

The Cotton Is High
&
Of the Earth:
Writing *The Cotton Is High*

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This novel and exegesis are submitted
together in satisfaction of the requirements for
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Abstract

The Cotton Is High is the comedic tale of one man's quest to find happiness and contentment in an imperfect, ever-changing world. Written in the first person narrative perspective, the novel details the protagonist's descent into madness as he, Cotton Walters, strives to understand and assimilate discrepancies between his seemingly ideal upbringing and the disadvantaged lives of the characters who surround him. Taking place over the course of a single day, the opening sections introduce Cotton as well as the first major conflict in the narrative: Cotton quarrels with Bell, his girlfriend, while travelling abroad in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The novel then follows Cotton through the streets of Dhaka, as he compares his "lucky" life to the poverty-stricken characters that surround him. Further sections reveal that Cotton's life may not be as perfect as he has previously suggested. Cotton, who is already showing signs of mental instability, runs into a character he believes to be his estranged mother and, again, through confrontations with a series of local, Bangladeshi characters, Cotton's life is compared and contrasted to the lives of those who surround him. The final sections detail Cotton's absolute downfall, in which he loses his mind in an attempt to understand problems within the world and within his own biography that are well beyond his cognitive capabilities.

Of the Earth, the exegetical component of my PhD, is divided into two parts. 'Part One: Depictions of Developing Nations' highlights debates surrounding the creative representation of an 'other' culture that exists within a developing nation. As such, the benefits and pitfalls of postcolonial discourse will be discussed and will be the lens through which literary influences on *The Cotton Is High* are examined. 'Part Two: Fictionalizing a Developing Nation' will discuss geo-political research and personal experiences that informed *The Cotton Is High*. It will also discuss difficulties encountered in the writing process, strategies for overcoming these difficulties, and the intended effect of authorial techniques on the reader. By discussing all of the above, the exegesis, as a whole, will demonstrate how *The Cotton Is High* has placed itself within the context of border-crossing fiction that engages with a developing nation.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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The Cotton Is High

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VOLUME ONE

Creative Work

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(Note: Creative document written in American English,
to match voice of narrator)

Summertime,
And the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin'
And the cotton is high

Your daddy's rich
And your mamma's good lookin'
So hush little baby
Don't you cry

Summer Time
DuBose Heyward

PART ONE

She called me a motherfucker. So I walked out on her. Problem is I had no idea where I was, or where to go after I'd stormed out, or how to get back once I'd calmed down and realized that leaving wasn't really an option.

I mean, she fully fucking screamed at me: "You are *such* a selfish asshole, Cotton. Do you realize that? Do you realize what a self-centered prick you are?" And I screamed back something melodramatic about taking a cab to the airport – right before accidentally leaving behind my passport and wallet – and it's funny because I don't ever really remember what we were arguing about. Like all I know is that Bell was sleeping on top of me, because Bell always sleeps on top of me, and I wanted to get up to get some fresh air, but I didn't want to wake her, because I didn't want her to ask: "Is everything alright?" Because everything was perfect, peachy keen, dandy, swell.

I mean, if you compare your life to the life of a leper you've just seen strewn across the sidewalk in one of the dirtiest, poorest places on earth, you suddenly feel beautiful and rich – and I guess that's what I was thinking about while I lay there beneath Bell, staring up at the off-kilter ceiling fan and attempting to follow one blade as it spun round and round. Everything, I thought, is relatively perfect. I'm extremely rich in this extremely poor society, and that's okay. Because I'm poor in America – like I'm not *really* rich, because if I was really rich I'd obviously have helped that poor woman. Is she still on the street where we saw her or is there some sort of shelter where she can go to be safe? Or a leper colony? Do leper colonies still exist?

And I hoped they did, because even if you're brilliant and kind, courageous and funny, who would want to sleep next to you when your face is covered in massive lumps? You would *have* to have a leper girlfriend, who you'd probably meet at a leper colony. So hopefully leper colonies still exist, and hopefully your leper girlfriend

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doesn't have stumps for arms like that poor lady on the street. She was the most horrifying human being I'd ever seen in real life – which sounds terrible, but it's true – and I kept hoping there was someone out there to keep her company, someone to love her despite her hideousness, because, if not, what was the point of being alive? I mean, wouldn't you just kill yourself? Because I would. Or I thought I would. I thought it didn't actually sound that bad, I mean, because we don't actually know anything about the afterlife, so who's to say it's negative? Like, maybe the absence of life isn't an absence at all, because you're gaining death. And perhaps that's the best thing ever. Perhaps it's bliss. Perhaps they should call it the miracle of death instead of the miracle of life, but yeah...

The call to prayer broke from the speakers of the local mosque and destroyed my pathetic little meditation on death. And I remember thinking: What would it be like to wake up every morning to the sound of this dude singing those prayers through that shitty megaphone? It was like someone trying to impersonate a ghost while raping a cat, and I sat there listening to those ululations until I could discern four other mosques in the distance. How is Bell still asleep? I wondered. How do you sleep though something so strange and beautiful and haunting and horrible?

Vodka, I answered myself. Forty-eight straight hours, more or less, of vodka tonics, screwdrivers, vodka lemonades and vodka's on the rocks. We'd started shortly after departure – soon as refreshments were served – and hadn't stopped until we fell asleep and woke up in Hong Kong, where we drank away our eight-hour delay; and then there were more refreshments, more romantic comedies and trips to the bathroom; until, finally, we arrived in Dhaka, where Bell's dad had picked us up. And he was drunk, as well. Which at first seemed awesome – I mean, because my dad's a

total teetotaler: like he doesn't even drink sparkling water because he thinks it's carcinogenic.

Later though, when Bell's dad wouldn't let us go to bed without another drink, it became disastrous. I started to think I was going to pass out at the dining table, and the servant lady kept pouring me chilled cucumber juice, but that wasn't helping because Bell's dad kept spiking it with more Absolut or Grey Goose or whatever top brand bottle he'd picked up on his latest stint abroad, all of which he wanted to tell us about.

'I'm exhausted,' I eventually said. 'I've got to go bed now, but thank you, Mr. Bipu, for everything.'

'No!' he said. 'You can't go yet. You just sat down.'

'Dad,' said Bell. 'It's late.'

'Well *you'll* stay for one more drink, won't you darling?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Obviously. But let Cotton get some rest.'

At which point I snuck upstairs, into the lavish guest room, and crawled into bed without brushing my teeth or checking my emails. And at first it felt so good. Like I sank so deeply into that mattress that it felt as though I were falling through the first floor and into the earth. I slept for what must have been a good hour, and then Bell crawled into bed beside me and wrapped her legs around my calves and her arms around my lower back. I'm usually fine with that, I mean, because she's just over five feet tall – super light and perfectly proportioned – and I don't usually mind if she sleeps on top of me, because I'm usually so baked that I pass out way before she's even in bed.

But this time her bear hug woke me up, just as she was falling asleep, and okay, she's got skin like something you could bathe in to heal sunburn, lips like your

favorite fruit, but that night she was sweaty, and her breath smelled of vodka and steak, and I didn't want anyone touching me. I didn't want her on top of me, but I also didn't want to wake her up. So I just sat there, counting sheep, thinking about death and the leper lady, until that call to prayer rang through the early morning streets.

Everything is not okay, I remember thinking. Everything is actually horrible. Or maybe I just need some air. Maybe I just need to breathe – to completely relax without this dead weight on top of me.

'Bell,' I said, pushing her hair out of my face. 'Get off of me.' Her breath on my neck was disgusting. 'Please, Bell, get off of me.' And she didn't budge, she didn't change. Her breathing remained steady and her heart, which was beating against my chest, maintained its slow pace.

So I grabbed her hips and slowly turned over, turned as if switching positions from cowgirl to the standard missionary, and she flopped onto her back, which was cute. I mean it was cute to watch her plop onto the empty half of the mattress: one hand falling amongst long, dark hair that was spread out like gossamer over the white pillow, and the other hand landing atop her face. Her mouth was hanging open and her lips were so full in the moonlight: so pretty, so drunk, with such perfect features. It was not technically a flattering portrait, which is to say that if I'd taken a photo of her and showed it to her the next morning, she'd have made me delete it. 'Cotton,' I could hear her say. 'What the fuck? Why would you take a photo of me like that? That's horrible.' But it wasn't horrible. It was un-posed and sincere: A Portrait of Belladonna Arvidsson-Bipu After Two and a Half Days of Vodka. My phone, I realized, was charging on the desk near the window. I could get some air. I could take a photo of her. I could do whatever I wanted, so long as she didn't wake up.



The razor wire was glimmering in the moonlight, and the garden was a black hole, and for a moment I imagined the lake outside the compound was a freeway forever leading into the distance. Black and smooth, I wanted to drive down it until the whole world melted away. Like it may sound strange or morbid, but dying sounded delicious. For a few days, or even an hour, to take a break from thinking and planning and worrying and breathing – it sounded so relaxing to die. And I imagined myself sinking into that lake and emerging refreshed and reborn. From the window I could see a tiny village on the opposite bank side, and down below, in the black hole, the radio in the guardhouse was belting another version of the call to prayer. It was nearing dawn, I knew. But I wasn't ready for the sun to rise, because I hadn't finished with the night. I hadn't slept. And I would need the sleep, I figured, if I was going to make it through a full day with Bell and her dad.

The singing prayers stopped for a moment and I could hear birds chirping.

'Cotton?' Bell said – and I moved back inside to find her sitting up in bed. She was lit up in the moonlight, with her hair draped over her bare shoulders and her eyes squeezed tightly closed. 'I'm so thirsty. What time is it?'

I picked my phone up off the desk. '4:33.'

'What are you doing?' she said. 'Why is the window open? The birds are loud, Cotton. And the mosquitoes are going to come in and there's malaria.'

I laughed.

'What?' she said.

'Nothing,' I said, still smiling.

'Why are you laughing?'

‘Because earlier,’ I said, ‘I was counting sheep.’

‘Why?’

‘That’s what you’re supposed to do if you can’t sleep, and yeah ... I was imagining these cloud white sheep hopping over a white fence, you know? They were hopping from pasture to another; and then it occurred to me that real sheep aren’t white, so much as they’re an expired cream color, with shit that clings to their backsides and maggots in the folds of their skin. Anyway, it didn’t help me sleep.’

‘That’s why you’re laughing? I don’t believe you.’

‘No,’ I said, grinning. ‘I was laughing because, when you said “mosquito,” for some reason I imagined a cloud white mosquito hopping over a barbed wire fence, from one leper lady to...’

‘*What?*’

‘You didn’t see her earlier?’

‘Who? Cotton, will you please close the fucking window?’

‘I can’t sleep.’

‘Cotton,’ she moaned. ‘Please.’

‘You should see the lake,’ I said. ‘It’s like a freeway.’

‘Please, Cotton.’

‘But I need the air, baby.’

‘You are such a selfish asshole,’ she said.

Which may or may not have been when the argument started. I mean, you could just as easily say that it began when Bell woke up, or when Bell crawled into bed and wrapped herself around me, or when Bell and I got on the plane, or when Bell and I met. You could say it started when I wouldn’t close the window, or when I accidentally quoted a rap song in response to her “selfish asshole” comment.

‘Eat a dick,’ I said.

‘*What?*’

‘Nothing,’ I said.

Which is when she called me a motherfucker and I drew the line.



Anyway, Dhaka isn't the best city in the world to get lost in. Unless you're from Dhaka. If you're from Dhaka, then Dhaka could very well be the best city in the world to get lost in. But I'm from Los Angeles – born at Hollywood Community and raised on Yucca Street, near the mini-park – and I would never have come to Bangladesh if Bell's dad wasn't Bangladeshi. Not that I had anything against the place. It just wasn't a country that I ever thought I'd visit, I mean, because I'd never even been to Mexico or Canada or anything. Bangladesh sounded like a trip to, well, Bangladesh. Like the only thing Bell had ever told me about the place was that it was full of starving people, and that when she was a little girl, visiting her dad, it had once flooded and they'd been trapped in their house for over a week. I thought that sounded horrible, and I guess if someone had asked me I'd have said I preferred to go to Rome or even Australia. But we went to Bangladesh, to the Gulshan Thana district of Dhaka, which is where Bell's dad lives and where everything I'm trying to tell you about takes place.

The district is roughly the same size as Hollywood, except there are like three times the amount of people in Gulshan Thana. Or at least that's what Bell's dad told us on the night we arrived, when we were all sitting around the dining room table drinking cucumber juice and vodka. ‘Cotton,’ he said. ‘You've of course been to

Disneyland?’ We were sitting on one end of the long table: Bell and me, Mr. Bipu and Bell’s step mom. In the kitchen, a cook grilled lobster, and a house girl kept pushing through the swinging doors to place steaming plates in front of us. ‘So I’m sure you’ve waited in some long lines,’ Mr. Bipu went on. ‘You understand what it’s like to be shoulder to shoulder with so many goddamn people that all you see are goddamn shoulders. Well that’s Disneyland, Cotton. That’s Anaheim, California, home of Mickey Mouse, right? And it’s no joke – I’m not saying Southern California is a joke. I’m just saying that Dhaka is like Disneyland if the park were packed to capacity and half flooded. You got seven million people packed into 800 square kilometers. You can hardly piss in private, let alone do anything else. And it’s fucking awful, Cotton. I fucking hate these people, even if I’m one of them. I wouldn’t live here if I wasn’t making a goddamn fortune.’ He sipped his vodka. ‘But I’m glad you and Bell came to visit.’

‘Thank you for having us,’ I said. ‘It’s really nice of...’

‘Well I didn’t actually invite you.’

‘Hank!’ yelled Bell’s step mom, Meredith.

‘Not that you’re not welcome,’ he continued, holding up a hand to silence his wife. ‘Because you are. It’s just I invited Bell, and she insisted you come because she’s apparently infatuated by you. So you’re here, and you’re welcome.’ His smile made me wonder if the skin on his face had ever been pulled in such a direction before. And later, as I was “storming” out of the house on tiptoe, I wanted nothing more than for that man with the faux grin to stay in his bedroom. So I walked, quietly, step by step, over that padded carpet and down those stairs, through the entry way and through the front door. Please, I remember thinking. Please Bell, stay in the room.

Don't throw a fucking shoe at me like you did last time. Don't cause a ruckus. I don't want him waking up.



I quickly walked down the long driveway, past the tennis courts and the Olympic-sized pool. The sky was still dark but I could see the guardhouse lit-up in front of the security gate, and the lone streetlamp beyond it. A relic, I thought. How cool. The streetlamp looked like something out of Dickens's London, and yet everything on the property around me could have been straight out of Southern California. I wondered if there was so much need for security, or if Bell's dad was just paranoid in the way that a lot of rich people are paranoid. Because Bell's mom is super paranoid. Like she lives in a gated community in the Santa Monica mountains, and she still sets an alarm whenever she's in the garden, and deadbolts her doors whenever she's inside. She has a gun, too, which is totally unnecessary. But that's normal in her neighborhood. That's normal in a lot of Southern California neighborhoods. And I suppose I wanted to know what was normal in Dhaka, because I'd never walked the streets of a foreign city before.

A guard popped his head out of the guardhouse when he heard my approaching footsteps. 'Good morning, sir,' he said, smiling and standing up to greet me. 'Why you are up this early? You are having the bad sleeping time?' He had a thick moustache, another relic, though it seemed more seventies style than Dickensian, and he was wearing a blue uniform and black boots. Behind him, peeking out of the guardhouse, was another guard. This guard was clean-shaven, perhaps a few years younger, and I heard the radio behind him drop in volume.

I had met both of them the previous day, but had forgotten their names.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘No, I can’t sleep.’

The clean-shaven guard pulled his lips back so far that I could see both his upper and lower rows of teeth. It seemed like a forced smile, which made me wonder what they were doing before I’d approached. ‘You are jet lagging?’ he asked, stepping out of the guardhouse.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I can’t sleep.’

‘You are wanting to walk?’ asked the moustache.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Be very careful,’ said the clean-shaven guard. ‘It is the very nice time for walking, the most beautiful time of the morning, when it is warm but not too hot. But sometimes there are bad dogs or bad people.’

‘Always,’ said the moustache, ‘there are not the nicest people walking in this dark hour. Particularly for the foreign man.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Many dangers, sir,’ said the shaven guard.

‘Many poor people,’ said the other.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I don’t have anything to steal.’

‘You have no money?’ said the moustache.

‘I’m just going to walk around for a moment,’ I said, ‘so I don’t really...’

They were talking to each other in rapid-fire Bengali, which sounded bubbly and lively and fun. ‘We are wanting to be giving you some money,’ said the clean-shaven guard, turning to me. ‘Please be taking with you for the short time that are walking.’

‘What?’ I said. ‘Why?’

‘You are maybe needing to have the money,’ said the moustache.

‘I don’t need money,’ I said. ‘I’ll be fine. I just need air.’

“Please sir,” said the shaven guard, taking out his wallet. “It is the just-in-case money. If you don’t need, no problem.’

‘Just in case,’ said the moustache.

‘In case,’ said the other, handing me a bill. ‘Just in case.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Sure.’ I looked at the bill. “But this is five hundred dollars, that’s way too much.’

‘Five hundred taka,’ said the moustache.

‘Six dollars,’ said the other.

