew already. You happy?"

"I had guessed and wondered about your life, was curious, but more really about who would be so lucky to be yours."

Still holding her solid gaze and clearly trying to keep things under control, he could see a slight softening in her eyes.

K was not used to anyone getting to her and for some reason she felt a kind warmth towards Mark. With the softening, a tear fell from the corner of her right eye, which clearly was the tip of the iceberg of the flood of water pooling in her luminescent marbled eyes.

Mark quickly realized this whole inquiry might not have been the right thing to say.

Particularly I can't afford to piss her off and lose her professional help.

"I mean, I am sorry, what I just said. I know didn't help."

"No.", Karina stated emphatically in a whisper, partly to keep the conversation private from the ever-present ears in the DC, part to keep from crying more, "what you just said, I felt it in my heart and I tell you, if you were a woman you would probably have jumped up on the list of rebound candidates," her tears floating over to laughter briefly before returning but now in a silent flood.

"Come on, let's get a breath of air?"

K tapped Mark's hand lightly, conscious that everything, literally everything that happened in the DC was captured by video and kept for time immemorial. Probably audio too.

"Let's make sure candid camera here, these guys don't get any ideas about me... unlike you I have a reputation to uphold!", she joked through her apparent distress. As they made it through the front door, after clearing several biometric fingerprint scanners intended to both keep people in and out of the DC, she spoke.

"This is just things of life, it's all going to be ok."

"Yeah well, yes, true, and nicely rationalized. I'd expect nothing less from you. But in here you still hurt nevertheless", Mark tapping on her upper right shoulder, "and if you want to talk or just cry it out, I am here and it's like 3:37am and we're hostages of goddamn Microsoft for the unforeseen future. So take advantage of it, if you like. Or punch me, whatever," he smiled.

Karina smiled, and then just reached for Mark, making a very weak attempt at a jab. Then reaching up with her right arm first and then her left, slowly and reluctantly, arms hanging around his neck gently, she fell into him. And for a few minutes let the tears interspersed with words flow. It was nothing new under the sun any of the things she said. But for Mark to feel how much this woman, such a strong and powerful woman felt and cared about things, really, to be so close and on this side for someone - anyone - was a first.

I wonder if this is what it's like to be a woman and have close friends?

Or heck to have a man friend who could let it down and out. He, true, had had a few close woman friends. And never someone letting herself go like this. It felt so good. It felt like being in love only that the love was just for absorbing the pain of his friend, and the honor of being permitted into her deepest authenticity, it literally made him feel a glow. Not to mention the woman who was sharing with him would do circles around him in everything related to anything in his serendipitously chosen line of work and probably most other things in life.

Not to mention she wears black and rides a Ducati.

"Lets go back in, okay?"

K, apparently refreshed and slightly embarrassed to have let go and for so long, looked up now with a sly smile.

"I dont know what made you think you could come in here and be like this with me."

She paused for several seconds, then looking more directly and with a tone of gratitude into his eyes,

"But thank you"

Long pause, looking down to the right,

"Because no one really does that for me, I guess they think I'm just so fucking strong and invincible and that I don't need it... but now you know the truth that I am not."

She trailed off, staring off into space, "Are you disillusioned as well?"

"Hey, you,"

Mark gestured to catch her attention, "You are strong as anything, woman, but you have a heart and you feel. Jesus Christ, you're alive. Thats all. I dunno, maybe too, everyone is afraid to get past that wall."

He smiled, "Shit, I was petrified at the words coming from my mouth."

"Thank you Mark," she completed.

He knew she was done. They returned to find the update complete and pretty soon after they were both able to head home. There was no more talk on the subject. Then or for the rest of what would be a few more months working together. He remembered too how he had gone home and told April the next day about K and how she had opened up to him. April had lovingly told him too that he inspired peoples trust.

Back in the dark room, in the present, tears started to \$er eyes.

Damn it! \$he had not expected this memory. \$he was so sorry and hurt about all that had happened with April.

But I'm still at a complete loss to have done anything differently.

Even if plopped back in the same place and time with her back then, \$he still did not have an answer or a different path. Hence \$er need for some help off this fence and reaching out for K.

'"Normal" Trans'

KO: Well?

KO: Well??!

Mali stared back at the computer, not realizing how much time had passed, and almost in perfect response to \$er own disorientation, another message from K...

KO: Well???

Mali: Sorry, got distracted ;(

KO: You were always the spacey kind weren't you?

Mali: Yeah yeah

KO: Its been years, what the heck, how are you? Where are you? After that night at the DC it was like pretty soon after you vanished and not long after, my company lost the contract. It was all a little mysterious I was thinking. And then I had that dream a couple weeks ago. Hence my stalker activity to find you.

Mali: You're anyone to talk about mysterious, beautiful woman in black on a motorcycle. The entire cast of Night Rider rolled into one :)

Aw Mali if you were only a girl.

Mali: So, well, I'm in Thailand now. Chiang Rai.

Something in K's mind crystalized as if it had just solved a big puzzle from the depths of the unconscious,

KO: Jesus. OMG. Dont tell me, you're trans???

Mali: WTF?!

KO: Come on, 'guys' in IT there is like 50/50 that they are trans. And for girls like me, its 75/25 they like girls or are at least bi, and the rest, well they are probably just not very good at IT... bwahhahhah... evil aren't I?

KO: I must sound totally brash but reality is, to do this kind of work you are better at if you can quickly enter and leave other possible realities. A flexible mind. You get it from having to break yourself out of the matrix. As well, code and debugging stuff, you have to imagine what 'might be' behind things based on everything you already know about systems and code and based on imagining what you don't know for sure but suspect. On a daily and often hourly basis we must throw away everything we know and see with new eyes. Now tell me, what do trans people have to do their whole lives until they wake up?

KO: But Jesus... you're in Thailand, the trans capital of the world, and you're not on the freakin beach, far from it. And you've changed your name what I would say increasingly toward the center if not feminine. Reality speaks dude... uh... dudette ! The only thing you could up it with is being in Chiang Mai than Chiang Rai.

Mali: Uh, Chiang Mai was last year.

Mali smirked. This was fun.

KO: OMFG you are soooooo too trans!!!! Because the only other would be you're a desperate old white guy looking for a 20 something GF. And you're not old enough, too good looking and too much going for you to be that lame. And if you were I'd personally come over there and beat the crap out of you til you woke up :)

Mali: I am. I'm here looking for a Thai bride.

KO: You just want me to come there to rough you up.

Mali: So sue me. I've a thing for strong women :)

K's heart skipped a beat. She knew who she was but it felt good to hear. And for some reason it meant more coming from Mark... Mali. And she'd not admit it to herself but her feelings for Mark were always different. She'd rationalized like a close friend or sibling. But it was this combination of being seen for her strength but also as a human with feelings, few people came being able to get both in the same package.

Or maybe I'm choosing women who just want the image. Just want the dream. And then when they realize I come with emotions and needs too... well and my geek obsessions... downhill.

Mali: Um, you know its so weird but I needed to talk to someone and you popped into my mind. It was without thinking.

KO: You're good at that - not thinking that is hahahah... but seriously, your best gifts are not just your mind, you know that, right? I can see that because I see how we're different.

Mali: Yeah, thats why I need you. I need someone with a brain, a logical brain because I'm kind of fucking myself lately :(

KO: Fucking yourself????! Do tell???

Mali: Not in the good way

Mali: I have too much data in my system to sort through. I know I could intuitively make choices, and of course thats how I got here already and...

KO: Are you okay?

Mali: So to speak, I think. But I'm coming to the end of my rope it feels. I'm really conflicted and can't break it. Gosh, what the heck am I writing, as if you were a psychologist!

KO: You have no idea how you helped me that fateful night. Someday I'll tell you. I'd prefer it to be in person, though. And I would also prefer to see you happy when you do come. You were never happy in San Diego were you?

Mali: I tried. There was so much good but no, I was conflicted there too. Much worse. Just an earlier incarnation of whats going on now. Shit, barely had anyone in my life since then. Things have gotten better but I feel like a rice farmer.