‘Five hundred taka is six dollars?’

‘Six dollars,’ said the moustache.

‘Five hundred taka,’ said the other, moving to open the gate.

‘Well I’ll give it back when I return,’ I said.

‘Okay,’ said the shaven guard. ‘Thank you sir. Enjoy your walk.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘No problem, sir,’ said the moustache, gesturing toward the now open gate.

‘We will be seeing you very soon, yes?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

He saluted me, as if I was some sort of military sergeant, and I didn’t know what to do, so I saluted him back. Then the other guard saluted me – at which point I stepped through the gates and into the streets. I walked.

Outside the gates, across the street, was a construction sight, and the street itself was pockmarked with potholes and pustules of debris. I walked through the darkness, beneath low hanging trees, happy to be free and breathing, but still angry at

Bell. She had called me the one thing I find highly offensive, and thinking about that made me think of all the other things she'd done which had pissed me off in the past few weeks; things I had kept to myself, because they seemed miniscule, which now came back in a torrent.

There was one thing in particular that I kept thinking about, a story she always brings up whenever she wants to embarrass me in front of new acquaintances. It's the story about the time I almost accidentally killed her, a true story. She had told it to her father and Meredith during dinner the previous evening, which was fucked. Because it was the first time I'd met them, and I'd wanted to make a good impression.

'Southern California can be beautiful, though,' Meredith had said. We were talking about the smog in the valley. 'Hank and I drove through the mountains last time we were there – down Mulholland Drive. It was gorgeous. We stopped at this one lookout and the city is quite beautiful from that distance.'

'Oh we've been there, haven't we Cotton?' Bell had said. 'I almost lost my life on Mulholland Drive.'

'What's this...?' said Mr. Bipu. 'You did?'

'Yeah,' said Bell. 'We were driving back from Mom's house, heading into the city, and I think we were arguing about something, right Cotton?' She looked at me and smiled. 'Anyway, I said something, and Mr. Road Rage here whipped to the side of the road – probably were you two pulled over to look at the city—and...'

'You said something about me being exactly like my mom,' I'd interrupted. 'That's what you said.'

'Oh so now it's okay that you almost killed me?'

'What happened?' asked Mr. Bipu.

‘Well,’ Bell continued. ‘I guess I said something about Cotton’s mom, and he hates when I do that, and, anyway, he whips to the side of the road, completely seeing red, and he just gets out of the car, which would have been fine if...’

‘I like to go on walks,’ I said, ‘when we argue. I just needed some fresh air, you know?’

‘Anyway,’ Bell said. ‘He standing there, probably looking at the scenery, and all the sudden I realize the car is rolling downhill. Like it’s rolling down Mulholland and I’m totally locked into the passenger seat – you know how the seat belt locks? So I yell out, “Cotton ... um ... is it rolling?” And I look back at him and realize exactly what’s going on. It was totally terrifying. Like the car was rolling toward the cliff, you know? And I was locked in my seat, I couldn’t do anything...’

‘So what did you do?’ asked Mr. Bipu. ‘You pulled the emergency brake, right?’

‘The e-brake was foot brake,’ Bell said. ‘I couldn’t reach it.’

‘So then...?’

‘Well it kept rolling, and Cotton, to his credit, was trying to chase after me and get back into the car. I was screaming, like, totally panicking. And so I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed the wheel and turned it away from the cliffs, toward this huge boulder on the other side of the road.’

‘You crashed the car?’ said Mr. Bipu.

‘Yeah,’ said Bell.

‘Good thinking,’ said Meredith.

‘Yeah,’ Bell said. ‘It was the only thing I could do.’

Anyway, I don't mind the story or anything. Like it's the truth. I don't need to deny the truth. But at the same time, it seems fucked that Bell brings it up in certain circumstances where I'm already feeling like the new comer.

'That was a dumb thing to do,' Mr. Bipu had said to me. 'Why did you get out the car without setting the brake?'

'I was angry,' I said. 'I thought the brake was set, but I guess it wasn't.'

'It was set when you were in the car with your foot on the brake,' Bell said. 'But when you got out, you almost killed me.'

'I know. And I've said I'm sorry.'

'What an idiot,' Mr. Bipu had said.

'Yeah...' Bell answered. 'But we put up with him.'



Anyway, according to Bell's dad Gulshan Thaana is the nicest area in Dhaka. It's apparently where all the embassies are, and where all the diplomats live, but yeah. As I turned off his street onto Gulshan Road it looked pretty dirty – like that was the most disturbing thing. There was litter everywhere and layers of dust on the buildings, some of which were modern and ugly, others that were beautiful in a decrepit, hazardous way. Plus there was just a lot of disorganization. For example, a traffic island had been destroyed by drivers, and it was apparent that in those places other drivers had taken advantage of the missing concrete and turned the island into a mere speed bump. The sidewalk was mostly rubble, and I walked over it thinking of Los Angeles: the 747's taking off from LAX and the freeways interweaving, downtown rising like a copse of metallic trees and the blue ocean sparkling. Cities always look

more beautiful at a distance, I thought. And then I saw her, the leper lady, and all thoughts of anything but her were derailed.

She was sitting with her back to a shop door. The same shop I'd see her in front of the previous day, with its black windows and charred doorframes, its insides covered in ashes and the waste of vermin; and I stood across the road, watching her hug her knees with her stumpy arms. She was rocking back and forth, either to keep warm or to calm herself, and again I wished I had my camera. Like it seemed like the perfect photo to illustrate why I should be grateful. But it's too dark, I remember thinking. I would need a long exposure to capture her in the light of the streets, and my camera phone doesn't have that function. Skinny in her loose-fitting garments, I imagined that her sarong had been dragged along the street on many occasions. Because her legs were withered. They obviously didn't work. And it's odd, but she reminded me of every beggar I'd ever seen in front of an abandoned shop. Except this time I wasn't trying to avoid her. This time I crossed the street and walked directly toward her, drawn by the fact that she'd continuously haunted me whereas most beggars I forget as soon as they're out of sight.

She saw me coming and stared up at me, and I stopped before her and looked down at her potato-peel skin, with its warts like the warts on a pumpkin. She smelled of putrefaction and urine, or maybe it was just the street in general. Either way, it was difficult to breathe and I had to cover my mouth and nose as I spoke.

'Hi,' I said, 'I'm Cotton.'

She smiled, revealing a mouth that reminded me of rotten fruit.

If I were in her position, I remember thinking, I'd want to be swept up and deposited in the nearest trashcan. This is not how a human should live. You should not feel obligated to live if you have nothing to live for.

‘Do you want anything?’ I asked. ‘Do you want some food or something?’

Her eyes, I noticed, were completely bloodshot. Opaque red, I imagined that if she had to cry she would cry blood. I had never seen someone who looked so scary and it did not seem real to me. Like the scene felt staged; her eyes seemed like contacts; her skin like makeup. I attempted to see the human beneath the mask, but I couldn’t. All I could see was the face of a monster.

‘There’s a mini-mart down there,’ I said, pointing down the road. ‘I saw it when we drove yesterday. Um ... I could go there and get you something to eat? A coffee...? Do you drink coffee?’

With her stumps she adjusted herself on the sidewalk, lifting her bottom as if her arms were crutches, and I spooked. Like I stepped backward, away from her. Because she’d moved with such deftness. I hadn’t expected it.

‘Oh,’ I said, still covering my mouth.

She looked up at me and lifted one arm, obviously begging, and I stepped back ever further. I didn’t want her to touch me. ‘I’ll get you something,’ I went on. ‘I’ll get you a little breakfast and some coffee. Or donuts...? Do you like donuts? What do you like? You don’t speak English, do you?’

She refused to look at me and I felt horrible.

‘Please,’ I said. ‘Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back with, like, some coffees or whatever. Or something salty? Do you like salty food?’

She bent over in front of me, in supplication, and I walked away wondering what the hell to do with someone like her. How do you help them?



The mini-mart was pretty much like any convenience store that I'd even been to, with linoleum floors underfoot, fluorescent lights overhead, and a dark man with a beard behind the counter. What would she want for breakfast? I wondered. What would I want if I were a homeless woman on the streets of Dhaka? There were donuts, of course, one packet with powdered sugar and another chocolate-dipped, but Bell's voice was in my ears: 'Cotton, you always get things that *you* want without ever thinking about what other people might like.' So I looked for blueberry muffins. I looked for fruit. I looked at the juices and the sodas and the energy drinks and the waters. Would she prefer Coke or Pepsi? I wondered. Probably Coke. Everybody I know prefers Coke. Or maybe she doesn't like soda, I thought. At least she's already missing her teeth, so she doesn't have to worry about the sugar. I strolled over to the counter and looked at the cigarettes. I looked at the chips in their packets and noted a few flavors that I had never seen before.

A banana, I decided. I'll grab a few bananas and a big bottle of water. Where are the fruits? I walked around looking for them and a magazine caught my eye. It was a Bangladeshi girly mag, but it was completely different than the mag's at home – like the girl on the cover was cute, but she was fully clothed. I sat there looking at her and all the other faces on the magazines, when a flash of yellow light passed before the window.

It was a shawl, a bright yellow shawl with a pattern of lime green octagons, and it was draped over the head of a girl who was walking past the window. She disappeared as quickly as she had come, but was followed by another girl, and another. Twenty or more girls passed when I started to wonder what was going on. Like they were all walking in groups of two and threes—group after group—and they were all wearing the most beautiful fabrics I had ever seen: blues like the firmament,

reds like the center of the earth, greens like rivers and oranges like egg yolks. There have been moments on trips when all colors combine to overwhelm, and moments in still reflection when life in its immensity seems too much to take it, but this was beyond those. I could not help but gawk as they continued walking past that window. Like they just kept coming: a girl with a face like a crow, another like a cow. There was a girl with teeth like broken piano keys and another with skin like a strongly brewed tea. I watched them like fish in a tank, and appreciated them like a museum visitor with an artist's oeuvre. They all had gold rings in their left nostrils and red dots between their brows – *all of them*. And all of them had black hair beneath those shawls and bracelets on their wrists. I thought nothing. There was nothing to think. They were so just different to all the other beauties I have admired on buses and on sidewalks, and I wanted so badly to step from the threshold of that shop and to swim amongst their perfumes and colors. But to step outside somehow felt like trespassing, as if they traveled in a pack in order to thwart invaders like myself.

Then I saw my masterpiece.

She had swollen lips and high cheekbones, dark eyes, dark skin, a white shawl draped over flowing hair and a figure that could not be concealed beneath her bright white gown. I watched her stroll toward me with an easy gait, smiling and chattering with her friends. And there was something familiar about her, something that reminded me of a close friend that I had yet to meet. It was something contained in her whole demeanor – the perfect mix of serenity and verve, humility and pride – and I wanted to talk to her, to walk beside her, and to kiss those lips and have them kiss me back. I put my hand to the shop window, gawking; and she looked up and saw me staring at her. She blushed, and kept walking, while I stepped toward the door.



I honestly had no idea what I was doing. I mean, half the time I'm already performing some action, like kicking a football, when I realize what I'm actually doing is kicking a football off a freeway bridge into oncoming traffic. Life is weird like that. Mine particularly. But as she continued walking, I stepped into the crowd and followed my guts as I followed that girl in the bright white shawl.

She was up ahead, I could see her. She was in front of a girl in yellow and blue shawl, and I tried my best to follow her, but didn't want to push and shove my way through the crowd of beauties. The group was thick and joining them felt odd enough, as if I'd somehow snuck into the girls locker room unnoticed. To call attention to myself would have been stupid. So I hung back, watching this white shawl swim amongst all the colors. I had no idea what I would say when we were finally face to face, no idea what I'd do, but my instincts were screaming at me to not lose sight of her.

In the streets, dawn had broken. The sky was pink, the cars were coming out in droves, and I moved amongst the energy of the collective, proud to be amongst them. We were a force. Our shuffling feet made rhythms as we walked over the cracked cement, and our swooshing clothes were like leaves blowing in the wind. Around me was the chattering of a language I could not understand, and I wanted so badly to eavesdrop. I wanted so badly to know what we were talking about. But all I had was the sound of our footsteps and the smell of our perfumes.

At that point I still knew where we were – on Gulshan Avenue, heading in the opposite direction from where I had first emerged and noticed the leper lady. But the leper lady was no longer on my mind, and I didn't know where those girls would lead

me. Maybe we're headed toward some sort of church meeting? I remember thinking. Or it would be a mosque meeting, wouldn't it? Like some sort of all girls Mosque. Or maybe an all girls University for ages ten through thirty?

It seemed unreasonable, but I thought that maybe they do it different in Bangladesh. Maybe all the girls go to one school, and all the boys go to another, and it doesn't really matter what age you are, so long as you don't mix with the opposite sex.

In front of me, dressed in three different patterns, was a trio that reminded me so much of my cousins that I actually contemplated sneaking up behind one of them and putting my hands over her eyes, saying "Guess who?" like the big dorky cousin that I am. But yeah ... they obviously weren't my cousins. I mean, they were probably around the same age (ten, twelve, and fourteen) and were maybe even sisters, but my cousins live in Pasadena – the youngest is just finishing elementary school, the middle is in eight grade, and the oldest is starting high school next year. They don't wear headscarves or walk through the streets on schooldays, but these girls were of the same spirit. Which is to say that the girl in the middle of the trio, the shortest and youngest, was telling a story with huge flourishes of her hands, just like my youngest cousin does. And her headscarf kept slipping back on her head, her sisters kept tugging it forward. The whole routine continued as we walked down the street together, and the streets themselves were starting to wake up. Shops were beginning to lift their rollers doors, traffic was growing.

We turned down a side street and everything changed from pink to orange, including the traffic. I peered ahead and tried to find my masterpiece, but couldn't see her. In the street were cars, taxis, trucks and rickshaws. The rickshaws were really quite incredible, with hand-painted portraits of Bollywood stars on the backs of their

carts. Like these portraits reminded me of cans of tuna, or matchboxes: primary colors, thick lines. And I've always been a fan of this type of design. So much so that I thought, once again, about taking photos, and kicked myself for leaving behind my camera. Because it would have been such a great shot, those hyper-colored shawls moving through the street like a school of fish, the rickshaws heading toward us in one direction, away from us in the other, and the decrepit building framing the entire scene.

'Hello sir!' said a rickshaw driver. He pedaled past with his toes hooked over the pedals like talons. And I looked up to see him shirtless in a white sarong, with the legs of a body builder on the frame of an anorexic super model. He pulled four schoolgirls in identical garb and still had the energy to turn and smile at me. And I watched him zip down the road and noticed that we, the collective, were turning down another side street.

Soon we were walking down another road that was lined by what looked like abandoned buildings. The road itself was paved and there was a single traffic light in the distance. But other than that the whole street seemed as if it were built during the English occupation of the area. Like everything was super ramshackle: the buildings were cement, with no paint, and they reminded me of parking lots in Los Angeles that were abandoned after the earthquake. All of them were the same, as if they were soon to be demolished, and down the road was a copse of trees that looked so out of place on the apocalyptic set.

Because that's what it was – or that's what it seemed like to me: a movie set, a movie about the end of the world. At the front of the line, the girl in the bright yellow shawl (the one I'd first seen passing the mini-mart window) crossed the road at the traffic light and began moving toward a dirt lot. At the back of the lot was a building

that looked derelict, and I remember thinking: Maybe these buildings are simply facades? Maybe inside all these dilapidated structures are desks and computers and coffee machines and water coolers. Or maybe this *is* a movie set. Maybe these girls are all extras and they're heading to shoot the next Bollywood blockbuster.

I hope so, I thought.

Because the building reminded me of this dream I used to have when I was a child. In this dream my mother would always be chasing me, and she'd always be sort of half-human, half-witch. She would chase me up what felt like an endless amount of concrete steps, and I'd run forever, until I'd eventually reach the rooftop – a rooftop like the rooftop of the building that the girls were filing into; a flat rooftop, like something you'd see in New York. I would run to edge of that roof and would look down at the dark cement. When I turned around, she'd be coming up the final flight of steps and she'd stop when she saw that I had no place to go. She'd smile at me, revealing a set of rotten teeth. Then she'd charge toward me at full speed, like a bull, and I'd move aside and she'd fly over the rooftop's edge, falling to the cement below. Which was horrible – I mean the feeling of both relief and sadness would sweep over me. That feeling is what I'd remember most about the dream upon waking up. That feeling as well as the image of my mother's face looking up from a pool of blood. She never died. She was always smiling up at me. And then the entire dream would start over again: I'd be on the ground floor, entering the building; I'd run up the stairs, she'd chase me, then she would fly off the roof, over and over again.

Anyway, the building that the girls went into reminded me of the building in the dream. It was made of grey cement and it had no panes in its windows, big cracks ran down its side and those colorful shawls were all moving through a single doorframe. I gawked in amazement as my masterpiece darted in. There she is, I

remember thinking, and I stepped out of the queue and ran forward, past my Bangladeshi cousins and past all the women who were waiting in line to enter. They gawked at me, but I didn't care anymore. I simply wanted to see her face again, to show her that I admired her enough to follow her.

When I got to the entrance, however, I stopped. Like I hadn't expected all those beautiful girls to be sitting behind sewing machines. And I remember thinking: Who the fuck still sews? The only person I know who still owns a machine is my grandmother, and I'm not even sure she's still capable of using it. So I don't know *anyone* who sews. Not a single person.