They had spend the past hour reacquainting along with Mali detailing \$er life and decisions since San Diego... and now it was K's analysis which was coming to the front...

KO: Remember one thing, whats inside of you is you. What you 'feel like doing' is you. I sometimes think most of the problems in humanity is that we think we can change certain things. But we cant.

KO: People, culture, our upbringings, society if you're at all different try to fuck you into destroying yourself. Or compromising your integrity to fit in.

KO: So we live in a world with so much free will and power, but at the end of the day whats in you is like ROM, hard coded shit. And if you're rooted your rooted and it can affect the hardware level no matter how many reinstalls and patches you try, if the hard circuits are mutated or rearranged, thats how they stay. I think thats where the pain is: When we fight the hardware.

KO: Fucked up shit tries to tell us that we can change things... how we feel, what - who - we want sexually. Gender too. Goddamn religions.

KO: You know what is known so far about being trans? Its hardware baby, put on track by hormones, a long long time ago, en utero, before you were born.

KO: It's not going away.

KO: We can hack around it... maybe I can help you with that. Maybe that's just what you need. I mean, I don't want to presume anything only that its not right for you to be twisted up, conflicted, unhappy and so desssssppperattttee that you log on to a private chat server that you have not said boo to in years...

Mali: I am sorry I lost contact. I actually thought maybe you hated me for what happened with the contract and all that.

KO: Yeah, as if my world depended on the income from that! No, not at all. Heck it was Dell servers running .NET and Sql Server and that albatross of code you called an app. You think it made me sad to not have to respond to that anymore? Come on... I'm the best UNIX sysadmin anywhere south of LA.

Mali: Won't argue with any of that. But you do remember that IQ's drop crossing the north county line, right?

KO: Jesus fucking yeah... ya know, I'd interviewed in SV and in LA but you know... what do you gain by joining that insanity when I have everything I want and need here in the desert?

Mali was alluding to their inside joke of long ago that "'ok' in Silicon Valley, kinda smart in LA, makes you a veritable genius in San Diego". They'd never pinned it down but to date but their working theory had something to do with the North County-Orange County line and a compulsory drop of IQ upon crossing it in the southern direction. The problem was minimal for those like Mali or certainly K who had a good level of intelligence to start. But to others the drop could take someone boarderline into being a breathtaking moron, as evidenced on the Pacific Beach boardwalk. An extra IQ hit was awarded it seemed to college age and especially those associated with fraternities in San Diego colleges. And douches.

KO: So I said no and now I contract for both companies up there for about three times what they'd have paid me as an employee hourly.

Something was so fun and easy with this chat and Mali was enjoying it. Didn't hurt that \$he thought a lot of K and was simply elated to be talking like this with her.

KO: Speaking of low IQ's, are you going to tell me whats going on?

Mali: Ok, so yeah, I am trans I think. But not a normal one.

KO: Oh, that's funny, not a normal trans...

KO: I ever tell you I'm not sure I'm a normal lesbian?

Mali: Point taken. In a nutshell I fought it for many years. On and off, like binging and purging. Buying clothes, dressing then at some point getting rid of it all, going back to military workouts and trying to be a man....

Mali: Hoping for the woman of my dreams. In fact I just did it once more here and it almost killed me inside.

KO: You and the Crossfit workouts. You know they actually just made you look super gay???! I mean here you are this slender thing and then you put on all that muscle? Oh, and waxed. Like some runway FEMALE model taking steroids. She would look gay too :)

Mali: Geez, you should have told me!

KO: I didn't know... maybe you WERE gay?! Uh, I would've had no problem with that! I didn't know, I mean, aside from your body that screams female energy... but that could have been anything... and if I remember correctly it was I who came out to you during that time. Not that I intended that either.

Mali: Well, I am then coming out half way to you now... It's weird, I needed to talk to someone. Maybe you can help me some.

KO: I've an idea I might be able. I'll just have to tell my GF why I am sitting here on chat so late at night.

Mali: Sounds like someone is pussy-whipped to me... like you need excuses for sitting at a terminal like 20 hours a day... you still doing that, BTW?

KO: Long story. On kind of a leash. But yeah... on the hours...

Mali: If I were you my body would be sooooo angry!

KO: Well, if I were you my brain would be pissed... or what would be left of it after the normalizing lobotomy bwahahahahaa!!!

Mali: You're sooooo mean, you think I am stupid. Remember my friend which of us is sitting south of the north county border right now.

KO: Oh no I am sorry. I didn't make you cry, did I?

Mali: Not telling.

KO: Ok so whats the problem then, so you like women's clothes, feel like a girl inside? Do you feel like a man at all, or ever? I mean, I'm not now intending to make any fun of you, but that night you hugged me, you were soft like a girl. If I had my eyes closed... God, it felt that good. You have no idea how high on the rebound list you actually were... as a guy hahaha! Of course I would never have told you that then. But now, maybe that helps.

Mali: More than you imagine. I just had this similar experience here.

KO: The 'woman of your dreams' one??? Spill it Mali...

And so Mali and K chatted away for another an hour about the situation with Cat and how it had turned out.

KO: So I ask you again, what's the problem?

Mali: Look, there is a lot I could say. I am not like the trans women who go 'I knew I was a girl from as far back as I remember'. I am more like, from as far back as I remember my body felt feminine... enjoyed it, felt soft, enjoyed being soft, of course super sensitive, longed for love intimacy, hated sports. But it was like I never questioned if I could be a girl. I did not know it was a possibility. Even so, I didn't fit a box anyway. But the horrible thing is, I always liked girls, women still are the most beautiful to me. But its like, to have that I felt like - kind of still feel - I have to be a guy. To have the love, and still to have the relationship I've dreamed of, that by

being and following what my body tells me more and more I am, the less chance of having any of it. I feel like I'm throwing away the only chance I have at the deepest dream and longing I have.

Mali: So I feel fucked. I can follow my body and be myself and be seen as gay maybe and drive away any woman who would want me. Or I can try to keep being a guy. Which BTW isn't going so well...

KO: I don't know if you realize that your words have your answer. But you can't see it. Literally.

Mali: What, that I should just accept myself and hope for the best? I'm just not a flaming gay man, I can't handle living and being seen as something I feel totally distant from.

KO: No shit. You're a freakin lesbian. Admit it, NOW. Forget about trans, that's just a path, but not your romantic and sexual identity.

Mali: Sometimes I like transwomen who still have... original equipment though :)

KO: And your point is what? You ever been with a guy?

Mali: Tried once or twice. Nice people, but was not a turn on. Felt nothing or worse, icky.

KO: But you've been with a transwoman?

Mali: The first and only time I've had breathless sex. It was amazing. After - and she had penetrated me - I felt so good, so myself. But she was hot, I mean more woman than many women.

KO: And after, what happened... ah let me guess, you repressed it?

Mali: Kinda sorta

KO: Unbefuckinglievable

There was a pause and Mali waited for more.

KO: So you're one of us. Accept it. Fucking a beautiful woman who happens to have a penis... Shit I might do that too. Still feeling pretty gay myself here...

KO: Just sayin...

Mali: I wish I was. But I look like a guy, my upper body. I am not going to be a man with breasts and I am sick of everyone assuming I am gay or like guys. What lesbian woman would go for me?

KO: Well, we can work with the first, for the second, you can guess how I feel about that too. So don't even consider it a problem. It's their problem not yours. Take it from me - and heck from Cat, you've got the special sauce. Oh and lastly, why do you despise yourself so much not to believe yourself lovable AND being yourself?

Mali: It's just that lesbian women, they would not be into me. They're not.

KO: Is that for you to decide? Or have you decided for yourself to shut off from this world so you can stay miserable and isolated, running to a terminal girl for help from the middle of nowhere.

Mali: Uh...

But K's words were still coming.

KO: In fact I have a friend who would be totally into you. But you'd have to jump some hoops not the least of getting over your fear of motorcycles and anything bigger than a 3 foot wave!

Mali: How do you know that?

KO: Come on, give me some credit... geez... girls talk!

Mali: Damn, so some girl was laughing her ass off. I know, it took me freakin six months to catch my first wave, out there every day. I love the water but waves scared the hell out of me. Still anything over 4 feet and I ditch my board and dive.

KO: You're a peril to surfers everywhere and an apparent Pacific Beach legend... in fact two, the one in your own mind and the one that everyone saw ;) That said, my GF is calling me, for reals. Can we chat later or tomorrow?

Mali: Sure, I'd really like that. And thank you, I'll probably read over this, you said some things for me to think about.

KO: I hope so. Just know, I'm here for you if you need me. God knows I've been through it too and had help when I needed it. I accepted and came out in HS, pre-Ellen days you know... in a way like being transgender is now...

It seemed like K had gone and Mali was not ready yet to let go. But then a true final message echoed to \$er console:

KO: FWIW, open-soul? I knew it was you. That dream. You know how you know who people and things are in dreams even if they look different, right? Well, open-soul was you, I knew it. But she was female. So let that stew yer noodles...

Then the dreaded words:

SESSION TERMINATED BY HOST.

Terrasanto's Wonder

The pieces - spear-like pieces of a few inches, really, not slivers - of white bone, tarnished with areas of blood and membranes sat atop the metal cabinet on a laid out white surgical cloth.

They caught Terrasanto's eye for whatever reason as he stood once again breaking to let his team complete the suturing of the insides of Ana's mouth. Closing the incisions used to access and remove what was previously a rather masculine jawline and squared chin compared to most feminine facial bone structures.

I could never do this. I don't have the strength.

Just the physical recovery alone!

Ana would face at least two months of intense recovery from this operation. Add on the trauma from whatever she did for sexual reassignment, if any, the hair transplants, electrolysis. Her overcoming of anorexia in exchange for her deserved dose of hormones, as her Mexican endocrinologist had made clear, perhaps saving her life. Inserting a needle into her own body on a weekly basis to bathe her insides in the feminine substance. He could not imagine an Ana weighing less than now and making it through this surgery.

I couldn't have operated on her weighing less. Too risky.

As he stared, at what some might consider carnage while others, hope, he couldn't help himself to not marvel again at what it must be that would drive a person to do this.

No, not just the surgery - this surgery, the cost, the recovery - but all of it. Ana had mentioned her case and it remained stuck in his mind, even heart. Not necessarily an effeminate man compared to many, not even a gay man. But perhaps, as she worded it, with a feminine energy that was not lost on others, detractors and romantic interests alike. Women who wanted a man who... for little did they know, was female, or feminine at least. Perhaps glossing over their own hidden attractions to the same sex.

But the interim. As she had described, several years of not appearing either as male or female, as she summed up the experience in the words 'cara de hombre, cuerpo de mujer' ('face of a man, body of a woman') that had been used so regularly by others in passing, in form of words, stares, ridicule to their friends. Ana then who had yet to realize the softness that her being exuded wasn't just physical - or didn't want to be.

Her 'cara de hombre' wasn't a horribly masculine face but was definitely male. Add to that the conditioning, surely anxiety, fear, from which came defensiveness and a way of holding herself in the world that caged her true expression, albeit feeling like protection. And as she related to him, a cage she constantly fought and finally had progressed to a point toward its frontiers. Perhaps the psycho-spiritual shift that would happen as a result of this surgery would be equally or more important as the physical result itself.

Not just physical.

It amazed him. Yes, this surgery was seemingly all physical.

As Ana had described her reticence: vanity.

Even the whole transition: vanity.

The time in front of the mirror or in the salon that could be spent otherwise serving the world. So many reasons not to do it.

What had started with clothes and makeup, any easy thing that could be done. All seemingly harder to do than the default of not doing any of it and being a 'man', harder to live by, more time, higher maintenance, yet the more she did it the more it would not go away, the more it was right. And the more the time past, the less she found herself returning to masculine presentation for safety. Instead of buying women's clothes, makeup and then in periods of despair throwing them out to return to the hope of being a man, more for the reason of who she longed for in her heart than for a solid social identity in the present, the male clothes bit by bit dropped from her wardrobe into the thrift shop donation boxes.

Then as she related the critical mass. A moment realizing that despite still being addressed as a male in the world, if she wanted to go back to being a 'guy', it would take a year or two - just physically to return there, but that there was no congruent way she ever could.

Which anyway was the last bastion, because then came her first hair transplant, the accompanying medication to keep from losing more hair from the adversarial testosterone her body was creating. And the rest was history until now.

And then at some point between when she had first contacted him and now, there was a whole, integrated woman. Cara de hombre or not, he chuckled, Ana was here to stay and had made that clear in her emails and how she had showed up in Uruguay. Surgery or not. And that was what he wanted to hear and pushed her to communicate in some way that convinced him. He thought of his wife. He thought of what it really meant to 'serve the world' and if Ana had any idea who she touched - and was going to - by following her heart.

She was not the first and surely far from the last of such a person he would see.

A Girl Who Knows a Guy

KO: I know a girl who knows a guy who knows someone you need to see there...

K's letters forming words as they streamed in bright green onto the black screen, hijacking away from Mali the terminal \$he was coding in.

How did she do that???

Mali: Hello to you too

\$he was not going to admit \$he had no idea how K had done that. K was on another level \$he knew \$he'd never reach.

KO: On Phahonyotin Road - you know that? On the way to the White Temple. Before the turn. Theres a market.

Mali: WTF???!!!

KO: Just humor me, okay?

KO: Now, you're going to drive and park at that market which is on the left side of the road, and to the right of the market theres often a group of monks standing around there. You might have to go back a few times. But look for the one with the face. Ask to speak to him.

Mali hated it when guys would direct \$er 'now your going to...' in unsolicited advice, but from K it was like kinda sweet.

Mali: The one with 'the face'? Uh...

KO: The guy says you will not mistake him. Whatever he means by that... is for you to live, thankfully for me.

Mali: And, uh, why? I feel like monks want nothing to do with me how I am. I feel weird. Does he speak English?

KO: Well then go and do your thing and feel awkward and stumble around in your kinder-Thai, I am sure that will endear him. Don't have much confidence in yourself these days, do you?

Mali would have to work on that one later. Was not the first time to hear that but \$he was starting to get it more.

Mali: So really, who is this girl who knows a guy who knows 'the face'?

KO: You think I am just that kind of geek?

KO: Heck, you are still freakin wondering how I just took over your terminal.

Mali: Uh...

KO: That was not a question.

KO: So will you go?

Mali: Anything for you sweetheart.

KO: Good. Write back when mission accomplished.

KO: And stop calling me 'sweetheart', what will GF think if she sees?

KO: Fighting for my life here.

KO: Bye.

'SESSION TERMINATED BY HOST' flashed on the screen.

Mali contemplated for a second the fact that although knowing K was gay and the few other things \$he knew about \$er, \$he didn't know a lot about her life and felt a growing curiosity now that their friendship had renewed in a new 'non-professional' context.

\$he felt the impulse, as was with strong people in \$er life, to want to make K proud and go on the mission, after which first agenda was to find another crack in that wall of hers and find out what was going on in K's life.

\$he'd never known K beyond this level of mysteriousness. But here K was, seemingly trying to help \$er in earnest, even sending \$er to do 'weird stuff' for \$er own wellbeing.

Doorstep

Koona was not home when Cat arrived around 9pm. She had not answered Cat's insistent calls. Coming to her house... Cat felt desperate. And now, Koona's absence brought up a whole other world of unsavory thoughts.

What if I've lost her?

I understand why she might never want to see me again.

Maybe she has another woman.

She's probably been dating while we've been hanging out.

Maybe I never even had her.

Duh.

She's gorgeous. Why wouldn't she be? She could have any woman \$he wanted.