But there, under those low ceilings, were hundred of girls behind machines that sounded like firing guns. I mean, the room was filled with the sound effect of an arcade game I used to play at the pizza parlor: it had a machine gun that you pointed at the screen and the sound effect of gunfire must have been based off sewing machines, because the cacophony in that building was identical. And it brought back memories of my father. Like it was our little bonding ritual, eating pizza, drinking Dr. Pepper, and shooting aliens. Anyway, it was strange to see those girls behind the machines because I hadn't expected them to be sitting behind machines. I'd expected them to be doing something that matched the color of their shawls, something brilliant and breathtaking.

I stepped into what I realized was a sweatshop, and started walking around, admiring their handiwork. They're kind of like synchronized swimmers, I realized. Or like soldiers marching toward some unseen finish line. Each of them sat atop a wooden stool, in front of a machine that never seemed to stop bobbing up and down, and they were all making sheets: simple, clean sheets. The threads they used were white, and the cloth was white, and the machines were white; and as I walked

amongst them, watching them double the material upon itself to form smooth edges, I told myself I was the foreman. Like it's a little trick I've learned from shoplifting: tell yourself your doing nothing wrong, and you seem less suspicious, more inconspicuous.

And it's strange, because, aside from trespassing, I wasn't doing anything wrong. Like I was just walking around, watching them do their job. But still, something in the air made me feel like an intruder who should watch their step. And I'm not exactly sure why I felt that way, though it may have had something to do with how they were looking at me. Like none of them were smiling. Not one. Not even a smirk. And as I passed down the aisles between the long tables, I started to feel pretty depressed. Their fingers pushed down the cloth on either side of the bobbing machines, and their sandal-clad feet, decorated in toe rings, revved the pedals. I wanted to shove my face into that cotton cloth, because cotton always makes me feel better. That's actually how I got my nickname. Like, as a kid, we used to live down the road from my Aunt and Uncle (the one's with the three cousins), and my Aunt used to baby-sit me, while my dad was at work. She has a story she always tells about loosing me, one time, when she was babysitting. 'I found him in the laundry room,' she always says, 'butt-naked and wrapped up in warm sheets.' So she started calling me "Cotton boy," which was eventually shortened to "Cotton."

My real name is Caleb, which is my father and grandfather's name. So I'm Caleb James Walters III, and I still like to rub my face into pillowcases before I fall asleep. At least, that's what Bell has told me. She always says that's the one thing I'll always do before drifting off, no matter how much we've had to drink. But anyway, I prefer Cotton.



I don't know if I mentioned it before, but the building had several floors. I don't know how many. I didn't go all the way to the top. But after walking up and down several aisles, I found the cement staircase and figured that's where my masterpiece had gone.

Upstairs, like downstairs, was crowded with long tables. Behind those tables were girls with sewing machines and my girl was seated right in front of me, with her back to the stairs and her head bowed down. She was already at work and it occurred to me how odd it must be to do the same thing that everybody beside you is doing. Then again, I realized, we're in a factory. Half the world probably works in factories, and it's not that different from sitting beside someone in another cubicle, you just do different work.

I watched her sew for awhile before I approached, and she kept her head down the entire time, as if she were composing a piece of music. She deserves to be swaddled in fresh cotton, I thought. Which was not a pick up line. I just thought that she deserved to be treated with delicacy, like a newborn or a fine piece of fruit.

Perhaps my thoughts were as loud to her as they were to me, because she turned in her chair and caught me standing there, staring.

'Hi,' I spluttered. 'Um ... I ...'

There are some people who seem to be handcrafted by some sort of master designer, and when you see them it's hard to stop staring. Like fireworks, you take them in with hungry eyes and pray that their light will remain with you. Or that's what I did. I took in her beauty: the perfect structure beneath skin that glowed; the

tiny scar on her forehead; the roundness of her eyes. I wanted to drop to my knees right there, to kiss her feet, but instead I kept spluttering non-sense.

‘You know,’ I said. ‘In Hollywood, where I’m from, you’d be sprawled across billboards and magazines. Like you’d probably be engaged to some fucking surfer, or the drummer of a horrible emo band. I wouldn’t even be able to talk to you, let alone tell you how gorgeous you are. And you *are* gorgeous, you know? You know that, right? You’re unbelievable ... you’re ... why are you laughing? I’m serious! You’re honestly the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life. Like ... I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone as perfect as you, and ... what are you laughing at? Tell me.’

Her pretty lips were pulled back and her white teeth were shining. That little gap was outrageously cute, and I watched her turn to the girl beside her and blush. She delivered a short Bengali phrase and those in the general vicinity erupted in laughter. In fact, I watched the phrase get repeated again and again; and it spread slowly, like a drop of paint in a glass of water, until every corner of the room had a smile on their face. I went from feeling like a criminal on the stand to a comedian on a stage, and it was great. ‘So...’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to interrupt your work. But I wanted to stop in and say hi and see if you might want to go out sometime, like...’ She licked her lips and I lost my train of thought. ‘Your eyes...’ I said, trailing off. ‘Wow. So big.’ She continued to stare at me and I stared at her and allowed myself to wander into those dark pupils. It was intense. I mean it had to have meant the same thing *there* that it means anywhere; and I’m no prude, like, she was gawking at me in the same way that I was gawking at her, and so I dove in. Because that’s what you do when you want something: You go for it. You trust your instincts. That is what I’ve been taught and that is what I believed.



So yeah, like, I tilted my head and opened my mouth and closed my eyes and leaned in. But her lips felt like an ear. Because I kissed her ear. I kissed the side of her head, beneath that white shawl, and opened my eyes to see her slipping out from underneath me. Fuck, I thought. Is she married or something? Or maybe she's never been kissed before?

The eyes of the room were staring at me and I watched my masterpiece scamper down the aisle with her hand over her mouth. The entire factory burst into mad chatter. Like, nobody was sewing anymore. And suddenly I felt like I was about to be burned at the stake. I mean, they had all been so bright and happy and now they looked absolutely infuriated. One girl openly shouted at me. She was standing up behind her sewing machine and wagging her finger as she yelled. Other girls looked at me and talked with their friends in whispers. And the girl who had been sitting next to my masterpiece spat at my feet.

I looked at the red spit next to my tennis shoes, and then looked up at her. Her teeth were stained red and suddenly the scene was scary. Like there was a pause – the one-two-three that a drummer counts off before the song kicks in: “One. Two. Three.” But after this pause the sound of the machines burst out like horses erupting from the starting gate. Every eye that had been fixed on me was suddenly staring at the cotton sheets between their fingers.

‘What is going on?’ I said.

I thought I was off the hook, like I thought the girls just had super short-attention spans and that my masterpiece would be back in her chair. Then I could apologize for having overstepped my mark. But yeah ... a lot of the girls were looking

up at me, or glancing over my shoulder, and I turned to find a skinny man with deep widows peaks standing directly behind me.

He was dressed in a button-up that was several sizes larger than his frame, and his necktie seemed too small for the shirt, his pants too tight for his legs. I felt bad for him. His hair was slicked back over what was obviously a bald spot and I remember thinking that, if I had to, I could pick the scrawny guy up and drop him down the flight of stairs. Not that I wanted to hurt anybody. Like that's really not my style. But it crossed my mind as he charged toward me like my mother in that nightmare.

'Whoa buddy,' I said, holding up my hands.

He started yelling at me in Bengali, and I let him yell. In fact, I smiled. Because I couldn't understand a word he was saying. It was all non-sense. And because he looked so much like a little yapping foo-foo dog, or like an angry mouse in Disney's *Cinderella*.

'Chill,' I eventually said, while he kept yelling. 'Relax.'

These are the worst things you can say to someone who is screaming you, I would later realize. But at that moment, he didn't make sense to me. I mean, he was obviously speaking another language, but even the rage he was pouring out didn't make sense. Like I've been angry before, plenty of times. Once I even freaked out on Bell and threw my fist through the drywall of my apartment like an idiot. And when I was a kid, when I was a teenager, I used to take a baseball bat to the trash bin on the side of the house. It was the only thing I could bash without my father getting angry with me. But this – the rage of the man in front of me – made no sense. How could he be so angry at a stranger? Was the masterpiece his daughter? Had he even seen me kiss her?

'Relax,' I said again, holding up my hands and trying to soothe him.

Which is when he grabbed my wrist and tugged me toward the stairs like a child. I finally reacted. It was instinct. He grabbed my wrist and I jerked my arm and accidentally shoved my elbow into his nose. ‘Oh shit,’ I said. ‘Sorry ... did I catch your face?’ I moved to place a calming hand on his shoulder, but he jerked away. There was blood pouring from his nose and there were tears in his eyes. ‘You’ll be alright,’ I said, reassuringly. ‘There’s a lot of blood, but that’s just because you’re nose is broken. It’s not serious. I’m sure there isn’t cartilage damage or anything.’

There really was a lot of blood pouring down his face. Like his whole shirtfront was already starting to go red, and I thought it might be a good idea if he sat down. So I grabbed the chair that my masterpiece had been sitting in. I set it up in front of him and patted the seat, but the man took offense. He started yelling again. Which was funny. I mean, because his nose was gushing blood and his lips were flapping in this funny language and he kept wagging his finger at me. But in order to wag he had to remove his hands from his face, and more blood would flow. Then his hands would return to his face and the cycle would continue.

‘You should really stop yelling at me,’ I said. ‘It’s not good for you.’

Granted, I said this while giggling. Because it was extremely amusing to watch this slapstick nosebleed scenario, and I stood there for a long time, listening to his lambaste and watching the blood flow over his chin.

‘Who are you, anyway?’ I asked. ‘Are you the manager? Why is a man managing all these girls? Isn’t that sexist or something? Wouldn’t it make more sense if they had a female foreman?’

He continued yelling, which eventually became extremely annoying, and I apologized again, but then it was time to move on. I stepped around him, peering over my shoulder a final time, hoping I’d see my masterpiece. She wasn’t there, of course.

Or I didn't see her amongst all the other girls with their machine-gun sewing. And so I moved to the top of the stairs and began my descent.



At the bottom of the stairs was a large group of girls who were staring up with wide eyes and hidden smirks. My Bangladeshi cousins were at the front of the group, and it occurred to me that they, too, were sweatshop workers. Which was fucked. I mean, my cousins don't even have long enough attention spans to get through *Forrest Gump*, let alone an entire day of menial labor, and it was weird to imagine them in the same position. Because the girls, my cousins, don't even have to do their own laundry, let alone eight hour shifts of sewing. These girls, these workers, I thought, are amazing. Their work ethic is amazing. Like I'm nineteen, almost twenty, and I used to work at the Beverly Hills Hilton, as a bellhop. I could hardly get through an entire day there, because all I could think about, as I waited for tourists to pull up, was all the countries I wanted to visit and the women I wanted to sleep with and the drugs I'd like to do. That job was easy compared to slaving away behind a machine, and I respected the girls for having the tenacity to get through day after day in such a hellhole.

Halfway down the stairs I saw the girls look over my shoulder before darting away. The manager man was behind me, yelling, and I clomped down the rest of the steps and straight down the nearest aisle. The women were back at work, sewing sheets for people like me and my family, making money for their own families, and I wanted to take them with me. I wanted to wrap them up in fine linens and throw them over my shoulder like Santa Claus, to deliver them to a spa for the day. Because that's

what Bell would always do whenever she was stressed from a long semester: she'd go to a health spa and get a facial, a mani-pedi, and treat herself to healthy juices and organic delicacies. These women deserve to be treated like women, I thought. They deserve to be treated with care and love and comfort. But I could not bring them with me. I could not help them, assuming they wanted help; so I stepped outside into the sunny day and left them all behind, thankful to have made it out of the building alive and hungry for breakfast.

I have to pee, I realized. And upon thinking these words I realized how full my bladder was, and how I'd been holding back for far too long.

I stepped around the corner of the building, into a little side alley that separated one factory from another. The alley was covered in rotting trash. There were flies buzzing everywhere, hovering over folded sanitary napkins and discarded banana leaves. The smell was ripe and horrible, but I had to go. In the distance were the sounds of sirens and traffic. I unzipped, as you do, and the sirens seemed to be growing louder. My urge to pee was pressing. I looked up, toward the patch of sky between the two buildings, and saw an airplane pass. Then I was peeing. And as I peed, the sirens grew louder and louder. They sounded like they were in the parking lot, and I thought, while peeing, about the man's broken nose. I thought: Did he call an ambulance already? That seems a bit fast. When did he manage to make a phone call? Or did someone call for him?

I thought of Bell, as well. She was likely starting to worry about me and I knew it was time to be heading back toward the house. Have I cheated on her? I wondered. Is cheating in the thought process alone, or is it in the act? Because if I can cheat in my thoughts, I've cheated over a million times. But if it's in the act, well, all I

did was kiss the girl on her ear. That's nothing. People in Europe kiss each other on the cheeks, right? And that's way more intimate...

I shook and zipped up and rounded the corner of the building. In front of me were four police cars with their sirens blaring and lights blazing. I headed straight through the dirt lot toward the street we'd walked in on; and the police cars were all empty, though several of their doors had been left ajar.

Maybe something else happened, I thought. Maybe the manager guy was panicking because there was something else going on, and he blamed me for it.

In the street I peeked back at the ramshackle building. There was no one on the roof, though I half expected to find my mother there, and there were no people in the doorway. But a window – an empty window frame on the second story – was filled with men: the manager man and two police officers. I looked at them, and the manager looked out the window and saw me. He pointed. Why is he pointing at me? I wondered. There was blood all over his face and the officer beside him had a large moustache. Are they looking for someone? I wondered. Who are they looking for?

The policeman with the moustache was wearing a navy beret and a blue uniform. We locked eyes for a moment and then I understood. They had come for me. The policeman darted out of the window frame and I started running.



I was guilty in the sense that, if caught, I would likely be found guilty of trespassing, or perhaps assault. But I wasn't guilty in the sense that I felt anything like remorse. I mean, why should I? Why feel bad about elbowing a sweatshop manager in the face? That's like feeling bad about accidentally punching a slave driver, or like worrying

about the pen you stole from your bank. Who cares if you elbow a sweatshop jerk? I didn't – and yet I couldn't imagine having to explain to the police officers that I was actually a hero.

So yeah ... when I saw that cop in the window of the factory, with his uniform and silly beret, I spooked. Which was dumb. Because, like, when Bell and I arrived in Dhaka her dad had told us, explicitly, that if we got into any trouble, all we had to do was bribe the cops. 'And if that doesn't work,' he'd said. 'I know people. We can get you off the hook for anything short of murder. So don't do anything dumb, but don't worry. Don't panic, alright?'

But I had panicked.

Like, I turned away from the eyes of that officer and started sprinting down the street toward where we had come from. The streets were busier than they had been before, and I got off the main road as soon as possible and ran down an alley that was parallel to Gulshan Avenue. I passed tea stalls and textile shops and sleeping dogs and piles of burning trash; then I turned down another alley and continued sprinting. There were rickshaw drivers lazing in their carts and kids playing marbles in the mud. A lady shooed a chicken from her doorway, and I ducked down another side alley, and even hopped a fence like they do in almost every movie that has a chase scene. The fence, however, led nowhere. Or it led to this abandoned lot that was fenced with a high brick walls. And so I hopped back over the fence that I'd jumped, and it was cool, running was cool. I mean, I'm not a sprinter or anything, but when imprisonment is nipping at your heels you run like you wouldn't believe. And it was fun to imagine the cops behind me, chasing me down as if I were some sort of badass fugitive. They might not have given chase at all, because I didn't hear sirens or anything, but I imagined them running down those factory steps and hopping into

their cars. Their lights would be blazing and the sirens screaming and the police would follow the dust I'm sure I kicked up as I ran. Maybe they even whipped around corners, tires screeching, with one cop behind the wheel and another screaming into his walkie-talkie: 'Twenty-two, twenty-four. In hot pursuit of one Caucasian individual in a stripy t-shirt and blue jeans. Suspect on foot. All units report.'

Anyway, I ran until my lungs filled my chest and it felt terrific to pound the sidewalk in my shitty sneakers. The sights and smells around me were metropolitan, like, there wasn't graffiti or anything, like in L.A., but there were hand-painted signs in the squiggly script that is Bengali, and plumes of smoke pouring from the backs of jalopy's. The streets were packed by that point. I crossed Gulshan Avenue, after weaving through all those alleys, and there were so many cars heading in each direction that I contemplated hopping onto their hoods, mounting their roofs, and crossing the road on top of them. Because that's what would happen in a movie. The camera would zoom in on the beads of sweat that I'm sure were dripping down my face, and I'd check over my shoulder (which I actually kept doing in real life), and when I finally hopped off the cars, onto the cement, the camera would freeze-frame on my sneakers and that would be that.

In actuality I jogged across Gulshan Avenue and ran down a road that reminded me a lot of Bell's dad's street, with low-hanging trees and some construction work. At the end of the road I could see the lake, and I ran toward it and didn't stop jogging until I was at the water's edge. By that point I was pretty exhausted. I mean, I don't smoke cigarettes or anything, because I don't understand them (they don't get you high or anything), but still I'm not super healthy. So I was huffing and puffing, with my hands on my knees and the Gulshan Lake in front of me. Or I assumed it was the Gulshan Lake (the same lake that I could see from the

window of the guest room), though it could have been some other lake. Bangladesh is obviously known for its water.