As she had watched Koona storm away, even in all the mixed emotion, all she saw was an amazing, beautiful, incredibly strong woman. And the one she loved. It was clear then but over the last days with Koona clearly not wanting any contact, she'd had a chance to marinate and magnify the problem.

Her heart yearned to be in Koona's company again.

On the street and during the day she felt her confidence back and stronger, feeling Koona with her despite her absence. But it was not the old Japanese confidence.

Maybe Cat 2.0 too.

She smiled at the thought...

Cat whose girlfriend is Koona.

Jesus Cat.

She's not here.

She's not yours!

Koona. Who is stronger than anyone she knew, beautiful, not to mention the best friend in the world. Just remembering their time together recently, remembering the feeling, made her feel alive, connected, sure of herself and loved.

Which was all so ironic since the object of all this, Koona, was completely MIA. But it had not been long enough for despair, only for an extreme feeling of jeopardy.

Hence this stalking.

Cat smirked halfheartedly.

She slunk down to sitting on the wooden floor next to Koona's door with her knees up, listening to the murmur of the klong, feeling the peace of this place that Koona had chosen and created, even in the eye of this storm.

Koona's place.

The place and woman that had started to further unravel her bit by bit, so amazing this hidden feeling and power Koona had latent over her even after so many years of friendship.

Then Koona's final blow breaking apart forever the charade her life had been.

Strangely too, on the street, in the mall, Cat had started to look at women differently. And she finally felt a certain peace with men that she'd never had either.

They are who they are.

They're okay.

But not what I want.

At all.

"What are you doing here?"

Am I dreaming? Where am I?

Koona's voice. Words. Boots with jeans tucked in.

Cat's eyes opened to the accusing Koona standing in front of her.

Cat looked up, feeling anxious as she smiled slightly.

"I just need to say some things to you, okay? You would not answer your phone", then adding, "I was worried too and I'm glad you're alright."

Koona huffed a breath and raised her eyebrows, waiting. She still felt upset about the whole thing.

Okay Cat, lets hear it, here and now. On the porch.

Not just all the shit but that damn Tom and Dee comment too. What the fuck!

In Koona's heart she'd convinced herself that the bullshit Tom-Dee role based crap was a deal-breaker and because Cat was Thai, and regardless of how close they were as friends, this would be enough to let this go.

Let Cat go.

Eventually.

She had not even gone out with the Flavor of the Month since that night. She had been hurting too...

Fucking again. Seven times not going out.

But Cat did not need to know this.

"Uh, I actually have a date tonight", she could not help herself.

But it was actually true.

Not that I couldn't cancel.

But she doesn't need to know that either.

"Okay, fine. You don't want to talk to me. Fine."

Cat's heart was breaking and through the anger the wave of tears could not be withheld, as she stood, in beginning sobs and readied to go.

And then, standing, she was eye to eye with Koona, well, as close as they could be given Koona was a bit taller always, but the boots added some more. Their eyes locked, both transmitting and beholding something deep and a question. Everything she had prepared to say went out the window as well as the charade. She reached her arms out softly and tentatively for Koona. There was no pride, nothing mattered anymore. But the lump

and tears in her throat would not allow her to vocalize.

"I love you Koona", simultaneously as the flood of tears broke, but there was no sound, only air.

Koona furrowed her eyebrows just slightly, in feeling and compassion. She had no idea what Cat was saying but she felt it. It was sincere. Cat was not one break down easily.

Cat with that fucking precision engineered Japanese teflon surface, around anything deeper than friendship.

"What?" she asked futilely as Cat blubbered, loosely holding to her.

Fuck. She was far from made of stone. She reached up and took Cat's hand and led her to the door, unlocking it and leading her into the bubble of comfort of her simple home.

Cat had slowed and calmed down now with a cup of warm tea in her hand. She took a deep breath.

"That's better", Koona smiled. She was still feeling standoffish but obviously Cat had something to say. And regardless, the pesky feeling of hope was rearing its head again.

"So now, tell me, what's up, what are you doing sleeping on my doorstep this evening?" the added smirk putting Cat at ease enough to speak finally.

"Koona, there's more I didn't tell you, about when I was with Mali", starting to feel again emotion welling up in her.

"Do I need to hear this?" the name Mali once again set her off. She did not want to know more if it meant more confusion and drama. Clearly between Mali and Cat there was plenty enough without her involved.

"Koona, I just need to tell you, okay, then I'll go, okay?" Cat paused, "I don't expect anything..."

Koona nodded.

"The thing is... is..." Cat trailed off, awaiting the courage, "Koona, even when I started to get close to Mali, as a friend, I kept thinking of, remembering you. It was weird, like flashes."

Koona nodded and raised her eyebrows.

"Well, we were best friends forever, that's not so weird I think. He - she - kind of took my place, huh?" she pondered the latent jealousy that had lurked behind the scene since their re-encounter, "You know, it really kind of hurt me when you told me about your new friendship... with me by the wayside."

Cat nodded. That was true. But she had more to say and had to get it out... then she could go back and try to pick up the shattered pieces all around - like this one.

"Koona, when Mali and I were together - you know?" she couldn't say it directly, it now felt like cheating on who she really loved deep down, "I kept seeing you. Not just you. Well, not seeing, feeling. Your body. Oh, it's so confusing to explain. It was not Mali, I felt you with me. I wanted you with me. Not a best friend. Much much more. Feelings for you... About... you..." she paused, "I know, I'm not making any sense".

Tears continued, now spilling silently from her eyes but hers and Koona's eyes were now locked. And neither broke it for more than a blink. Just the flicker of their inner movement, contained emotion and questions all in one. In minutes, hours, whatever it was, Cat opened her arms and Koona held her. Heaven again.

"I couldn't understand it. Quite reach it."

"And now?"

"I..." as the words failed her, she raised her head to tentatively plant a kiss on her best friend's lips. Koona against the impulse to open, recoiled, not releasing her touch on Cat's arms but now holding her at distance.

The act of which broke the dam in Cat. The deeply withheld longing, that had finally broken to the surface in recent days was still withheld from its object. Now not just the tears in her eyes but those in her heart started to flow. All that held back for so long. Freed by the most unbelievable. She felt both tortured and liberated in the same convulsive tears.

Koona raised her eyebrows. She gently but firmly kneaded Cat's arm under her grip. She was not made of stone. But this was just too soon, no matter how much she wanted it too. She had to take care of and love herself more. Cat's track record was not so good and she needed to be sure.

"Cat, talk to me. I'm listening but I don't want to be another whim of yours." The words both evoking opening and splintering in Cat's heart, Cat felt herself bleed. She knew she had more to say, and she sobered herself.

"Koona, at the pool, in my heart, in my dreams, the other night when I told you you're beautiful, it's like I'm not controlling anything, I'm just really being true. The rest of my life feels like such a fraud now in contrast. And Mali... without Mali I don't know if this would have broken through or so soon. I already talked to Mali, yesterday. We're okay... well, not okay, but they know, we talked. And you know the crazy thing, is it took her to get past all my screwed up boxes I've put around myself that I mistook for reality."

Cat looked at Koona who nodded and seemed to be waiting for more.

At that moment the doorbell rang. Cat's heart sunk. Koona knew it was her date. The whole thing was kind of breaking her heart now too. That week 'together' had been so nice. She missed it too. But something in her made her continue.

"Cat, I'm sorry, I really need to go. Maybe we can continue this, uh, sometime soon. Because, this isn't a five minute conversation, and I had made plans."

I'm a fucking ice queen too, by the way.

But she could not do it any other way.

"Do you want to hang out here? I mean, I won't be late. We can talk then."

Koona smiled and made sure to meet Cat's eyes fully. As if to say 'get it, I'm testing you, I want more so don't go'.

"She's someone I've been seeing on and off a few months, we're also friends. I owe her better than to bow out."

_Liar liar pants on fire. Flavor of the month. _If that.

But standing plans *were* still plans. Something in her knew this was okay. If Cat wanted to stay - heck, if she did stay - that itself also meant a lot. And a twinge of jeopardy surfaced in her, in the hopes that Cat would be there when she got home.