Anyway, I was taking these huge breaths and pulling in the smell of fresh water and fresh air, and I wanted to jump in and swim out into the middle of the lake like I used to when I was a kid. When Dad would take me to Santa Monica and we'd swim for the day near the pier. But Bell's father was ringing in my ears: 'Listen, Cotton,' he'd said the previous night over dinner. 'Trust me. No matter what you do, don't go in the fucking lake. That's where these people shit, alright? It's where they shit, shower, brush their teeth and throw their trash.'

I tried to find proof of the shit that's Bell's dad had mention, but the lake looked pretty clean. Like it was a healthy, bluish-green color, with morning light reflecting off the ripples in the water and kids swimming over the surface. There was no shit, as far as I could see, but there was a strange iridescent patch near where the kids were swimming, and the bank side was littered in plastic wrappers and endless shimmering bottle caps. Across the lake I hear a rooster crow and I noticed three women who seemed to be bathing in the water. The sight wasn't sexual or anything. Like they were fully covered and they seemed kind of like mamas, anyway. But I took it as proof that what Bell's father said was true: the lake was used for bathing, and washing clothes, and cooking, and probably as a sewage system as well.

I did not want to go back to Bell's house, I realized. I didn't want to have to see her overbearing dad or to answer any questions about where I had been. Like I already knew what would happen when she and I reunited. She'd apologize for having been so moody earlier that morning, and I'd apologize for having told her to eat a bag of dicks. Then she'd say that we needed to be more open, that we needed to talk more about emotions so that they don't boil over. And I'd say that it's hard for me because

sometimes I don't know how I'm feeling until the emotion has already passed. She'd wrap her arms around me and I'd wrap my arms around her and we'd kiss. We might even make love. Then we'd fight again a few days later. And that's fucking boring.

I didn't want to go back, but I also didn't want to get arrested. Plus I didn't really know where to go, I mean, because I had simply run. I hadn't paid attention to what direction I'd been running in. My goal had simply been to get away from the police officers, and paying attention to my surrounding wasn't really on the forefront of my mind. I looked down the bank side, to the right, and it looked unfamiliar. To the left was a woman in the lake, scooping water into a black pot, and I started to watch her.

She was dressed in a similar fashion to the factory girls, but wasn't wearing a headscarf, and with a single swoop she scooped water into her pot and hoisted it atop her head. She stood up, one arm falling to her side and the other balancing the pot. And I watched her walk up the bank side as if carrying a pot on her head were the most natural thing in the world.

Amazing, I remember thinking. I'd never seen anyone carry something on their head before, like it seemed super *National Geographic* style or something.

She carried the water toward a little hut that reminded me of a lawnmower shed left in the middle of a field. Rusted and made of corrugated iron, it seemed sturdy enough to protect you from the elements, though I couldn't imagine sleeping there night after night. And inside, watching the woman walk toward him, was a man with a machete and a big beard.

He looked like Osama Bin Laden, and he caught me staring at him and waved me over. I was confused. The woman went into the shed and I'd been staring at her

and she was probably his wife and now he was smiling at me. He waved again, beckoning, and I smiled and waved back. But I didn't want to walk up that bank. I didn't trust the man.

'It's alright!' I called up. 'I'm just walking. Just minding my own business.'

'Friend!' he yelled back. 'Please come.'



The inside of the shack felt no bigger than the average American minivan. The rear contained a number of cooking implements, one wall had a bamboo mat set against it, but other than that the place was pretty barren. He had clasped me on the shoulder upon my entering his home, but he didn't let go of the machete. And I looked around his dwelling and soon found myself staring at his beard. It was amazing. Black and long, it flowed down his chin in little rivulets and didn't stop until it reached the middle of his chest. And he was shirtless, skinny. Super cool looking, I'd have grown a beard like his if I were able to. He squeezed my shoulder.

'What's up?' I asked. 'Why are you squeezing me?'

'You are welcome,' he said. 'Come.'

He showed me over to his wife and said something to her. With his free hand, he motioned for her to stand up. Which is when I noticed the little bundle wrapped tightly against her chest. Like it had been there the whole time, but before it was hidden beneath her loose sarong thing, and I hadn't seen the wisp of black hair sticking out from that colorful pattern. The man loosened the bundle to show me his child's face and together we looked at this wrinkled kid with its nose scrunched up and its eyes tightly shut. It was cute, I mean, it was a fucking baby, and there was no

need to communicate after that. We were entertained by the little fists and the little nose and the purple pouting lips. The child was like watching a fire. It didn't have to do anything for it to be entertaining.

'How old is she?' I asked.

'Is a boy,' he said proudly. 'Boy is better, yes?'

'I guess so,' I said. 'I don't know.'

For a moment I thought of my mother. She had left when I was probably the same age as his child, about six months old.

'You have a beautiful baby,' I said, after a long pause. 'You're very lucky.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Very beautiful.'

'She seems like a good mother, too,' I said, nodding at the woman. 'She's obviously super in love with the kid.'

'Yes,' said the man, smiling. 'She is good.'

'My mom left when I was that age,' I said, gesturing toward the baby. 'Dad came home and she was gone. She didn't leave a note or anything.'

'Yes,' he said, still smiling.

'She was an artist,' I said. 'There aren't any pictures of me as a kid, because my parents were super poor. But there's a painting. She was a really good artist.'

'Where you are from?' he asked. 'America?'

'Los Angeles,' I said. 'Hollywood.'

He seemed unimpressed. 'Where your father is from?'

'Also Hollywood,' I said. 'Both of my parents were born in Chicago, but Dad has lived in Los Angeles since college. He went to UC Irvine. Now he teaches high school in Beverley Hill, which is why I went to high school there.'

'What your name is?' he asked.

‘Cotton,’ I said.

‘Koton?’

‘Cotton,’ I said again.

‘Like the textile?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Like the textile.’

‘Koton,’ he said, ‘pleased to be meeting.’ He touched his chest with the machete. ‘I am Borkot. I am Muslim. You are Christian?’

‘Um...’ I said.

‘This...’ he said. ‘This is the time I am meeting the Christian.’

‘Your first time?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I am a Muslim. You are Christian.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘It’s good to me you, Borkot.’

He gave me a huge smile and I reached out to shake his hand. We shook. We kept shaking. He didn’t seem to want to let go, and eventually I had to pull out of his grasp. ‘It was good to meet you,’ I said. ‘I’ve got to be going now. I have to go.’

He gestured toward his wife, who was leaning down with her hand against the baby’s head and digging into a basket that was near our feet. It was a basket full of rice and it was obvious that he was inviting me to stay for breakfast.

‘That would be great,’ I said, ‘I’m super hungry, but...’ I kept thinking about people shitting in the lake. ‘I don’t want to be a disturbance.’

‘No problem.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘but no. I’ve got to go now.’

‘Please you are stay?’ he said. ‘Please?’ He was still smiling at me and his eyes were so dark above his dark beard.

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I’m running away from the police.’ I started to step toward the door, attempting to gracefully exit. ‘You have a really beautiful family, though. You’re really generous and everything. Like I wish my mom was half the mother that she is, but ...’ I continued backpedaling. ‘There’s just a lot going on in my life right now and I can’t sit here with you guys, even though it sounds terrific. Does that make sense?’

He looked extremely confused. ‘Dahl?’ he said.

I was already outside and I didn’t know what to do. So I saluted him, as the guards had saluted me. He cocked his head to one side, and I looked over his shoulder at his wife. ‘Good bye,’ I said, waving. And in that moment I wanted so badly to be that baby swaddled against that mama’s chest, if only for a second. Then I could be Cotton again. Then I could go back to being myself.



The lake was my only landmark, and I turned left at the water’s edge, in the direction that I believed would take me back to Bell’s dad’s house. Nothing was on my mind except my mother. Like I passed more rusted huts and more families. Dogs with cancers on their coats walked toward me, dancing past without looking up, and there were kids with bloated bellies and women washing colorful fabrics. But all I could think about was her – no note, no nothing. It’s strange to have a blank canvas for a mother. Strange that I know so little about her.

There is a story that my father used to tell me when I’d ask about her, and I thought about it as I clomped over tiny clods of mud and discarded bottle caps. ‘I came home,’ he used to say, ‘and there she in front of the canvas, like she always used

to be when I got home from classes. She was painting a portrait of the three of us. It was all in primary colors, which was her style at the time. I believe our skin tones were bright orange, and the background was bright blue. But the best part, Caleb ... the best part is that you were held against her chest while she painted. You were breastfeeding, suckling with the sweetest sounds. You'll understand when you're a father. Babies, when they breastfeed, they make these sounds. You were in pure ecstasy, Caleb. And I came and kissed your mother on her forehead, she never looked away from the canvas. Then I leaned down to kiss you on the forehead, and your little bald baby scalp was covered in different splotches of paint. Reds and blues and yellows, like polka dots. She'd been breastfeeding you and painting and would sometimes, I suppose, lean into the canvas. It was a very cute sight to see, Caleb. We were very happy.'

There, on that bank side, I remember saying aloud: 'Fuck you.' Because that was the only story I really had; that is my only memory of my mother; and it's not even firsthand, but borrowed from my dad. All these other kids, I remember thinking, have memories of their parents. I don't have shit.

A moment later children surrounded me. I had been walking with my head down, had walked around a bend in the lake, and then suddenly they were there: a group of kids with more energy than an aerobics instructor on coke. They shouted and giggled and played drums on my stomach. Some had bald heads – shaved, I would learn later, to thwart lice – and others had heads like greased skilletts. Question after question was shouted at me, as if they thought I was a babysitter or a Sesame Street character. I couldn't walk forward anymore. There were too many of them and I couldn't push through the throng without being surrounded again.

'Hello,' said one. 'What is your name?'

‘What is your country?’ asked another.

They vied for my attention, each of them trying to get in front of me so that they might be in the forefront of my vision. So many of them had the swollen bellies of kids you see in advertisements for aid in Africa, and I wanted to poke their bellies in jest, as I would have with my younger cousins.

‘My name is Cotton!’ I yelled to the group.

‘Where you are from?’

‘I’m from Hollywood, California,’ I said.

‘Hollywood!’ they cheered, and they burst into laughter.

‘Jack!’ yelled one. ‘Jack Dawson.’

‘Jack!’ yelled another.

‘No,’ I said, holding a hand to my chest. ‘Cotton. I’m Cotton.’

The child in front of me, who seemed to be some sort of leader – or, at least, well respected – clasped my hand in his, and held onto it. I didn’t mind, but wished I’d brought the tiny bottle of hand sanitizer that I’d left in my carry-on.

‘What is your name?’ another child asked, again.

‘Jack!’ the other said, laughing.

‘Where you are from?’ asked another.

And I realized that these questions might be the extent of their English language training, which was better than my knowledge of Bengali, but still ... it was sort of annoying repeating the same answers again and again.

‘Come,’ said the boy who was holding my hand. ‘You are following me.’

‘Where are we going?’ I asked, as he pulled me behind him.

But his answer was drowned out by the chorus of repeating questions. We were moving, I noticed, up the bank side toward what looked like a village. There

were houses like the home I'd recently been in, the home of the young family. They were organized in neat rows, like any neighborhood, and some of them seemed to be constructed from flotsam pulled out of the lake, others were made of corrugated iron or corrugated fiberglass. We walked toward them. Another row of houses appeared. The village was large, I realized. It may even have extended for a mile or two. And it was empty, this village, save for the children.

Yes, the children seemed to run the town and they were all buzzing around me as if I was the hive and they were the colony. 'You are coming to my house,' said the boy who was holding my hand. His teeth were white and there were little white lice in his jet-black hair. Skinny but strong, he pulled me behind me with one arm and with the other pushed kids out of his way. He looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old. 'Cotton,' he said, looking up at me. 'I am Opu.'

'Opu?' I said.

'Yes. Zaid Islam Opu. Call me Opu.'

'Opu,' I said again, following behind him. 'Where are we going?'

'My house,' he said. 'I will show you.'

He pulled me down a street that was surrounded on both sides by houses. The street itself was dirt, dry and cracked in the places where rain had pooled and dried again. The kids buzzed around us like mosquitoes, humming in that language I could not understand, and soon we were outside of a hut like any other hut. The front door was simply an old bed sheet hung as a curtain, and its rusted roof was so low that I had to duck to get in.

Inside, it was dark. 'This is my sister,' Opu said, motioning toward a small figure that my eyes were taking time to adjust to.

The kids piled in behind us: fifteen or more in this tiny hut, another fifteen waiting outside the door. I peered toward the figure and realized she was pregnant. Does she want us in here? I wondered. Are we intruding? She smiled and said something to Opu in Bengali, but didn't protect her belly or attempt to move or anything.

'Jack,' said Opu. 'They are thinking that you are looking like the Jack Dawson.'

'Who is Jack Dawson?' I said.

A shaft of light made an interesting triangular shape on Opu's face, and it occurred to me how handsome he was, with skin that reminded me of an Egyptian friend in elementary school: a kid we used to call 'Ra,' after the Egyptian sun god. 'This is Jack Dawson,' he said, pointing at a poster that was hung on the wall beside him.

It was a poster from the film *Titanic*, an image I'd seen a billion times when the movie had just come out, and I thought of Los Angeles. I thought of the billboards and the bus stop benches. I hadn't even seen the poster when we'd first walked in, or I hadn't cared to notice. I mean, *Titanic*, to me, was just a film. I had seen it with one of my first girlfriends, Sheri, but hardly remembered the plot because we'd made out through the course of the movie. These kids, however, obviously revered the film. They were staring at me, and staring at the poster, then looking back at me and smiling. 'Hollywood,' I could hear in the air, 'Jack.' I looked at the poster. Jack Dawson, the main character, was whispering something in the lead female's ear while she spreads her arms out and pretended to be a bird. It was quite a compliment, really, to be mistaken for Jack.

'He is you?' asked Opu, pointing at the poster.

‘No,’ I said.

‘He looks like you.’

‘You think?’

‘Yes,’ said Opu. ‘Very much.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘That’s a nice thing to say.’

‘You’re welcome,’ said Opu.

The kids, I realized, had fallen silent. Opu’s sister was smiling at me, like a child, and the children were waiting for me to acknowledge that I was, indeed, the actor. I was about to turn and say, ‘It’s not me,’ when Opu yelled something toward the back of the room. A felt-tip marker was produced. It made its way from hand to hand until finally it was held out in front of me.

‘You are signing the poster?’ asked Opu.

‘Um...’ I said. ‘Why?’

‘They are believing you are Jack Dawson,’ he said. ‘It will make them happy.’

‘But I’m not Jack Dawson,’ I said. ‘I’m Cotton. Cotton Walters.’

Opu leaned in and whispered: ‘They do not know this.’

‘I know,’ I said, whispering back. ‘But maybe you should tell them.’

Opu righted himself and looked out over his crowd of supporters. He had a little grin in one corner of his mouth and his hair was glimmering in the shaft of light. He pointed at me. ‘It is Jack!’ he yelled. ‘He will sign the poster!’

The kids burst out in screams of joy. They were like teenage girls faced with a pop singer, and it filled my soul with such glee that I burst out laughing as well.

‘You are signing the *Titanic*,’ said Opu. ‘Please.’

‘Okay,’ I said, smiling. ‘I guess I am about as close to Hollywood as any of you guys will get.’

‘Yes!’ said Opu. ‘He is signing!’

I uncapped the marker and leaned in to scribble across the face of the heroine. Opu looked at the poster and read aloud as I wrote: ‘Opu and the village kids,’ he read. ‘Keep on ... keeping ... it ... cool. Lots of love and friendship. Your pal, Jack.’

The kids erupted in another round of cheers and I smiled. It felt good to be famous, it was easy to make other people happy, and I was thankful that I’d signed the character’s name with a big swooping J and everything.

‘Okay,’ I said, capping the marker and holding it out for Opu. ‘Time for me to get out of here. I’ve got very important Hollywood business meetings to take care of. No time for ...’ Opu wasn’t taking the marker. In fact, he wasn’t paying attention to me at all. In the doorway of that tiny home was a boy and Opu was yelling at him.

‘Once more,’ said Opu, pushing into the crowd to retrieve whatever was being handed forward. ‘You are signing these, also,’ he said. ‘There are not so many.’

He produced a pack of worn playing cards and handed them to me. On each card were the usual numbers and suits, and below the numbered suits were famous scenes from the movie. On the five of spades was a scene of Jack embracing the heroine, they were dressed in the clothes of paupers; and on the Ace of hearts was another scene of Jack embracing the heroine, but they were dressed for the ballroom.

I looked at Opu, who was smiling and nodding. ‘You are please signing the cards please?’ he said. ‘Yes?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Please,’ he said.

‘Why? I’m not Jack.’

‘Because my parents...’ said Opu. ‘They are dead.’

‘*What?*’

‘They have been dying.’

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ I said. ‘Are you bringing up your parents’ death so that I’ll sign these? No.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘My mother, she is loving the film.’

‘You’re kidding me,’ I said. ‘This is crazy.’

‘Please,’ he said, putting on a sad face.

‘Oh man. You want me to sign all of them?’

‘Yes. One for each of the children.’

I looked up at all the faces that were staring at me. There were kids in the door and kids in the back of the room. Kids pressed up against me and there were kids behind me as well. They all looked like orphans out of a Broadway production of *Annie* or *Oliver*, and I wanted to help them, I really did. But the room was stuffy and their neediness was stifling. There was a hand on my thigh and I looked down at a little crossed eyed girl that was as cute as she was disturbing. A hand was touching one of my butt cheeks, I realized, and someone was stepping on my foot. Then I remembered the lake, and what Mr. Bipu had said about how they both bathed and shit in it.

‘No,’ I said, dropping the cards to the ground with the marker.

Their reaction was different than I’d expected. Like I was prepared to shove my way out of there, but when I dropped those cards the kids went crazy. They scabbled for them, bunching up around my feet, and I could see Opu’s sister getting shoved into one of the walls. Now she was protecting her belly and I was worried for her.

‘Stop!’ I yelled at the kids, pulling some of them up of the ground. ‘Get out of here. Let me out of here.’

I was ready to push over a wall, when Opu started yelling. He stood beside me, on his tiptoes, barking order in Bengali; and the kids reacted to him. They looked up at me, or at his sister, and some of them filed out. Or enough of them filed out to give us some breathing room. Others, of course, saw their opportunity to get a playing card and dove to the ground. I stepped over them, attempting to avoid their tiny hands, and made my way toward the light of day. One of the kids grabbed my leg and held on like a koala gripping a branch, and I watched Opu bend over and yank the kid's hair until he let go. I was thankful for him.



The kids were waiting for me when I stepped outside. The air was fresh, the lake was glimmering in the sun, and all around me they pushed and yelled in excited voices. I wanted, so badly, for them all to disappear. I thought about a hotel room, thought about clean sheets and complete silence. I'll disappear, I thought. I'll get away from everything, including myself. But yeah ... I was thinking these things while they overtook me, one hand at a time. They touched my legs and my torso and my chest and my neck. Some held up playing cards for me to sign, others asked the same questions that had already been answered. I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them I saw a little girl standing at the edge of the group, quite a distance from us. She was just a little toddler with a malnourishment potbelly, but what interested me about her was how she seemed uninterested in the hubbub.

She had puffy cheeks and big eyes and I loved the way she stood there with both hands awkwardly held out in front of her chin like a boxer. I loved her disinterest in me, and loved how she seemed distant and yet fully aware of her surroundings.

Like she seemed to be soaking up every image and reveling in it, without getting involved. I stepped toward her, again noticing her hands and how she continued to hold them up in front of her chest, even when I approached. It was a strange stance for a toddler, a protective stance, as if she'd been hurt by countless things and was attempting in a childish way to thwart further pain.

I moved through the other kids as one might move through water, pushing them aside with a breast stroke, and they encircled me again, but she remained as still as a rock in a stream.

'What is your name?' I asked, looking into her dark eyes.

'Shapti,' said a boy. It was Opu. He was back.

'Shapti,' I said, looking down at her dirty, snot-nosed face. Her eyes were reflective and almond-shaped, and her shaved head had a smudge of ash beneath the hairline. Someone had penciled dark eyebrows above those reflective eye, which was odd on a child and perhaps the thing that had first confronted me about her gaze. I hadn't noticed the eyebrows at first, but now they were all I could look at. That is, until she lifted her hands to itch her nose.

Her hand were oozing discharge, as if someone had sprayed them in battery acid; and for a moment I wanted to turn and run away from the image. I wanted to pretend that I hadn't seen fingers glued together with yellowish-green scab, but it was too late. Her hands were real, and they were disgusting, and I had seen them.

'What happened?' I asked, leaning down to examine her hands as they dropped back toward her chest. 'What's happened to your little hands?'

'She is swimming,' said Opu. 'She is swimming and touching a rope that is in the water. It is burning her hands like this.'

‘They’re going to rot off,’ I said. ‘You shouldn’t have wounds like this in an open environment, particularly this environment.’

‘Yes,’ said Opu.

‘Where is her mom?’ I asked.

Opu shrugged. ‘The Shapti is swimming and she touches the rope. It gives her this burn.’

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ I said. ‘This isn’t a rope burn. This is a burn from a fire, or acid or something...’

‘She is swimming in the lake,’ he said. ‘Then she is touching a rope that is in the water and it is burning her very bad.’

‘I don’t get it,’ I said.

‘Come,’ said Opu.

‘Alright,’ I said, swooping the little girl up in my arms.

She was heavier than I’d expected, as if she were a bundle of coins, and I followed Opu to the lakeside with her in my arms. All of the kids were following us, screaming and carrying on as they had been since I’d entered the village.

We stopped when we reached the lake, and Opu pointed across the water at a group of mansion that were built along the opposite bank. They were the same mansions, I realized, that bordered Bell’s dad’s house; and then I saw Bell’s dad’s house, almost directly across from us, where a man was waiting with a boat on the bank.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘That’s where I live.’

‘The rope,’ said Opu, pointing at the neighborhood across the lake. ‘With the electricity.’

‘A wire...?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘electricity wire. She is swimming very near the edge of the lake and she is touching a rope that is hanging in the water. It is a very hot rope and it is giving her this horrible hand burn. Now this,’ he gestured toward her corrupted hands. ‘Now she is having the bad hands.’

The dirt surrounding the lake and the lake itself were beautiful. The kids were beautiful, too, even if they drove me crazy, and for a moment I simply stood there in shock, looking out at everything and wondering what to do next.

‘So, her mother...?’ I asked. ‘She’s not here?’

‘No,’ said Opu. ‘She is not here.’

‘Does she have a father?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He is in Rajshahi, working in the fields.’

‘And she was swimming...?’ I said. ‘She was swimming, and there was a live wire, and she accidentally touched it, and now...’

‘Yes,’ said Opu. ‘She accidentally touches it.’

‘That’s bullshit,’ I said, angrily. ‘That’s complete bullshit.’

‘What is bullshit?’ asked Opu.

‘Her hands,’ I said. ‘It’s bullshit that she was simply swimming, which is what kids do. And now here hands are fucked. That’s complete shit.’

‘No,’ said Opu. ‘What is *bullshit*?’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Bullshit means that it’s, like, wrong. It’s just wrong.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That is bullshit.’

‘I mean,’ I went on, ‘in Los Angeles everything is also filthy and dangerous. But you guys must have the worst city council in the history of human kind. Honestly, *what the fuck*? You let live wires sit next to your lake? She nearly burns her hands off, but you don’t take her to the hospital? You *do* realize that she’s going to lose her

hands, right? Then what is she going to do? Becoming a fucking philosopher? Fucking...'

'What is fucking?' Opu asked.

'Fucking is fucking,' I said. 'It's like bullshit. And this is bullshit. This is bullshit, man. What is wrong with this place? Why doesn't somebody help her?'

The kids were watching me rant, with mouths agape. But Shapti didn't seem the least bit disturbed by my uproar. In my arms, her calmness calmed me, and I looked at her hands again, which were hovering in front of us, and said: 'Okay. We're going to the hospital. I don't care about Bell's house. I don't care about anything except getting this little girl's hands fixed.'

'No problem,' said Opu.

'What?' I said. 'Yes it *is* a problem. She's going to lose her hands.'

'You have much money, yes?' he said. 'We go to the hospital.'

'You know the way?' I said.

'Yes,' said Opu. 'We go with him.' Opu pointed across the lake at the man in the boat. Shirtless in the sun, he had a large bag of rice on his shoulder that he heaved down into the shitty watercraft. Behind him, an old woman watched his every move.

'Who is he?' I asked.

The man stepped out of the rink-a-dink longboat, then turned to help the old woman aboard.

'That's the ferryman,' Opu repeated. 'He is pushing the boat.'

The old woman stepped onto the raft with the ferryman's help.

'And you know where the hospital is...?' I said to Opu. 'You sure?'

'I am knowing,' he said. 'We are taking the boat, then we are walking. Not so far.'

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘We’ll take the boat.’

The idea of it was frightening. I mean, because the lake was full of shit and the boat itself looked precarious. I didn’t want to end up in that water; didn’t want to have to swim through the cesspit; and didn’t want Shapti touching it, either.

‘He is coming,’ said Opu, pointing. And we all watched the ferryman push away from the opposite shore with a long bamboo pole.



The pole moved up and down like a piston. The ferryman would lift it, high into the air, choking up on his grip as the pole rose higher, and then he’d sink it into the water and push against the lake’s bottom as hard as he could. His muscles would tense for a moment. Then he’d relax and let the boat cruise forward, while choking up on the pole again. It was a very slow process. Shapti was heavy in my arms and the kids were still hovering around us. Opu was talking to them, it sounded like he was bragging.

Alongside Bell’s dad’s house is a street that leads to the lake. I was looking at it, looking for signs of Bell, when I saw a white woman approach. She was tall and blonde and was wearing khaki pants and a khaki shirt with cargo pockets, as if she were on safari. Her familiarity was enormous, even at that distance, and it sounds absurd, but it crossed my mind that she might be my mother. I mean, I had a *feeling* that she was my mother. She walked toward the water’s edge, peering across at either us or the ferryman in the middle of the lake, and I wanted to wave at her. I wanted to signal her down like a rescue plane, to say: ‘Here! Here I am!’ But instead I watched

her hands fall to her side. She stood there for a moment, looking at us, and then reached into one of her cargo pockets and pulled out what looked like a pack of cigarettes.

She was frumpier than I'd imagined she'd be, and I was happy to see the donut shape around her waist. It made me feel like she was taking care of herself and eating well, because her frailness – or the way my dad had sometimes described her frailness – had always disturbed me. I watched her put a cigarette in her lips and then reach back into her shirtfront pocket. She pulled out a box of matches, struck one against the box, and then placed the extinguished match into the bag that was hanging at her side. It was a small duffel bag, and I imagined it was full of paints and paintbrushes. I imagined she had come to Bangladesh to paint portraits of the people, and I understood why: the people, to me, were the most fascinating part of what I had seen so far. Like they were beautiful, with beautiful skin and bright colors adorning their sharp and beautiful faces. If I were a painter, I'd have painted them as well. But instead I longed for my phone and its camera.

Anyway, eventually the ferryman pushed into the mud on our bank. We watched him quickly scamper to the side of the boat that was docked. He avoided the old woman and hopped into the water, pulling the boat further ashore. I wondered how they all survived in such water. How do the kids swim in it and not get sick? How does the ferryman not have perpetual dysentery?

The old woman stood up and began to move toward the front of the boat. She had more wrinkles than I even thought possible, and her eyes were like milky mirrors, as if she were blind. Shapti, in my arms, was staring at her. Together we watched her ignore the outstretched hand of the ferryman and deftly hop over the waterline onto

the muddy bank side. She barked orders at the man, pointing at the bag of rice, and I glanced over at my mom.

‘She says to put down the Shapti,’ said Opu.

‘Who, mom?’ I looked toward our bank again and saw the old woman staring at me with a puckered face and livid eyes. ‘Oh ... her. Why? Tell her we’re going to the hospital.’

The old lady was yelling at Opu, barking orders, and I noticed that she still had all her teeth. ‘She says put her down,’ said Opu. ‘She says you are the dangerous man.’ She does not want you to be holding the Shapti.’

Opu was following me as I approached her, and the kids were following us. I did not put Shapti down. ‘Tell her she’s beautiful,’ I said to Opu, though I was standing directly in front of the old woman. ‘Tell her that she’s amazing looking and that I would love to take her photo sometime, if she’d let me.’

‘Sorry? You want me to say to her that she is pretty?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Tell her she’s amazing.’

He spoke the old woman and she watched me. She looked as though she was sucking a lemon, and Opu translated her wrath. ‘Put down the Shapti,’ he said. ‘You are the bad man.’

‘Are you serious? That’s what she’s saying?’

‘Yes,’ said Opu, smiling at me to show that we were still on good terms.

‘How could I be the bad man?’ I asked. ‘Does she know that I want to take the little one to the hospital? Does she know that the girl’s hands are fucked? I’m not going to hurt her or something. I’m not like that. Tell her,’ I went on. ‘Tell her that I love this girl like I love my own sister, if I had a sister. Tell her to trust me. We’re

going to the hospital and we're going to get her hands fixed, I'd never hurt her, I don't want to hurt anybody. Tell her I'm good.'

Opu translated again, and the woman answered me directly: 'Na.'

'Ya,' I said, clutching Shapti to my chest.

'Na,' she said again, shaking her head and reaching out to grab the girl.

I pulled away and the woman burst out with a thousand words I couldn't understand. She moved toward me again, and I leaned over the water and set Shapti down in the ferry – or tried to set Shapti down in the ferry. I mean, I wanted to show that we were leaving whether she wanted us to or not, but Shapti wasn't used to standing on a floating object. She was just a toddler, and I guess I'd thought she'd be fine to stand on her own, but she fell as soon as her little feet touched a seat on that shitty water craft. And it would have been okay if she'd plopped down on her backside, but she tried to brace her fall with her hands. Her cries were the first sound I'd heard out of her mouth, and they were high pitched and heart breaking.

I looked up to see if my mother had seen what I'd accidentally done, but she didn't seem to be paying attention to us.

Then my eyes were back on Shapti. Her dirty little face was tear streaked and her mouth was wide open and wailing. There was blood, too. Quite a lot of blood on her hands, where her scabs had cracked.

I leaned down to pick her up again, to comfort her, but the old woman jammed a sharp elbow into my ribs and grabbed the girl. 'What the fuck is your problem, lady?' I said, holding my ribs. 'I'm trying to help.'

The old woman scowled at me.

'She is the grandmother,' said Opu. 'She is not liking you.'

'Why? Why does she hate me so much?'

‘I don’t know,’ said Opu. ‘Maybe she is not liking the foreigner.’

The old woman was in the water now, holding Shapti and saying things in Bengali.

‘What do we do?’ I asked.

‘A gift?’ said Opu. ‘Gifts are always good, no?’

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a *Titanic* playing card, which I threw into the lake, instantly feeling bad about littering. Then I found the thousand-taka note.

‘How much is the ferry?’ I asked Opu.

‘Two taka per person,’ said Opu.

‘Two cents?’

‘Two taka,’ he said.

‘That’s like two cents, isn’t it?’

Opu shrugged.

‘I have one-thousand taka,’ I said, looking at the bright red bill. ‘Can you pay for the ferry?’ Opu nodded, yes. ‘Tell her I’ll happily give her one-thousand taka if she’ll give me her granddaughter.’

‘One-thousand taka?’ said Opu. ‘You are sure?’

‘Yeah I’m sure,’ I said.

‘That is much money,’ said Opu.

‘Tell her I’m rich,’ I said. ‘Tell her that if she lets me take Shapti, I’ll give her a thousand taka now and a thousand taka when I return.’

Opu translated, moving his hands as he spoke, perhaps describing my intention in detail: how I simply wanted to cross the ferry with the little girl and to go directly to the hospital to get her hands worked on by a doctor. He went on at some

length, but when he mentioned the only word I could understand, 'taka,' the woman scrunched up her face again and started yelling.

Shapti, I noticed, was now silently sobbing, with her oversized child head resting on the old woman's bony shoulder. I felt horrible for having hurt her.

'Tell her that she can come with us,' I said. 'Tell her that she's invited to join us, that we can all go to the hospital together. Tell her that and see what she says.'

Again Opu translated and I watched and tried to understand why this old lady didn't want her granddaughter's hands to be healed. I could see – now that I knew they were related— how Shapti and her had similar demeanors. I mean, the old woman was way more caustic and way more beaten, as if she'd seen a thousand travesties and preferred to deal only with those that had already occurred. But they both retained a similar strength, a natural obstinacy. It was written in the lines of the old woman's face: Don't fuck with me or you'll pay with your life.

'Okay,' Opu said. 'She says she will come.'

'Really?'

'Yes,' said Opu. 'She says to give her the money now, and also the money later. Also she would like to return here before the sun is going down – Shapti's mother, she is working. She would like to return before the mother is arriving here tonight.'

'No problem,' I said. 'Or I don't think it's a problem? Is it a problem?'

'No problem,' said Opu.

'Good,' I said. 'So tell her that we will do everything in our power to get Shapti back here before the sun goes down, and tell her thank you. I care about her daughter very much and I want to help. Tell her that.'

'Okay,' said Opu.

On the opposite bank my mother was waving her arms, and I took it as a good sign. Like, I took it as a sign that she was American. Because American's are usually more impatient. Or at least that's what I've noticed when I was working at the hotel: the American tourists were always hurrying around, as if you can see all of Los Angeles in one weekend, whereas European tourists usually spent their time in the cafes around the Hilton. Anyway, I was also getting impatient. So we obviously had that in common.



Shapti and the old woman got into the ferry ahead of us. Then Opu got in. The ferryman had run up the bank with the old woman's bag of rice, but he returned a moment later and found me standing at the water's edge. I was looking at the boat, contemplating how to get in without getting my feet wet. I mean, because the boat wasn't much of a boat at all – it was more like a pile of trash fastened together in some mysterious way that I could not figure out. And I'd watched the old woman get in, I'd watched Opu as well; both of them had stepped into the structure and walked to the far side, pushing through tiny pools of brown water without even thinking about it. But the water was all I could think about. I imagined it full of tiny microscopic bugs, and I imagined the bugs soaking through my sneakers, through my socks, and into the soles of my feet. It disgusted me. Everything about the lake disgusted me. But I stepped in, because I had to.