If Cat only knew the place she had in her heart.

She could wait a few hours.

And Cat, as the door slammed shut, smiled, that at least... she'd see Koona again soon. And that implicitly it meant this other woman wasn't such a big deal. Or at least she wasn't sleeping with her... well, probably not tonight?

Well they could still sleep together.

But that would be weird.

Not Koona's style at all I think.

Shut up Cat.

You're going to make yourself insane.

Or if so it isn't love, not if she's coming back to me.

Jesus, Cat, stop!

The FACE

You will not be punished for your hate. _

_You will be punished by your hate. _

_ — Buddha

Sure enough. Sweating lightly in the mid-afternoon sun, following K's instructions from the 'girl who knows a guy' to to the T.

The market was one of those so often found in Thailand. Basically open air on all sides, supported by wooden pillars, a sloped ceiling, the roof made of corrugated steel. The kind of place, as Mali had discovered long ago, you could buy just about anything fresh - fish, vegetables, meat, along with assortments of condiments, oils and everything you could imagine. Each stall was run by a different person or people - what often looked like families - and had a different kind of food or products. The best part is that you could walk out of one of these places with food to feed yourself for a week for maybe 300, certainly less than 500 baht, \$10 to \$15 US dollars.

Pulling up to the moped parking, a few unusually poor looking monks in golden robes were hanging around. Which seemed strange to Mali, not used to seeing monks just milling around in front of a market. She felt self-conscious and it seemed two of them facing her were looking at her. They had a rough energy, almost more like gang members than monks.

Almost... certainly dangerous.

Mali ignored them tending to situating the moped and getting the thing turned off but \$he could not ignore the third monk whose back was toward \$er initially as he turned around.

The mans' face was like... nothing \$he'd ever seen. How to describe? Like a heavy truck had run over it, wiped and skewed bones from right to left leaving black tire marks, with the head of course still existing in the three dimensional world. It was impossible now for \$er to turn back, \$he'd found 'The Face', without even trying.

In any case Mali was not a real people approacher, and much less in recent years. And how \$he felt at the moment was pushing the boundaries even more as these monks were ominous and \$he'd already not liked they way they were looking at \$er. This was something \$he had never seen as monks tended to mind themselves, walk quietly, poised and in their own world.

"Sawadee ka?" Mali approached the group. \$he could simply not fail at this oh so strange mission. For K if not \$erself.

The men smirked. That was the thing.

Even monks laugh at me.

Fuck this.

The anger inside was already leading the impulse to turn around and get the fuck away, yet 1Face's eyes caught \$er's and he nodded. As if knowing everything.

Mali took a deep breath and started,

"Chan puan poot ma tini poot gup khun..." Mali didn't know their name or how to address them.

"Ma," he gestured, breaking from the group, "... come."

At this point, regardless of the edge \$he felt, things were just almost moving at a far too fast in surreality to ignore, like in a dream that will take it's course, like it or not.

The Face led Mali through the busy market as if he owned it. The middle of the market had what seemed like a wall, maybe a divider between the sides of it, but as they got closer, \$he realized it was like an inner room in the middle. As they entered, the inside was sparse, in fact it was just a blanket on the floor, a couple of meditation cushions for sitting and a wooden table at the side with some candles and some other what looked like Buddhist items. The light was dim and the walls had a deep red tone.

He gestured for Mali to sit.

And then he started. Again, as if he knew everything.

This is beyond 'what the fuck' status.

"Girl or boy - you?", asked Face, each word like a punch.

"Well, I am not sure anymore. I like being more...", Mali had not completed.

"Girl or boy. No other word. Cochai krup? Understand? Little English - me," he smiled in the sincere way only a monk can, disarming Mali.

"Dont know", Mali slipped in to \$er 'speaking to foreigner' mode which \$he found cute but probably in the end did damage to those who were struggling to speak English correctly.

"You happy - yes no?"

"Well I guess..."

"No! No other word. Happy, you - yes no?"

"No then."

"Krai... yhy?"

"Hard to be myself. Feel anxious, afraid. People laugh and say things. I want be pretty, but hate looking like man. My face."

Then Mali's heart broke as \$he looked at Face. All of the sudden perspective ran over \$er that felt like the truck that seemed to have run over The Face's face.

How in the fuck can I even be concerned with my stupid problems. This man...

"Answer not feel sorry me."

"You go home. Forget. No fix problem."

He paused as if to make sure Mali got this, and then continued,

"You love your face — you see mine beautiful too," he paused.

"I reflection."

"Answer is - you think all hate you. Wrong."

"Truth is - you hate you."

"You see beauty, aliveness... mystery — in fish! Not you!!!"

How the hell did he know...

This was all hitting Mali pretty hard but Face was not done.

"Eyes. Not woman eyes. Not soft."

"Go home. Go out. Every time worry. Every time think people laugh. Ridicule. Remember. They not hate you. You hate you. You create horrible hatred in world. Only real hatred is..." he grasped the air but was out of words in English.

"Lying - no more! Have to hate, hate right one."

"You holding hell in hands, not let go and blame everyone around you."

"Go home."

"Maybe find way."

"Maybe eyes more soft."

"Go home.", he shooed Mali with his hand as he got up and opened the door.

The meeting was clearly over.

As they met eyes as Mali came to exit, \$he could see beyond the doubt the light and fire in the monks eyes. Something \$he'd completely missed because of his face. As much as his words, this moment indelibly seared a mark in \$er heart.

The Way Back to Love

The other gang-monks were nowhere to be seen when Mali reached the parking area. For which \$he was glad as \$he was barely coherent as it was.

I have to get away.

Sit somewhere alone.

Process this.

The hot and heavy sun had heated \$er moped seat to a simmer. \$he winced at the searing of \$er ass even while easing on slowly. Having donned sunglasses and a thick gray button-down shirt for sun cover, \$he turned the ignition, revved, pulled back and finally made \$er way across to the return lane.

The splendor of the flat Thai countryside, mountains in the distance lay on the left in the brilliance of the light. It was special, so special. The stores, markets, the greenery. The other mopeders on the road. So many cute little young Thai women, like munchkins, headphones on, smug as bugs in a rug on their mopeds, with their Hello Kitty helmets off to unknowable places. A reality juxtaposed by perhaps the most surreal conversation and meeting \$he'd certainly ever had, that even now it did not seem real, just minutes after.

And... yes Mali... always watch for incoming traffic.

It was not Thai driving culture to check before pulling blindly onto a road albeit into full speed traffic and it still terrified \$er.

But shock and surreality aside, something felt so much lighter in \$er now. So many days and times Thailand was hard to take. But in this moment \$he instead just felt love and gratitude for this place that was handing \$er \$er ass on a platter.

This was going to take some processing.

Jesus Christ was he blunt.

Of course Mali realized a lot could be the language barrier and the need for Face to get the message across with the few English words he knew. But something about the bluntness haunted \$er. The confidence of it. As if it really was the truth about \$er fucked up life.

In the past \$he would have fought such bluntness. But inside, deep inside, \$he recognized truth shoved in \$er face. Somewhere too \$he recognized that in about two minutes this apparently poor deformed man who was probably a saint had broken something that \$he had been after for years, even with all the 50-minute hours, new-age woo woo crap and so much searching.

How deep this goes only time will tell.

I need time...

\$he needed time. Before going back. Before chatting to K. Before doing anything.

Before going home...

Crossing the bridge into actual Chiang Rai proper, recognizing the need for food, \$he pulled up to a place that looked like it served beef noodle soup. Beef meals were sometimes hard to come by, so \$he knew better to not take up the offer when found. The restaurant was empty but open.

\$he walked in and found a table a nice distance from the fan oscillating at the front. \$he ordered a bowl of beef noodle soup. Hopefully it did not have MSG but that was something still far out of \$er ability to ask for. Even if \$he could remember the word, attempts at pronouncing it had never succeeded in an understanding.

The bowl was set in front of \$er. After a few slurps of delicious salty broth, a song came on the radio...