I tried to walk on the dry planks, but the boat was rocking and the water was rocking and soon my socks were wet. I sat down next to Opu and watched the ferryman push us into the water. He hopped aboard, positioned himself at the rear of

the craft, and lifted his bamboo pole. It was fun once we got going. The jalopy skirted across the water in little spurts, inching forward, and with each inch my nervousness grew. I'm going to meet my mother, I realized. Finally. I'm finally going to meet her.

She was standing with hands on her hips, eager for us to arrive.

'Maybe she recognizes me,' I said, more to myself than Opu.

'Who?' he asked.

'That woman,' I said.

'*Her?*' said Opu. 'She is the woman that is coming many times to our village. She is taking our photographs.'

'She takes photos? Does she paint?'

'Maybe,' he said. 'Why is she recognizing you? You know her?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't.'

'Then why she is recognizing you? Because you are Jack Dawson?' It was Opu's form of a joke, and he couldn't stop laughing after he said it.

'I think she's my mom,' I said. 'She left when I was little.'

'Your mother is leaving?' he asked, still smiling at his joke. 'Why? She is not loving you?' I looked at him and he dropped his smile. 'My mother is dying,' he said, with the slightest smirk. 'Also my father is dying. But they are loving me very much.'

'That's good,' I said. 'Sorry to hear that they passed away.'

'Why you are sorry?' he asked. 'You are not killing my parents.'

'No,' I said. 'I didn't.'

'So why you are sorry?' he asked. 'It is not the fault of Cotton.'

Opu and I looked at the woman on the shoreline. She was pacing back and forth, smoking another cigarette, and her hair had, at some point, been pulled back in

an unflattering ponytail. Everything in my guts was telling me that it was her. The way she intently watched the water seemed like the same way that I would watch the water, and the way she pulled on her cigarette in big puffs reminded me of how I like to smoke joints. Her face, I realized as we approached, was a lot like a marionette. She had deep set eyes and deep lines jutting down from the corners of her mouth.

The ferryman pushed us into the shore and I watched her readjust the strap of her bag. He, the ferryman, moved past all of us, and hopped into the water, pulling us into the mud. She said something to him in Bengali, and I sat there watching them converse while Shapti and old woman stood up. Opu stood up next. He moved to disembark as if walking on a rickety boat was the most natural thing in the world. I followed him, precariously, and waited for the woman to finish her conversation. Shapti and the old woman moved past me.

‘Hi,’ I said, eventually interrupting.

She turned to me: ‘Hello.’ Her accent was American.

‘Do you recognize me?’ I asked.

She squeezed the burning cinder from her cigarette and squinted at me. ‘No,’ she said, reaching toward her bag to deposit the butt. ‘Should I?’

‘I’m Cotton,’ I said. ‘But you’d know me as Caleb.’

Her face did not change. ‘Caleb?’ she said.

‘Walters,’ I said.

‘Caleb Walters...?’ she said. ‘Do you work for the Red Cross?’

‘No,’ I said, more offended than I’d like to have been. ‘I’m your son.’

‘My son?’ she said, smiling. ‘Sorry, you’ve got the wrong lady.’

She moved to board the ferry and I said: ‘Are you sure? What’s your name?’

‘I’m positive,’ she said, turning to the ferryman.

‘How can you be positive?’ I asked. ‘It’s okay, mom. You know that, right?’

‘Kid,’ she said. ‘Listen ... I’ve never had a child, alright? I’m not your mom.’

She reached into a cargo pocket to fetch her cigarettes. ‘Why would you think I’m your mother? Do I look like your mother?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I don’t know her.’

‘So you ask every stranger you come across if they’re your mother?’

‘I don’t ask men,’ I said.

‘No,’ she said, putting a cigarette in her grinning lips. ‘Makes sense.’

‘And you’re from the US, right? Where are you from?’

‘Chicago,’ she said, lighting her cigarette. ‘You?’

‘Chicago?’ I said. ‘My mom was born in Chicago.’

She was shaking her head. ‘I’m not your mother, kid. Trust me, I know what goes in and out of my own body, alright? I’ve never had a kid before.’

‘And you’re sure?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m positive.’ She turned to the ferryman and again said something in Bengali.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked.

‘My name’s Courtney,’ she said.

‘That’s your real name?’ I said. ‘Courtney.’

‘Yes,’ she said, exhaling. ‘That is my real name.’

‘My mom’s name was Karen.’

‘Karen what?’ she said.

‘Karen Ford. Ford was her maiden name.’

‘Oh,’ said Courtney. ‘Well good luck finding her.’ She turned to the ferryman, who had been walking around the shoreline, and he jumped back into the boat.

‘Fuck you,’ I said. ‘You don’t sound sincere at all.’

‘Fuck *me?*’ said the woman. ‘What? *Why?*’

‘I’m out of here,’ I said. ‘I’m gone.’

‘Okay,’ she said, pulling the cigarette from her mouth. ‘Well it was interesting to meet you, Caleb. Good luck with your search.’

‘Good luck with *your* search,’ I said, and I pointed toward Shapti. ‘I’m going to the hospital with *that* little girl, and even if you were my mother, I wouldn’t give a shit. I’d just go, anyway, because that little girl means more to me than you ever will.’

Courtney was shaking her head at me and laughing. She looked so much like a marionette without strings. ‘Good for you, Caleb,’ she said. ‘It’s important that you’re doing something, like, instead of wandering around, worrying about your own problems.’

‘I’m Cotton,’ I said. ‘Please call me Cotton.’

‘Okay,’ she said, smiling. ‘Cotton ... would you mind if I take your photo?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Why should I mind?’

‘Just give me a second,’ she said, placing the cigarette in her lips in order to dig through her tiny duffel bag.

I turned around and saw the trio standing up the bank, waiting for me. Shapti was on her feet and her grandmother was beside her. Opu was wandering around behind them. ‘She’s going to take a photo,’ I yelled up. ‘With all of us.’

‘Cotton,’ said Courtney. ‘Go up there and stand with the others. I’ll hop out and take a few shots.’

‘Alright,’ I said.

A moment later, she pointed that lens at us, and I tried to imagine what we must have all looked like together. Opu, the stick-thin boy with big ears and a

permanent smile, dark skin, and oily black hair, was standing to my left. Shapti, the filthy toddler with a massive starvation belly and hands that looked as if they might fall off at any moment, was in front of me. And the old woman, with her eyes so deeply set in her head that she could have been a walking skeleton, was to my right. I smiled, a blonde kid in stripy t-shirt and blue jeans, with a square jaw and nice teeth. I was happy in that moment. It was okay that she was not my mother, because she was right: there were other things to worry about, things that were not myself.

‘All finished,’ she said, calling up to me. ‘Just give me a second to put away my camera and I’ll give you my business card. You can write to me and I’ll email you the photo, alright?’

‘What about the others?’ I asked.

‘Oh I’ll be working in Dhaka for the next few months,’ she said, digging into another shirt front pocket. ‘I’ll make sure to get it to them. Just make sure you email me if you want the photo.’ She handed me her card, and it confirmed that her name was, in fact, Courtney. Courtney Hendrickson. She was a freelance photographer and writer, with a website and everything; and she was definitely not my mother.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Yeah I’ll email. Soon as I get home.’

‘And tell me what happens with the little girl’s hands,’ she said. ‘They looked pretty chewed up.’

‘Okay,’ I said, and she went her way and we went ours.

I mean, we walked up the bank side toward Bell’s father’s house. It wasn’t far or anything: its property-line borders the lake on one side and the road to the ferry on the other. We walked along the road, along the property-line, trying to make out the house through the trees in the garden. The occasional flashes of glass and white paint were visible through the branches, and we could see the blueness of the pool and the

bright green of the manicured lawns in the distance. I did not see any sign of Bell or her father, and I was thankful for that. All I wanted at that point was to get Shapti to a hospital.



I hadn't really had an opportunity to check it out in the daylight, because after Bell's dad toured us around the city it was already dark, and when I'd stormed out that morning the sun hadn't come up. But in the daylight, I could see how big the house was. Like it was enormous – the property in its entirety was half as big as Opu's village – and it took us quite a few minutes to reach the front gate.

'I have to go in there to get my wallet,' I said to Opu, as we walked. 'Then we can go straight to the hospital.'

'Where you are going?' he asked.

'In there,' I said, nodding toward the fence.

'*There?*' he said. 'Why you are going in there?'

'Oh,' I said, realizing I hadn't told him where I was staying. 'That's where my girlfriend's dad lives.'

'Always I have been wanting to go in there,' said Opu. 'Ever since I am seeing the palace constructed many years ago.'

'The palace?' I said. 'It's more like a dungeon. Or ... well, not a dungeon. It's actually super glitzy and everything. But the guy who lives there, Mr. Bipu, my girlfriend's dad, well he's a total ogre. He's awful, you wouldn't like it in there.'

'Always I am looking at the palace,' said Opu. 'It is very nice, no?'

I shrugged. 'I'd take you in there, but not now, okay? I need to rush in and rush out. I want to get to the hospital. That's alright if you stay outside, right? You don't mind?'

'Never is a problem with me, Cotton. Maybe someday, yes, I would like to go into the palace and to see it. I am thinking, when I am looking from the other side of the lake, it is a very rich and beautiful palace to reside in.'

'It is,' I said, 'yeah, it's beautiful. A little bit showy, but...'

'What is showy?'

'Oh,' I said. 'Um ... like you know when someone has a monster truck or whatever, even though they live in the city and have no need for a monster truck?'

'What is a monster truck?'

We were standing in front of the security gate. All I had to do was knock on the guardhouse door and I would be let in. 'It's excess to an extreme,' I said. 'It's like when people show off, when they act like they're celebrities. That's showy.'

'You are acting, no?' said Opu.

'That's different,' I said. 'I was just pretending to be Jack to make you all happy. That's not showy. Showy is like...' Shapti and the old woman were standing beside us, looking down the road. 'Listen,' I said to Opu, 'I'll explain it later. I should go in now.'

'We are waiting there,' said Opu, pointing at the empty construction site across the road from the property. 'You are taking your time, no problem with us. We are having a very nice time waiting for you in the wooded area of the new palace.'

'Are you sure?' I said, even though there was no other option. 'I don't want to make you guys wait outside like dogs or something. It's just this will be a lot faster if I go in by myself.'

‘Cotton,’ he said. ‘Better we are waiting like dogs than to be the rats scurrying around the kitchen. We are waiting outside the palace, no problem.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘You’re a good man.’

Opu turned to the old woman, who had picked up Shapti again, and he started translating to them as they walked toward the construction site. I turned and prepared to knock on the security door. I mean, it wasn’t exactly an easy task that I’d laid out in front of myself. Bell would want to know where I’d been and what had taken me so long. She would want me to understand how worried I’d made her feel and how much she loved me, and would also want to give me a very long-winded apology for having said what she’d said that morning. I would be expected to make a long-winded apology in return. Then and only then would I be able to explain that, outside, I had three friends waiting for me, one with hands that needed medical attention. I obviously didn’t have time for all that. Last time I’d checked, Shapti’s hands had still been trickling blood from the little fall on the boat. Plus her grandmother had insisted we have her back before sundown.

I prepared to knock, but stopped when I thought of Bell’s father. He was a bigger impediment than Bell, I realized. Because he would have questions and would demand answers. Vagueness, I had learned the previous evening at the dinner table, was his enemy. His wife, Meredith, had asked me what I planned to do now that I’d finished high school. ‘I don’t really care,’ I’d said. ‘As long as I’m getting paid a decent wage and have enough free time to enjoy myself, then I’m happy. Job titles aren’t important,’ I’d said. ‘They don’t make you who you are.’

‘What a bunch of shit,’ Bell’s dad had answered. ‘You don’t care what you do for work? You don’t mind being a goddamn bellhop?’

‘No,’ I’d said. ‘I don’t mind.’

‘I’m telling you, Cotton,’ he’d answered, struggling to hold back his gall. ‘That’s no way to get ahead. You need to know what you want so you can go and get it. If anyone gets in the way, fucking run em’ over.’

‘I believe in going and getting what I want,’ I’d said. ‘Or that’s how I approach some things, like ... I wanted to come here, to Dhaka, once Bell had invited me, so I put aside half my paycheck for six months. But I just don’t know what I want to do with my life, in terms of occupation. And I honestly don’t care. I honestly just want to be happy.’

‘What a load of shit,’ he’d said. ‘I’d bet you a thousand dollars that by the time you’re thirty you’ll be singing a different tune.’

Anyway, I swallowed hard and knocked on the guardhouse door. If Bell’s dad is home, I thought, I’ll just answer all his questions and duck out at the first opportunity. He wouldn’t understand if I told him about Shapti. That dude wouldn’t understand helping anybody unless *they* were paying *him*.

The peep window on the door opened. Through the barred windows I could see the guard with the moustache. He was wearing aviator sunglasses, and I could see myself in them. I could see how shit I looked – I mean, my hair is usually a mess, but I also looked tired and pale and sort of strung out.

‘Mr. Cotton!’ he said. ‘Where you have been?’

‘Um...’ I said.

‘We will open the gate.’ He closed the peep window in my face.

A split-second later the clean-shaven guard was pulling open the gate. He was also wearing aviators, and he was smiling. ‘Where you have been, sir?’ he asked. ‘We have been missing you so very much.’

‘I got pretty lost,’ I explained.

‘The madam is gone,’ said the guard with the moustache. ‘She says that you are very missing and is looking for you.’

‘Also the policemen are looking for you,’ said the clean-faced guard. ‘You are a very missing person, Mr. Cotton. Very very missing.’

‘You are aware?’ said the moustache.

‘Sorry?’ I said.

‘You are aware that many people are looking for you?’

‘I am now. When did the police come past?’

‘The police...’ said the shaven guard. ‘Maybe nine of clock this morning. Ms. Bell, she is leaving the house at maybe 9:45. Now is it fifteen minutes to noontime.’

‘So no problem,’ said the guard with moustache. ‘Now you are not the missing person. You are calling Ms. Bell ... or you are wanting us to be calling her?’

‘What?’

‘You are calling Ms. Bell?’

‘Better if you are calling her,’ said the clean-shaven guard. ‘Women, they are liking this very much when we are calling them ourselves to say we are very sorry.’

‘You are calling Ms. Bell and taking a relaxing shower,’ said the moustache. ‘I will tell the kitchen that you are home for lunch ... or you will tell them, sir?’

‘We will tell them,’ said the shaven guard. ‘You are relaxing.’

‘Yes,’ said the moustache. ‘We will tell them.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘So...?’

‘Yes sir?’ they asked together.

‘Is anyone home?’

‘No sir,’ said the moustache.

‘No,’ said the shaven guard.

‘They are looking for you,’ said the moustache.

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘No problem, sir,’ said the moustache.

‘You are welcome,’ said the shaven guard.

‘Okay,’ I said again, and I didn’t know what to do next.

So I saluted them. I saluted them both and then walked away – in fact, I started jogging toward the big boxy house at the end of the long driveway. The swimming pool was there, and it looked refreshing. The tennis courts looked hot and awful. I jogged past everything and didn’t stop until I reached the front door. Everything, I realized, is so clean and gaudy. Everything is expensive. This place is nice, but it’s also horrible.

I stepped into the house without wiping my feet on the doormat and listened for any sounds from the staff. The house felt big and empty. I was in luck. I walked up the carpeted stairs, past the portraits of Belladonna and her father, and didn’t stop until I reached our bedroom door. It was closed. It felt like she was going to be there, waiting for me, and my stomach tensed as I pushed through that door and into the room where we’d had that pretty normal argument. And the room was nice and empty. My wallet was exactly where I had left it, on the windowsill, and my phone was on the writing desk. I picked it up and for some reason checked my email. I mean, it’s just a habit. Every time I’ve been away from my phone for more than half an hour, I tend to click the little tab that opens the email. Then I check Facebook and Twitter. And I did all this. I clicked one tab after another, but the programs had to load.

Eventually, I sat on the bed. It had been made, I noticed, and clothes that I’d strewn on the floor were folded in a neat pile atop the bedside table. Bell had sent six

emails. I clicked the most recent and waited for it to load. It felt as if she'd barge in at any moment. And I had this feeling – a feeling I used to get when I was home alone as a kid. I'd be sitting in my bedroom, reading a comic or watching TV, and would hear a creaking sound coming from down the hall. The door was always open and I'd stare through it, wondering what the hell was going on. Then I'd see a flash of light move past the door, and I'd always think it was my mom, like, finally coming home to surprise me. Even when we moved houses I thought this. But obviously, whenever I got up and tiptoed down the hall, there was nobody there.

And there was nobody in that bedroom at Bell's dad's house. There was just the email, and all it said was that she loved me and was searching the city. Don't go anywhere if you get this, it said. Please.



In the hallway I skipped past the pictures of Bell as a snot-nosed gremlin and walked down the stairs, into the entryway. I planned to go to the kitchen, to steal some food for all of us, but when I reached the bottom of the stairs, Bell's dad wandered through the front door. He was wearing suspenders over a white shirt and there was a ring of sweat on his bulging stomach.

'Cotton,' he said, as he entered the door. 'We've been looking all over the goddamn city for you. Where the hell have you been?'

'I left my phone,' I said, patting my pocket.

'What? We've been looking for you everywhere...'

'I got really lost. I went to the convenience store and then suddenly I was, like, super turned around and...'

‘Jesus Christ, Cotton,’ he said. ‘Didn’t I tell you not to leave the fucking compound at night? You think it’s safe out there? You think this is the goddamn suburbs of Los Angeles? This isn’t the suburbs, Cotton. This is Banglafuckingdesh, alright?’

‘I’m not from the suburbs,’ I said. ‘I’m from Hollywood.’

‘You think it’s fucking Hollywood out there?’ he shouted, pointing toward the door. ‘Those people will eat you alive if you give ‘em a goddamn inch. The sooner you figure that out, the better. I swear, you kids are fucking imbeciles. You don’t think. You don’t ask questions. You just dive the fuck in without thinking about anything.’

I stood there, shocked.

‘Did you call Bell yet?’ he said, in a completely even tone.

‘Not yet,’ I said.

‘She’s driving around looking for you, Cotton. Do you know that? Do you know you got her worried sick?’

‘I didn’t have my phone,’ I said.

‘You *what*? You don’t have a phone? But you know how to use one, right? Fucking pick one up, Cotton. There’s phone all over the fucking house.’

I stayed quiet. Anything I said was just going to piss him off.

‘You hungry?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘We’ll have lunch in half an hour. But first call Bell. Tell her you’re here. Tell her to come home and that Meredith is coming as well. And tell the cook to open a white wine. Sauv Blanc.’

‘Um...’ I said. ‘Mr. Bipu?’

‘What?’

‘The guards, um...’

‘The Mohammad’s?’

‘I guess,’ I said. ‘The guards who are outside right now...?’

‘The Mohammad’s,’ he said. ‘They have the same name.’

‘Right. Well, they said that the police came by? That they were looking for me? We should tell them that I’m not missing anymore, or...?’

‘Tell them *what*? I didn’t call the police to have them look for you, Cotton. They came here because some crazy fuck broke into one of my factories this morning and assaulted one of my staff members. Apparently he was trying to rape one of the girls.’

‘The girls?’

‘The garment workers.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘That’s horrible.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That’s what I’m saying. This city is full of fucking lunatics. You have to be careful. You don’t want to go too far and not be able to back pedal, alright?’

‘Sorry?’

‘I think you know what I mean,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Just get the fuck out of my sight. Go call Bell. Do something. Anything. Just go away.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Um...’

He looked at his watch. ‘Half an hour. You’ve got half an hour and then it’s time for lunch. Call Bell, take a shower, and I’ll tell the cook about the wine.’

‘Alright,’ I said.

‘Why are you still standing there?’

‘The phone?’

‘There’s one around the corner,’ he said, pointing toward the living room. ‘It’s right there.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Um ... do you have her number?’

‘It’s the same number she has in Los Angeles.’

‘*Really?*’

‘She’s roaming.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Cool.’

I stepped away from him, around the corner, and picked up the phone. He walked away, thankfully, and I dialed, but all I wanted to do was run. I mean, I wanted out of there so badly and I was stuck performing all these bullshit tasks.

‘Hello?’

‘Bell!’

‘Cotton, where have you been? You scared the shit out of me, you know?’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

‘Cotton?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you earlier, like ... I shouldn’t have said anything about the window, or I should have said it more nicely, but...’ And it was strange: as she talked I could hear the words behind the words, which is to say that I knew she was apologizing so that she could hear me apologize. I could hardly bother listening to her. Like, all I could think about was Shapti bleeding outside the gates. Everything else felt inconsequential. And at the same time I remember

wondering why I should care about Shapti and not care about my relationship. 'Will you accept my apology?' said Bell. 'I'll be home in five minutes. We can...'

'Sorry?' I said. 'What were you saying?'

There was a long pause.

Which was finally broken by: 'Do you ever listen to anything I say?'

'Yes.'

'Well what did I say?'

'You said you're sorry and that you'll be home soon.'

'What else?'

It occurred to me that the quickest way off the phone was to simply hang up. So that's what I did. I hung up the phone and stepped into the entryway and walked through the front door. It was noon, but it felt like the day was just beginning.

PART TWO

I was ready to take Shapti to the hospital, and I waited for the guards to close the gates behind me and made my way to the construction site across the street. It was really a pretty dangerous place, I realized. Like there wasn't anybody on the job at that time, but there were bricks balanced a few stories up, on some scaffolding made from bamboo, and a strong enough gust could have sent them crashing toward the ground and sent me or Opu or the ladies to our graves. Plus there were boards with nails, chunks of cement, piles of glass, and pools of rainwater. I walked around these obstacles with ease, thinking of the thousand-and-one ways you can die at any instant: a pile of bricks on your head, a flash flood, a random disease, a meteor striking the Earth, an earthquake.

I found the trio sitting at the back of the site in what I thought might eventually be the kitchen of the mansion that was being built. The old woman watched me approach, and it was funny because I'd hated her *so much* at first. Like, when she was attempting to stop me from taking Shapti to the hospital, I'd thought she was an idiot. But there, under the scaffolding, she seemed wise and strong. Her eyes were hard to read and her obvious lack of awe for all that stood before her impressed me. Again, she reminded me of Shapti – or Shapti reminded me of her – and I took my phone out of my pocket and snapped a quick shot.

'Ya'll ready to go?' I asked.

Opu turned and smiled at me. He hadn't heard me coming. 'Cotton!' he said, with such joy that I, too, couldn't help but smile. I felt wonderfully free.

The old woman's eyes followed something over my shoulder and I turned to see what she was staring at. Through the frame of the house I saw Bell in her Dad's black Range Rover. She was waiting at the security gate and I could hear the blare of horrible techno pouring through the car stereo and could practically smell the new

leather seats. She was checking herself out in the rearview mirror, adjusting it and cleaning up the makeup around her eyes. She had obviously been crying. Like she'd have cried when I stormed out and didn't return, then she'd have cried out of anger, then she'd have become scared and cried. She definitely cried again when I hung up on her, but I didn't really care. I mean, on so many other occasions we have fought and we have cried and we have ended up back in each other's arms, but I didn't want that anymore. I didn't want anything to do with Bell or her family, even though they could have made my life easy at that point. Like, I could have run toward the SUV, tapped on the glass, and waited for her to roll down the window. 'Bell,' I could have said. 'I'm sorry.' And I could have explained the whole thing: how I got lost, how I found a girl in need of help, how we needed to go to the hospital ASAP. Bell would have helped us, she would have driven us to the hospital. I mean she's not a monster like her dad. But I didn't want to have to ask her for help. I didn't want to have to apologize for something that I wasn't sorry about, and I didn't want to have to explain that it was over. All I wanted was to go to the hospital without any more impediments.

So I watched the guards slide open the gate, and I watched Bell pull onto the driveway. She zipped quickly toward the house, braking hard in front of the door, and one of the guard's came out in front of the gate. He was looking for me – looking down the street in both directions – but he didn't bother looking into the construction site, and I watched Bell beyond him as she darted into the front door. The guard closed the gate.

'Okay,' I said to the trio. 'We ready?'

Opu translated and the old woman picked up the little one. I grabbed Opu's hand, and the four of us walked through the dirt of the construction site, between

stacks of rebar. We stepped over the board with nails and walked under the piles of bricks that were suspended above our heads. On the street, we walked quickly. It was relieving to know that I wouldn't come across Bell as she drove back to the property, because breaking up with people is annoying. It's difficult to say to someone that you don't want to be with them anymore. And like I said, all I wanted to do at that point was to take care of Shapti's hands.

The low hanging trees on the street were bobbing in the wind, and up ahead, on Gulshan Avenue, we could see a thick row of traffic. We walked toward it without talking and I thought about how eventually I'd have to go back to Bell's property to grab the rest of my belongings. But first the hospital, I told myself. First we take care of business.

A silver Mercedes turned onto the street and began driving toward us. We were side by side in the middle of the road, and the car flashed its lights as it approached. We moved to the roadside and the Benz stopped beside us. The tinted windows came down, revealing the Botox-stung lips and chemically peeled face of Bell's step mom, Meredith. She was smiling – it could very well be the only expression she's capable of— and I felt like running.

'*Cotton*,' she said, her voice ending on a high note. She sounded like a valley girl, though I'm pretty sure she was born in North Dakota. 'Where have you been? What have you been doing? Bell has been looking all over the place for you.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Um...'

She looked at Opu. 'Go away,' she said, and turned to me again. 'Cotton, why don't you get in the car? These people will just *stand* here until I give them a little treat.' She turned to Opu again, shooing him away with the back of her manicured hand.

Opu was staring at me, confused as to what to do.

‘Mrs. Bipu...?’ I said.

‘Call me Meredith.’

‘Meredith,’ I said. ‘This is my friend, Opu. He’s with me.’ I stepped aside so she could see the old woman and Shapti. ‘They’re all with me.’

‘Cotton,’ she said, smiling wider. ‘You didn’t tell me they were your *friends*. How embarrassing! How awful! I’m sorry, young man,’ she said to Opu. ‘Well you three will *have* to join Cotton and myself for lunch. We’re having a pasta salad, an old recipe from my side of the family – absolutely to die for. You three will *have* to join us. Cotton, will you open the door for your friends?’

‘Actually...’ I said, but she interrupted.

‘You *are* hungry, aren’t you?’ she said to Opu.

‘Yes madam,’ he said, looking at me for direction. ‘Thank you.’

‘Cute,’ she said. ‘He’s very polite.’

‘Mrs. Bipu...?’ I interrupted.

‘Cotton, I told you to call me Meredith.’

‘Meredith,’ I said. ‘Thank you, but, well, we’re sort of busy at the moment. I mean, could you tell Bell that I’ll be home in a few hours and that I’m looking forward to explaining everything...? I just have to run a few errands. Then I’ll be back at the...’

‘Cotton, get in the car.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I know you’ve made cute little friends, they seem lovely. But please, you look exhausted. Dhaka will do that to people. You need to have a little lunch, a shower, and some rest. Then you’ll feel better. Trust me, get in the car.’

‘I’ll be back,’ I said. ‘It won’t take long.’

‘It’s not Los Angeles, is it? Is it a bit much for you?’

‘What?’

‘Dhaka,’ she said. ‘It’s a bit of a cesspit, isn’t it? Poor people. There are actually some pretty locations up North, near Bogra. I’ll talk to Hank about traveling up there. But Dhaka, Cotton – I totally understand why you look so exhausted. It’s not easy, you know? Seeing all this poverty everywhere...’

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘We have to go now.’

‘Fine,’ she said, still smiling. She looked disgusted with all of us. ‘I’ll tell Bell that you say hello and that you look forward to explaining everything ... and I look forward to hearing about it, too.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Bye sweetheart.’ She winked and the window of the Benz went up. The car slowly rolled forward before zipping down the street. Like, she was down the street in an instant, the brake lights flashing red, and when I turned around again, the old woman and Shapti were a few steps ahead of Opu and me. We followed.

‘Opu,’ I said, as we turned right on Gulshan Avenue. ‘I need to stop at the ATM. Which is down there, in the opposite direction, like ... because I want to make sure we have enough money for Shapti’s treatment, okay? Could you tell the old woman that we’re going to get some money?’

‘Didi,’ he said, and then a string of Bengali words flew from his mouth and I was left standing there, watching the people caught in traffic all around us. They were all staring at me, including the old woman – I mean, she was glaring at me with those vulture eyes and I felt so small in her presence.

She said something to Opu.

‘Okay,’ he said, turning to me. ‘They will be meeting us right up ahead. There...’ He pointed to the next street corner, where a woman was standing with a child clinging to her chest. ‘At the tea stall.’

‘Cool,’ I said. ‘You ready?’



We turned and began walking on the same path that I had walked that morning. The street was now alive, with buses backed up behind cars and rickshaws weaving everywhere. I kept wondering why the old woman seemed to hate me so much. I mean, all I was doing was trying to help her and her granddaughter. I hadn’t done anything to harm her. Why is she always looking at me like I’m a fucking criminal? Why does she hate foreigners?

I stared across the street, toward the ATM’s, and was met with so many faces and eyes. Seriously, there were probably one hundred people staring at me from the windows of buses and from the backs of rickshaws, from shop front doors and cars and from the sidewalk. Eyes! So many eyes. And all of them pointed in my direction.

‘Why is everybody staring at me?’ I asked Opu.

‘Because you are great,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘But how do they know that?’

‘They are knowing because you are the Cotton,’ said Opu. ‘It is very apparent that the greatness is radiating from your face and smile. Plus, sir, they are having nothing else to do but to stare at you. So much is traffic in the streets. So much waiting. So they are staring at you because you are not the typical Bangladeshi man.’

You are the Cotton, from the Hollywood, California, America.’ He paused. ‘Why you are coming here, sir? Why you are coming to Bangladesh?’

‘I have no idea,’ I said. ‘I mean, like, my ex-girlfriend, the one we saw in the car back there, she’s from Bangladesh, or her dad is from Bangladesh, so we came to visit him. He’s the one with the humongous house. And I guess he owns a shit load of factories or whatever. The garment industry.’

‘Mother of Shapti is working in the garment industry.’

‘Yeah?’ I said. ‘Maybe I saw her this morning.’

‘You are in the garment industry this morning?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Just before I met up with you. Anyway, we came to Bangladesh for Spring Break. That’s what it’s called in the U.S. – it’s like a break we get every spring, and usually people go down to Mexico, but we came here because of Bell’s dad. Bell’s still in high school. This is the only time she has off.’

‘Which one is the highest school?’ asked Opu. ‘This is like the Harvard University?’

‘Harvard? No, this is like the Beverley Hills High School. My dad teaches there, which is why I went there, even though I technically should have gone to Hollywood High. But Beverley Hills has higher standards, so...’

‘I would like to go to the Harvard University,’ said Opu. ‘Because I am liking to make so much money.’

‘Harvard?’

‘Yes. I am liking to be studying the business and to be making the money.’

‘Oh,’ I said, and I wanted so badly to tell him what I had grown up hearing from my father. I wanted to say: Opu, you can do it. You can do anything you put your mind to. You are great. You are capable. You’re amazing. But I couldn’t say any

of that, because the odds were not even remotely stacked in his favor. I mean, he was a smart kid. Super smart. But the truth is that I'd grown up believing those things about myself, believing that I could do anything, and I still couldn't accomplish my goal – like I couldn't find her, no matter how hard I looked into the face of every stranger.

Anyway, we arrived at the small group of ATM's that are located beyond the mini-mart. There were four of them – four machines in what looked like old school telephone booths – and outside each booth was a security guard, which kind of reminded me that I had to be careful, like, technically I was still a fugitive and could still be caught by the police (though it seemed unlikely at that time). I smiled at the guards and entered one of the booths, and I brought Opu in with me. Or he followed me in. Which I immediately regretted, I mean, because it felt extremely rude withdrawing fifty-thousand taka in front of this kid who had so little.

The bills were bright pink and they came out in a large stack of thousand-taka notes. 'Will you give me the money?' asked Opu, with a very serious look on his face. 'For the Harvard University? Because I am very much wanting to go to the school.'

'Opu buddy, listen ... I know this looks like a lot of money, and it *is* a lot of money, in Bangladesh ... but, well, in the U.S., at Harvard, this many taka would only buy you a few textbooks. Maybe one semester's worth. Maybe four or five.'

'Four or five *books*? Why you are not photocopying them? This is much more cheaper and you are using the money for other expensive items.'

I held up the stack of bills and started flipping through them with my thumb. 'To go to Harvard you would need about five hundred stacks of these,' I said. 'That much money probably isn't in all of these ATM's combined.'

'Oh,' he said. 'That is much money.'

‘Yeah.’

‘Maybe I am going to the Dhaka University,’ he said. ‘It is also good like the Harvard, no?’

‘It’s a good place to start,’ I said, and I opened the door of the booth (feeling like a total asshole) and stepped out. ‘In fact,’ I went on. ‘We can start here. You’ve been helping me translate all morning. So here’s one-thousand taka. If you continue to help me, I’ll give you another thousand at the end of the day – as long as we don’t spend it all on Shapti’s hands, okay? But you have to promise to save the money for University, alright?’

‘Thank you,’ he said, accepting the bill. ‘But I am helping you because we are the friends, not because you are paying me, yes?’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘As your friend I want you to have this money. But you have to promise to save it for college, okay? Do you promise?’

‘Yes, I am promising.’

‘Good.’

‘Thank you, Cotton.’

‘My pleasure,’ I said, and we started walking down the street toward Shapti and the old lady. ‘I think you’ll be a terrific businessman,’ I said. ‘I mean, you seem to have almost a natural gift for...’ Then she was there, exactly where I’d seen her that morning, when I’d wandered away from Bell’s house and bumped into her. I’d completely forgotten that she existed, like, I mean, after running into all of those beautiful girls in the colorful shawls, I’d forgotten about the leper lady.

So I reached into my pocket. ‘Opu,’ I said. ‘Will you do me a favor? Will you take this money...?’ I handed him a one-thousand taka note. ‘And give it to that woman? The woman sitting over there, against the shop.’