I've been living with a shadow overhead,
I've been sleeping with a cloud above my bed,
I've been lonely for so long,
Trapped in the past,
I just can't seem to move on!
I've been hiding all my hopes and dreams away,
Just in case I ever need 'em again someday,
I've been setting aside time,
To clear a little space in the corners of my mind... *

A lump formed deep in \$er throat.

What am I doing here in Thailand but this?

Stuck, alone... fighting for something and to find my way.

Buying time so that I might one day actually live and be happy...

All I wanna do is find a way back into love...
I've been watching but the stars refuse to shine,
I've been searching but I just don't see the signs,
I know that it's out there,
There's gotta be something for my soul somewhere!
I've been looking for someone to shed some light,
Not somebody just to get me through the night,
I could use some direction,
And I'm open to your suggestions. *

\$er heart once again breaking open, but this time to something somewhere very deep inside.

In this moment \$he knew it was over. \$he was new.

It was over. No more holding back or shame.

\$he broke into full tears, bleeding them into \$er soup in \$er bowed head. It was all too much.

This song, this place, the Face, what he said.

How I hate.

I hate and hate and hate.

I hate everyone around me. They're all haters to me.

Haters haters haters

No wonder \$he felt so awkward half the time when \$he received only kindness from another. Worse after imagining that they hated \$er too. No wonder, all of this. Made everyone a hater, but no, of course \$he did not hate. \$erself nor anyone. It was just 'them' that mocked, judged, criticized, made \$er feel awkward. Not okay. All these people. All this life. Ever since the bullying as a child. \$he emptied out, tears flowing and adding additional salted broth to the bowl.

\$he looked up. The middle aged woman cook and waitress looked concerned. \$he smiled through \$er tears, a real smile not \$er bullshit half smiles. That too would be a thing of the past, hiding. And so like Thais, especially when they got the message that one was okay and was kind-hearted, she smiled back. \$he loved this place. Anywhere with like twelve words and different types of smiles had to be okay.

The probably first place in the world to at least tolerate and even love their transgender beings. A place where the person talking gets to state what gender they see themselves.

A place where at least if you're made fun of, you're made fun of for what you are and not what you're not.

They might laugh at you for being transgender.

But no one calls you a 'man in a dress' like in the fucked up western world.

It still pissed Mali off but...

I hate how I am too. I hate what and they they're laughing. So what is that?

It just made more tears.

\$he knew better than to try stopping. This was ground zero. At least for today.

Then like as the rain torrent finally stops, even abruptly, the sun breaking and contrasting to all the dark clouds still around, it was kind of over. Feeling so light than ever in so long. The woman came over 'new soup?' she smiled.

"No, I eat this one, I am not running from these tears, time to eat my own dogfood."

"... uh I didn't mean the soup..."

\$he was sure the woman had no idea what \$he was saying but, nor really did \$he. Or did \$he know how in the end all this would pan out.

Just that this was big.

* Quoted song "Way Back to Love" by Adam Schlesinger

Hello World

A few days later...

Mali lay on \$er bed, late in the evening before turning in for the day. Impulsed by feeling alone and the need to connect, \$he started the terminal on her Mac and logged into K's chat server. There was no answer. Well, then again, it was in fact fourteen hours earlier there, making it something like 7am. \$he suspected that K probably went to bed not much earlier than that. Just seemed, \$he didn't know actually.

Mali: *Hi K... I know its a weird hour. I am going to leave this on for a bit, if you find it. Hope you're well ;)*

Mali dozed off, then slept. And slept.

When awaking, accidentally brushing the track pad, the black screen came back to vision. 'Crap', thinking to \$erself, 'I cant just leave that on with K, she probably owns my whole system by now.' Half not caring because \$he trusted her. But it bothered \$er ego.

On the screen were words now:

KO: *Sorry missed you. I figure you have things to tell me! BTW, a long lost friend of mine, long story, but she's coming to Thailand. I figure it might be good for you two to meet. Just a hunch :) Name is Anastasia. Bangkok airport 6:45am this Friday, Singapore 6045. Coming with two friends. But the two are going right to Phuket. I told Ana to hang with you if she could for a bit...*

'Really' were the words from Mali's mouth re K's initiative. But something made \$er glad. \$he was beyond lonely.

Mali: *Wow. Uh... you do take initiative for me don't you :) But friends of yours are friends of mine. I just got back from BKK though! Do I have to go again?*

Message sent. Now to wait.

It wasn't long though, after a shower and putting the rice cooker to heat up some home made oatmeal, flashing on the screen,

KO: *You're so nice. Really. But it would be so great. Ana is ridiculously cool. If she only liked girls I would be so in to her :) Well, I don't actually know the deal with her. But we met in grade school. Well, 'virtually' met. She is this crazy free dancer and wanted to create this project with movement on the computer. She found me - I was only like 14 and totally into the \$100 she paid me for like a billion hours of really cool programming. She actually won a prize and a writeup for it and I was included. She - well her parents - flew me out to the ceremony and we became close friends - as much as you could in a few days together in the 80's, when long distance wasn't cheap and all we had left were letters. But ever since we stay in touch once in a while. Its not close but she's the real thing of real things. You know in*

this world...

Mali: *Say no more :) I totally want to see this program... still exist?*

KO: *Yeah, if you have a TRS-80 with an 8" floppy drive, got the goods locked up in my vault somewhere.*

Mali: *Vault???*

KO: *If you only knew! All kinds of shit in there people would not believe I kept. Like my first love the Apple II, when their logo was still pretty rainbow... hahaha THAT should have been a sign... not the boring gray piece of shit they have now... before UI's were built for the shit-dumb user base of today...*

Mali: *I have to visit you, really.*

K felt a rush of warmth in her heart at the idea and smiled.

KO: *Yeah?*

Mali: *Oh and the Face guy? I'm gonna save that one for when we meet in person.*

KO: *You're soooooooooo mean!!!! But fair fair. So you found him???*

Mali: *I can say thank you, for now. That WAS an experience that I still haven't completely come to grips with.*

KO: *You're welcome hahahaha... evil aren't I?*

Mali: *And let Ana know I am all hers. I can - will - come down to BKK for her or for sure if she wants to come up here she's totally welcome to the bumkin land.*

KO: *Tell you what and I would not tell you to do this if I didn't know her. She's so cool, just go meet her, make her day, ok? I actually think she will more than make your day. Wish I could come in fact!*

Mali: *You should! Anything for you sweetheart ;)*

KO: *I tooooooollldddd you, don't do that!!! And yeah... THAT would go over just great with my GF right now :(*

Mali: *So which Friday does she get here?*

KO: *Day after tomorrow.*

Mali: *Seriously?*

KO: *Can you make it?*

Mali: *I'll make it happen. Is all good with you and GF?*

KO: *Better. I... well... for when we meet in person we talk, it will turn into an epic here and you need to go out. But I am really really trying to make this work here and face my work 'demons' that are soooooo hard because I can't tell them from angels.*

Mali: *I think I understand. I so look forward to actually seeing you again. You're - speaking of cool people - rather amazing yourself :)*

Another stream of warmth went through K. It felt nice. What the hell was that?!

KO: *Ok, with that I will sign off.*

SESSION CLOSED

NEXT

Hating on the Road to Bangkok

*The best day of my life is the day I am free to be myself as I am. The day that I have a smile wherever I go and laugh easily and often is a day lived at its fullest. I am complete. Game over, nothing else to seek. *

Mali had some years back penned these words into 'his' journal and still carried it, copying it to a new one when needed. It's funny how it's like we already know everything, the real end answer but we need help getting there.

*Of course everyday is beautiful when you're right with yourself. *

But I'm still hardly right with myself.

Six in the morning was also a beautiful time to walk in Chiang Rai. It was cool(er), tranquil and allowed one to savor the beauty - which was plentiful though easy to overlook when the sun reached in at the heat of the day.

Given there was not much chance for finding a cab anywhere near the apartment building, \$he started walking with \$er small roller carry-on suitcase in tow.

Although it wasn't in every moment, strangely since seeing The Face, \$he felt empowered to be 'fabulous'... it was just the word that embodied that feeling. Because before - or unless \$he ever became a 'she' to the world - 'fabulous' was what \$he would have to settle for. Even for \$erself, at home, first came fabulous and then maybe maybe 'she'.

Gay or in my case... not.

\$he noticed even just a difference in \$er hips as \$he walked. Not flamboyant or anything but just more...

Me

\$he couldn't put \$er finger on it but something had broken - just more of the caring about what others thought was gone.

As a car announced its way by the engine, Mali could feel the usual tense-up \$he'd feel - in the morning when \$he expected to be alone.

But it's just because I hate myself...

Mali reminded \$erself. The anxiety subsided. Saying that seemed like such a negative thing... but in the days since The Face meeting, whenever \$he reminded \$erself of it, \$he felt more okay, more free, and a smile would come easier. It was strange.

Tranquil roads. Turning the corner from \$er street and soon walking over the little bridge across a small brook. The greenery always full and enthralling. It was truly beautiful this place. Too if one got to the third story or beyond of any building - then the surrounding mountains and majestic country could be seen. Only that savoring such beauty and its deliciousness was generally lost in the heat and intense sun, so it felt to \$er.

In any other cooler climate, this place would be somewhere \$he would explore, walk every street and alley, want to go find the base of the hills and see how far \$he can go up them. So, it was walks like these in early mornings, rain or unusual cold spells that were so precious and was \$er only ability to emotionally connect to the physical environment. Well, beside nighttime.

No people on the street to stare, make remarks or laugh. Or just get in \$er way, impeding \$er path and progress, as it felt. That's why \$he liked the early morning. One didn't have to be fabulous... or anything for that matter, have any confidence, sense of or belief in yourself or your value... if no one else was around it was a non-issue. \$he often didn't even know \$he was in a bad mood until crossing paths with someone.

As \$he made \$er way, all of the sudden \$he heard a door open and saw a woman a few houses ahead getting onto a moped. Damn, so much for being alone. As if it was a big deal, it was just how \$he was when \$he was expecting and wanting to be alone. Which was most of the time.

It's just that I hate myself.

Mali walked by pretending to not know anyone was around, but the woman said hi, and offered \$er a ride on her moped as she was heading to the market.

Mali immediately tensed up inside feeling bad, about how \$he just had ignored the woman and wanted away from her. Fact was, \$he didn't want to be seen - or show \$erself.

I'm just sick of people staring at me, observing me, even laughing at me. That's the whole story.

*I hate myself. That's what. The rest is bullshit. *

Mali reminded \$erself again.

\$he smiled back at the woman, 'kap koon ka, mai ao, chop dern na ka'.

Thank you, but no thanks, I like to walk.

She smiled in thanks again and went on her way.

And that was the feeling \$he so often had, like after such an interaction \$he felt tense, pulling in inside, making \$erself small in the view that someone was kind to \$er.

Because if you hate yourself, kindness is quite hard to take.

\$he nodded. It made sense.

And \$he hated the rigidity that was born from such turning in. \$he'd never until now understood the mechanism. For most of \$er life \$he'd less than consciously blamed the world for \$er problems.

Why couldn't \$he just be open, smile and love? And not give a damn what anyone else thought?

*I think everyone hates me. *

Everyone's looking at me.

Laughing at me.

*But really, its me who hates, looks and laughs at me. *

*First and worse than anyone else. *

*I beat them to it. *

In the mirror at home it starts.

\$he continued to repeat it like a mantra as \$he walked. Found a cab. Actually smiled and was friendly to the driver. And soon was aboard a plane destined for Bangkok.

NEXT

Dress Shopping

Shit already or get off the pot!

The long morning of constant movement of travel and getting situated *this time* in Bangkok now had decelerated from light speed to 0 in a moment once the last of \$er belongings had been placed somewhere reasonable on the extensive counters that surrounded the room without other storage space. It was only mid-afternoon but felt like yesterday that \$he'd walked with \$er bag in tow down the rural streets of Chiang Rai.

Entering the lobby, \$he realized \$he'd become a regular at the Nantra Sukhumvit Hotel, greeted with a warmth and familiarity which felt good. The wild thing about living as an expat, as \$he'd also encountered when living in Mexico, were these moments when you realize the concept of 'home' has shifted and the new one has become a relative term. Just as returning to Chiang Rai actually was home now, not the USA. And the Nantra a home now too.

\$he laid on \$er faithful yoga mat, stretched and let go, turning \$er head side to side and then and staring up at the white painted ceiling of \$er little room. With the Face, the coming of Anastasia and all the travel, well, not to mention the reacquaintance with K, \$he felt disoriented now, but in a way that offered new freedom. Similar feeling to when \$he'd left a job or a relationship, a freedom and ease. Like there was a surplus of time, space and directionality open to \$er, for the taking. All possibilities.

Something magical also was going on with embracing \$er apparent distaste for \$erself, or as Face had called it, 'hate'. It was like \$he'd spent \$er life bracing against this aggressively intrusive outer world. And in doing so prevented \$erself from being \$erself. But now that \$he turned the hate \$he'd imagined the world had for \$er inward, strangely \$he felt more free.

And Cat...

The hold Cat had on \$er - and really the idea of keeping \$erself as a man - had really seemed to relax. Almost overnight. Somewhere in between their last conversation and the Face's lesson...

It's as if I don't even find anymore the feeling that drove me to play that game. Or to even want to.

The impulse whatever it was that drove \$er *there* was apparently gone. Like a place you found once in a city but can not for the life of you find your way back to it.

I don't need to be a man anymore.

For anything. For anyone.

*There's no one - nothing - there for me anyway. *

*My dream... love... relationship... could never happen being a man. *

Being a lie.

Too, \$he strangely felt more okay... to go further. A certain thought had started coming up the last few days. Initially let go and dismissed but now to the point which it had to be acted upon.

A new level of exploration.

Unthinkable even a week before.

\$he smirked playfully, knowing in \$er gut that this had to happen.

Going to happen.

And like everything that comes about in it's own time, today was perfect for it.

And I know exactly where to go.

It was the perfect combination of motivation, excitement coupled with anxiety that made things in life exciting.

*I have no idea how this will go. I just have to try. *

I might just feel awkward... and that's okay. It's okay... at any point I end this experiment.

*I might be laughed at even more. *

\$he had realized over the years that the best is to take the things \$he felt inclined to do in respect to 'dressing' and try them. Without committal or expectation. To see how \$he felt and go from there. \$er entire progression toward the feminine had been in this way. Up to and including the use of hormones which \$he was trying out now. Empirically determining who \$he was.

And Anastasia is coming tomorrow.

For some reason it seemed important to do this now, before she got here.

Anyhow, if things feel bad, go bad, all I have to do is remember too...

'I hate myself'

It'd worked so far and miraculously, it seemed, had paved the way to this moment, the next adventure and exploration.

A mantra that gave power.

And so Mali pulled herself up from the yoga mat, arranged herself and set out to make it happen. Deep inside in addition to the excitement was a sense of warm comfort even just thinking about it.

In Thailand, shopping malls are the extended living space of the population. Where the streets and outdoors are just a tolerated nuisance during the day, the malls are filled with all types. Filled is the key. Not overly crowded but definitely filled.

Mali shook her head.

Thailand malls are... the best in the world. Spending the day is not painful, even relaxing.

Such as was Terminal 21 today, the large eight floored shopping mega-complex across the street from the high-rise where Cat's clinic was located. It felt like the center of the universe - both the MRT subway and the BTS skyway line converged onto the raised pedestrian overpass which fed into the mall as well as the street, Sukhumvit which ran the ends of the city.

Mali made her way, picking out the shaded places to deviate her walking path to avoid the early afternoon sun, coming upon and passing people alone and in groups that were on their way too.

She chose the mall because its floor of boutique stores - actually more like stalls. She had walked by them often while frequenting the mall after attending her Thai classes across the street. Mali realized in this moment of the domino effect - from Thai class, to walking in randomly to Cat's clinic in the same building, to this moment.

It's like everything is for a reason... again.

It seemed so often since starting to 'go to hell' that nothing seemed to make sense or flow.

Anyhow, the stores had the kind of clothes she knew would like to wear. Colors, fashionable, form fitting in great part, but that they were surprisingly reasonably price compared to the name brand stores on the other floors.

*Definitely Thai style, this floor. *

All black, floors and walls, and a maze-like complex of the halls shooting off from the center where she stood in the midst of a cafe that specialized only in green tea concoctions and a Hagen Dazs counter.

*Definitely my place. *

Offsetting the blackness were the windows and contents of the little stores, radiating with color. So much more pleasing than the operating room white light bathed upscale stores on the other levels. Unconsciously to her, this offered a kind of feeling of safety and protection than such other places, the too-bright lights exposing everything and so often filled with catty self-entitled women.

Mali knew she was making up for lost time and that not everything she would buy would be perfect but \$he wanted some sort of completion that day. \$he needed some shoes, nice sandals perhaps, something she could walk a lot in, and black to go with whatever else she would buy. Then dresses. And if she found some nice earrings, jewelry that would be very helpful.

*Oh... and bras. Shit... bras. *

That's gonna be the hard one.

She had no idea how to shop for bras. Especially bras that were basically unnecessary physically but for cultural and emotional necessity.

So with a plan, and the necessary militant energy to make things happen, \$he began the mission...

"This for girlFRIEND?" the store clerk intoned innocently, smiling the always ebullient 'hello smile', the one that melts the heart of first time foreigner, who loses their mind like a puppy dog in this place as they don't realize there are twelve other smiles the Thai people wear and they all mean different things, even this one.

It was the game Mali was so used to playing in \$er mind - 'how in the world are others seeing me?'. The response of the other person or people played into and determined \$er relation to them and in a way who \$he was.

And how I feel about myself.

Oh yeah... I hate myself.

Of course, when \$he was assumed as a man or gay, then \$he'd play \$er familiar favorite, *lets make a list of what's wrong with me this time.*

So what was so wrong with \$er today, at this juncture, that \$he was assumed to be a man shopping for a girlfriend?

*Fuck me. I hate myself. *

That was the unfortunate thing, for an in-between person wanting to appear feminine. As a woman could go out without makeup, and even with combat boots and Mali's exact outfit and still be read as female.

But not me. Not in a million years.

I look like a fucking gay guy at best.

*What the hell is it? The bone structure of my face, lack of breasts, and the somewhat tense, rigid, a bit masculine way I think I still move? *

It was something that \$he always fought with. As if \$er body was still afraid and thus tense while another part of \$er wanted to be free. Always at odds.

"I'll try it on, kaaa?", Mali replied. \$he felt less awkward in being adamant today. Actually, \$he wanted this so much \$he really didn't give a shit right now about anyone's attitude or perception of \$er. And today it was not an option to walk out of a store with something \$he wanted because of how \$he was treated.

Fuck you if you think you're going to get in my way today.

*I'm going to make this happen. *

"Ah, kaaaa," the saleswoman smiled knowingly. No big deal. It was Bangkok. Ladyboy everywhere. Even farang ladyboy here.

She gestured to the dressing room. As Mali entered \$he sighed and shook off the situation.

Leaving with two dresses, the next stop was easier. It was a kiosk that had these amazing long t-shirt material dresses. And also some more edgy stuff, leather and jewelry. This place was not a problem at all, the younger saleswoman getting who Mali was without missing a beat.

Mali left there with a second bag full of another dress and some assorted inexpensive faux-silver jewelry.

The shoe department at one of the larger department stores was another story. Many saleswomen all hovering around. The bright white and lights fatiguing, and it'd already been quite a day. And what felt like attitude.

Mali could feel and knew \$er resilience was wearing thin.

But this was still going to happen. The inertia would not permit failure here.

The problem had been that although \$er feet were within female range, perhaps to the upper end, \$he was in Thailand, the land of the petite and not only that, \$he had no idea how shoe sizes worked for anyone here.

"Measure feet ka?" Mali inquired.

The saleswoman shook her head as if she didn't understand.

"Maybe no have your size."

Fuck you.

Mali felt the remark as a bit snarky and that the woman wanted this strange androgynous farang gone.

Not going to happen today.

After some trials and persistence, \$he finally left with a pair of not ugly but not gorgeous practical type sandals in hand, the ones that had a strap over the front of the foot and one around the back of foot and ankle, way better looking than Birkenstocks and less outdoorsy than Texas.

*They'd do for now. And heck, they're comfortable! *

*I'm done. *

After a few hours she was exhausted. Not from just shopping but as a woman. It had been a tremendous amount of psychic energy withdrawal from the bank that at the start of the outing was full up from the ecstasy of travel, all the growth in the past week not to mention anticipation of meeting Anastasia.

And every interaction with others, it seemed, to have a price, in the currency of \$er confidence. As always. Realizing and feeling mirrored back that not everyone that was helping her saw her the way \$he saw \$erself hurt. Even in the best case \$he felt like \$he was being humored and \$he hated that feeling. \$he was sensitive but then again, this mission was so important \$he had put those feelings on the back burner for once.

Mali sat in a daze.

\$he'd treated herself to a green tea affogatto, a hot green tea with a scoop of green tea ice cream in it - this cafe's answer to the coffee drinking world, and an excellent one at that.

\$he watched the passing shoppers. Actually the feet of the passing shoppers, now with a sensitized awareness to shoes. \$he was thinking about \$er shoe - sandal - choice.

I won't deceive myself. I have not broken the shoe code yet.

She watched the girls and women passing by and made notes of who had 'nailed it' and who just was 'so so'. And why that was so. Color coordination was definitely in. Shoes and something else on the outfit.

Sandals with painted toenails...

Definitely hot.

Sandals or open toed shoes with sparkle...

Extra points if they sparkled with color...

High heels...

Uh lets not go there. I'm tall enough and what's the point...

Closed toed shoes... with or without a small heel...

Fucking witchy shoes. Why do women wear that ugly shit?

\$he stared out at shoppers for probably half an hour more focusing on closed toed shoes... and could not find one example contrary of hot closed toed shoes. Although focusing on this one element of dress, \$he had no question without anyone telling \$er, what \$he liked.

Turning to the thought of dresses. It had to be dresses for now. If anything she had learned, is that to compensate for indicators that say 'male' when someone looks at you, one had to stack everything possible in the other direction. So transgender women had to in essence do more than genetic women to have any semblance of passing - of being read as female, meaning enough elements were female that they tipped the brain and senses of the perceiver. She knew this from actual experience.

Before wigs it was all about clothes and makeup. That was an awful period \$he chose not to dwell on.

*Ultra gay looking. *

Especially when \$he'd shaved \$er head in hopes of appearing like Sinéad O'Connor. Which didn't work at all. \$he cringed a little at the memory.

Then the bandanas as a head cover attempt. Which more than once combined with his overly slender stature led people to ask if 'he' was sick. Some comedian at a show even called \$er a pirate. Horrible.

Then wigs, a step in the right direction but...

Finally with the first hair transplant there was a feeling of being more 'okay' as is. A relatively female hair line. No more need for wigs and horrible bandanas, less makeup. It was the gateway to \$er believing. And all this durring \$er first visit to Thailand. Never the same after.

The funny thing too, with each improvement in femininity - the hair transplants, the rhinoplasty - after each Mali would ask 'maybe I did not need to do all this' but forgetting all the steps \$he'd already made -- and the benefits \$he was receiving. Which only became apparent when, ignorant of such, \$he would return to try male mode and each time feel progressively not right.

Hua Hin. I don't want to ever do that again, okay Mali?

Mali shook \$er head, looking downwards and smiled.

About

Until I add more here... I can be contacted at:

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{%- if site.email -%}

[{{ site.email }}](#)

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