‘The evil one?’

‘She’s not evil,’ I said. ‘She just has leprosy.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Just give her the money, Opu.’

‘You are sure? One-thousand taka?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay,’ he said, though he looked disturbed by the proposition.

He ran toward the poor woman, without making eye contact, and handed her the bill. She reached out and took it, smiling her toothless grin; and then Opu ran back to me as fast as he could, having refused to look at her the entire time.

‘Opu...’ I said, when he returned. ‘Why didn’t you look at her?’

‘Because she is scary,’ he said. ‘She is very hard to be looking at.’

A little bit of money isn’t going to fix her problems, I realized. She needs to see a doctor. ‘Opu,’ I said, ‘you need to help me translate. Now, I’ve thought about it and I’ve decided that she has to come with us, to the hospital, to receive treatment.’

‘*What?* But she is giving us her sicknesses! I am not wanting to be going with you to be talking with her.’

‘Opu,’ I said, walking toward the lady. ‘She’s not a monster, alright? And remember ... I hired you to help me translate.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘If that was your mother,’ I said. ‘Wouldn’t you want her to go to the hospital?’

‘My mother is dead, sir.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Sorry.’

‘Why sorry? No problem! I am understanding ... if my mother is alive, and she is having the many leper disease, I am wanting her to be going to the hospital. But Cotton, sir, I am still not wanting to touch this lady. This is okay?’

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘But I’m going to need you to translate for me, alright?’

‘Of course, sir. No problem.’

‘Good,’ I said.

This time, as she saw me coming, there was a glimmer of recognition in her eyes. She was sitting in the exact same location that I’d see her that morning, wearing the exact same clothes and still smelling horrible.

‘Tell her,’ I said to Opu. ‘That we would like to take her with us to the hospital for treatment.’ As I spoke, it was as if the poor woman understood what I was saying. Like as the words left my mouth, she began to look uneasy. Her stumps pushed against the cold cement and rearranged her lifeless legs, while Opu translated. She listened and I could see that she was putting herself into a position to scurry away if she needed to. This, of course, made no sense to me. I mean, a lot of things make no sense to me. But this, in particular, was odd – why would she feel threatened by us? What did she have to be afraid of? Could she not see the good intentions written across my face?

‘She would not like to be going with us, sir.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because,’ he said. ‘She believes that if she goes with you then they are taking her away, sir. She says she will not go with you.’

‘Tell her that we’d like to help her,’ I explained. ‘Tell her that I’m here to help.’

Again, Opu translated. ‘She says she will not go,’ he said.

‘I’ll give her money,’ I said, reaching into my pocket. ‘Tell her I’ll give her another thousand taka if she’ll come with us.’

Opu explained and she looked up at him with her bloodshot eyes. ‘She says that first you give her money,’ said Opu.

‘Fine,’ I said, holding out the bill.

She leaned forward and grabbed it with her two stumps, and she was actually pretty scary – like some sort of cave dweller. I was beginning to feel even more sorry for her. ‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Now let’s go.’

She didn’t move.

‘C’mon,’ I said. ‘We’re in a hurry.’

She looked up at me and stared. She was so hard to look at, and I didn’t want to touch her – like I didn’t want to pick her up and drag her to the hospital. What if something fell off her body when she was in my arms? What if I could never wash her scent away?

‘Alright,’ I said, pulling another bill from my pocket. ‘Here’s another thousand.’ I dangled it in front of her. ‘Come. Come on.’ She sat there, scowling at me. ‘Come,’ I said. And I continued dangling the bill just out of her reach. But she didn’t move. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s go.’ I held the bill closer to her face, and then her two stumps flew out and she grabbed my legs. She pressed her face into my stomach, wiggling until her skin was pressed against my belly; and I started freaking out. Like I backed away so quickly that I bumped into Opu and he was disgusted by her (or by me, who had touched her). I remember yelling: ‘What the fuck is your problem?’ And she had that ugly grin on her face. She had attacked me, I realized. ‘You’re completely insane,’ I said – and I did something I now regret doing. I spit at her. ‘You ugly witch,’ I said. All my best intentions were crumpled like the bill in my

hand, which I threw at her. ‘Come on,’ I said to Opu. ‘Let her die on the street. I honestly don’t give a shit.’ I walked away, promising myself that I would never think about her again.



The streets, at that point, were packed with traffic that extended forever into the distance. In fact, I almost felt at home for a moment – in the sense that all traffic jams remind me of Los Angeles – but at the same time Dhaka was so foreign. The lady, the leper, for one: that would never have happened in L.A. Or I don’t think it would happen, as I’ve never actually seen a leper in Los Angeles. I’d never really seen a bicycle, either – like they *exist* (there are the weekend warriors who pedal down the PCH in their spandex), but Dhaka is different. In front of us were cars, sure, but they were all old and shitty looking. Very few of them had a polished finish. So the traffic was pretty much like a junkyard in action: no sense of smog regulations, no sense of brake lights being a necessity. And there were so many bicycles tucked between every waiting car: rickshaws, with strong, hungry-eyed men in sandals sitting on the bikes and the carts behind them were filled with people. Nobody was moving at all. I mean, walking was way faster than even the rickshaws, and it was starting to rain. But Opu didn’t seem to mind and I didn’t care at all. We walked back toward Shapti and the old woman.

‘Opu,’ I said, attempting to get my mind off what had just happened. ‘Tell me about your parents. How old were you when they passed away?’

‘What is passed away?’

‘Died,’ I said. ‘How old were you when they died.’

‘My mother or my father? When I am three years old, my father, he is dying. I am not remembering him so much, but my mother is telling me many stories about my father when he is living. My mother is dying later and I am not liking to talk about this, because I am missing her always. She is a very kind woman. She makes me work very hard and I am learning many things from her, because she is working in a place where they are making so many English books. I am reading the manuals of very many appliances that I have never heard of, but I am learning, and I am missing my mother every day. Maybe you are missing yours, too? I am wishing now that my mother is watching me with my friend, Cotton. You are wishing that your mother is seeing you with Opu?’

As Opu talked, I looked out at all the strangers who were staring at us. And it was odd to me, because I’m the one who is always looking at others. I mean, I’m always scanning every face to see if I can find her.

‘Yes,’ I said to Opu. ‘I wish she was watching us right now. Or I wish your mother was watching us. My mom ... she might not be very nice. Maybe she wouldn’t like us at all, I don’t know. Opu, I don’t really know anything about her, except that she liked to paint.’

‘Always they are proud of me,’ he said. ‘My parents ... always they are proud, but right now, with you, I think they are very proud. Because you are a good man.’

‘What?’

‘You are good, Cotton.’

‘Are you serious? I just spit at a leper.’

‘You are good.’

‘Well, you are a good too,’ I said. ‘You are great.’

‘You are,’ he said.

‘But I just spit on a leper,’ I said. ‘That’s horrible.’

Opu went on complimenting me, and I listened, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what I had done. I mean, I’d totally lost control and spit on the poor lady. Which is horrible. And yeah ... I remember sort of deciding, right there, to make up for it. Like there were probably over a thousand people in our field of vision – in cars, on the streets, in buses and in windows – and I’d say about one hundred of them were beggars. I had taken out 50,000 taka. More than enough, I figured, to pay for Shapti’s hands to get fixed.

‘Opu,’ I said. ‘Will you do me a favor?’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘It is my pleasure to be doing favors for my friend.’

‘Okay,’ I said, pulling out my wad of bills and counting out one hundred thousand-taka notes. ‘Take this money and give one bill to every beggar you come across. Just one bill, okay? And don’t tell them it’s from me. Like don’t point at me or anything. I don’t need them to know it’s from a foreigner. I just want to do it to help them out, alright?’

‘No,’ said Opu. ‘I will not be liking to do this.’

‘Why? It’s good to give.’

‘Yes,’ said Opu. ‘It is good. But I am having no money. I am not having money, so why I am giving it away?’

‘Well I don’t really have a lot of money, either,’ I said. ‘I mean, I worked as a bell hop and it took me months to save up to come here. But I’m here. And now that I’m here I can see how rich I am – like, you’re probably rich too. You just aren’t comparing yourself to the right people.’

‘But I am wanting to go to the Harvard!’ he said. ‘I am wanting to learn much so I can make much money.’

‘Opu,’ I said, ‘I’ll tell you what. If you do this for me, I’ll give you another thousand taka – as long as you promise to save it for college, I don’t mind giving it to you. But just do it, okay? Seriously, I feel crap. I think this will make me feel better, to give without asking anything in return.’

‘Okay,’ said Opu, accepting the bills I handed him.

‘One-thousand each,’ I said. ‘No more, no less. There’s fifty bills there.’

‘Sir, fifty-thousand is very much money!’

‘Not to me,’ I said. ‘To me that’s only a few dollars.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And Opu,’ I said. ‘If you see any beggars that I can’t see from here, let me know. Actually,’ I said, counting off more bills. ‘Take these as a precaution. Give them to every beggar you see, alright? If we need more for Shapti, later, we can take it out of an ATM. Just bring back any surplus, okay?’

‘What is surplus?’

‘Any extra.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Thank you Opu.’

He turned around and did my bidding, and it’s hard to explain how much joy I derived from watching the little man hand out these bills. He would run ahead, and I would watch him talk to the person for a little while, perhaps explaining what was going on; then he’d bend down to slip a bill into their hand. Like he did it so slyly. It was so cool. As if he were just shaking their hand. And they’d look down and I’d watch their faces light up as they checked their bills. I mean, I watched him do this with at least five beggars: another leper, a lady with her kid, a beggar boy, and a

beggar girl. Then he was behind me, doing my charity work, while I walked toward Shapti and the old woman.

‘All gone, sir,’ he eventually said, catching up to me. ‘Every taka gone.’

We were standing on the corner, near the tea stall where we were to meet our girls. ‘You gave all the money?’ I said. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes sir,’ he said, emptying his pockets. ‘I even gave the money that you are giving me for the Dhaka University, sir. Because there are many more beggars than I am expecting.’

‘Opu! I told you to save that money.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘That was very generous of you.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Here,’ I said, digging into my pocket. ‘Here is three-thousand taka. I’m not giving you any more, okay? That’s it. Save that for college, alright?’

‘Yes sir.’

He slipped the money into his pocket.

‘This is the tea stall?’ I asked.

He nodded, and we crossed the street. Under the portico of the tea stall we found the girls waiting at a table, and it was so cozy there. The food smelled so good and I was starving – or I was super hungry. A big man was standing near us with sweat dripping off his face into a pot of boiling oil. He was deep frying something. Deep-frying, I thought, probably kills any chance of contamination. This is probably the cleanest place to eat and I have to eat now.

‘Opu,’ I said, sitting down at the table with the girl. ‘Let’s quickly eat. Then we can go to the hospital.’

‘Yes Cotton, sir,’ he said. ‘I would very much appreciate the food.’

He spoke to the old woman, and sat down. We were right on the edge of the shop, beneath the roller door, and in the restaurant were dozens of people. Everyone was eating and chatting and drinking tea. Opu ordered something by shouting at the man who was deep-frying the pastries. He ordered something for the little one, as well. Then the guy who was cooking walked over to us. The old woman shrugged and said something. I guess she wasn’t hungry. And it was my turn to order, but yeah ... I was transfixed by this gentleman toward the back of the room who was facing me.

‘Opu,’ I said, nudging him.

‘The dhal, sir,’ said Opu. ‘Order the dhal. Very Tasty.’

‘No,’ I answered. ‘Does that man look familiar to you?’ When I said it, I sort of pointed. The restaurant owner followed my stares and the old woman turned to see what we were talking about. Pretty soon, since many of the guests were watching us, half the restaurant had turned around and we were all looking at this guy in his blue shirt, with his neatly parted hair and big moustache.

‘Who?’ said Opu. ‘The policeman?’

‘Oh shit,’ I said.

It was the cop from the second story window of that ramshackle factory. He looked up and everyone looked away from him except me. Then I saw a glimmer of recognition in his eyes, like, he watched me for a moment, without moving.

‘I have to go,’ I said, pushing back my chair. All color had drained from my face, I could feel it. And the policeman, when he saw me stand, also stood. He stepped toward me and I bolted.

The rain was coming down and I was so sick of running before I had even begun. Like, I was so tired of having places to go, but not having time to think or feel. All I'd done since arriving in Dhaka was to think and feel everything – to take in every sight and sound as if I were tripping acid. Now I was running. I sprinted down Gulshan Avenue, toward Bell's dad's house, and the crowded streets were so fucking annoying. I had to dodge so many people, and occasionally I'd check over my shoulder and find the cop still running after me. I ran harder. I ran as hard as I possible could, but he was always there. And I scooted beneath umbrellas that had been opened. I ran through crowds of people, pushing and shoving and not caring if I bowled them over. The policemen chased me, pushing through other sets of people; and I ran. I maneuvered through pedestrian traffic and into the street. I weaved through street traffic, in between cars and rickshaws. I passed the beggars that Opu had given my money to, passed all those eyes. And they watched me pass, these eyes, and pointed the policeman in my direction.

When I turned off Gulshan Avenue, onto Bell's dad's street, the policeman was a decent distance from me. But on the open street he could see me. I had nowhere to go but back to Bell's. And I ran, so hard, and he chased. Eventually I reached the gate and yelled something incoherent at the guards. 'Open!' I screamed. 'Open the fucking gate!'

They were too slow. Then it was too late. The policeman ran up, shoved his palm into the middle of my back, and dropped me to the ground. I mean, it was not the first time I'd been arrested in my life. It wasn't even the second time. But it was the first time I'd been arrested in Bangladesh and to tell you the truth, in that moment, I was terrified. Like I knew that Bell's dad would come out. He would talk to the cop.

I might even be let go. But I was terrified of having to explain myself to Bell's father, and terrified of not being able to leave the house in order to help Shapti.

I tried to breath, but it's always difficult when you're being arrested. I mean, my arms were held behind my back and he had shoved his knee between my shoulder blades. My lungs felt like they were being compressed, which makes it extremely hard to cry out for help, though I tried. I moaned something to the guards, but that was pointless. One of them had already run to the house, shouting for Bell's dad, and the other's shoes were in my line of vision. Like he was standing there, occasionally shuffling his feet and talking to the policeman. And I realized just how bad it must look. Like it always felt like the guards were on our side, if anything happened. I always figured they were there to help us — and now something *was* happening. He was cuffing me with zip tie and his hands were in my pockets.

He rifled through them, digging deep, and I watched the guards black boots stand there doing nothing. Which is when I realized that, as the accused person, you have no rights. I mean, when you're pinned to the ground by a man in a uniform you always look as though you've done something wrong. You're guilty before trial — and I was, I mean, guilty, but this all seemed a bit excessive for trespassing and assault. All I had done was accidentally elbow some annoying manager guy in the face and kiss an employee's ear! I shouldn't have run, I realized. I should have pretended like nothing happened. Then the cop would probably have thought I was just some random tourist. Not that I'd seen any other tourists, but...

It occurred to me that I'd just been robbed of nearly two hundred and fifty dollars, which is nothing. Except that two hundred and fifty dollars was enough to fix Shapti's hands; and now I had run away, leaving her with Opu and the measly three-thousand taka I'd given him. So this cop was essentially ripping her new hands out of

my pocket. 'Are we done here?' I asked, lifting my chin so that I could speak. 'Because I've really got some other places I'd like to be.'

The cop took the back of my head and pushed my face into the cement, then started talking to me, rapidly, in that language that before had seemed bouncy and fun. I obviously didn't understand what he was saying, and the guard did not translate. Opu, I thought, would explain everything. He'd tell them I'm a good person – that I do good things for people, which yeah ...

It dawned on me that, actually, I hadn't done anything for anybody since I woke up that morning. I mean, I'd given quite a bit of money away but that was more to make me feel good about myself. I hadn't actually done anything selfless.

Low, undoubtedly low, with that pavement in front of my eyes and those thoughts pouring through my head, I wanted to sink. I wanted the Earth to open up and swallow me, because I knew what was coming next.

'Get off of him,' I heard Bell say. 'Get the fuck off of him. He didn't do anything ... Cotton, what did you do? Are you alright?'

The cop had released my head and I turned. My forehead was burning from where it had been pressed into the gravel.

'What the fuck is going on here?' Bell's dad boomed. And I watched his loafers approach. I could practically feel his footsteps vibrating the Earth; and then suddenly I was standing again. Like, he had pushed the officer away, grabbed me beneath my arms, and lifted me into a standing position. 'Who the fuck do you think you are?' he yelled at the cop. 'You think you're someone because you've got a goddamned uniform?'

The policeman backed away from Bell's screaming father. 'This man ... he is the criminal,' he shouted. 'This man we are arresting.'

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’ Bell’s dad switched to Bengali. He argued with the cop for what felt like hours, though I’m sure it only took a few seconds; and he was staring at me. I mean, Bell’s dad was staring at me with his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed. For a moment I almost wanted to say to the police officer: Please don’t leave me with this guy. He’s an absolute maniac. He’s going to strangle me as soon as you go.

‘Well then,’ he said to the cop, in English. ‘If that’s the case, then you can let him go. I didn’t realize it was Cotton. He’s one of us.’

‘Yes,’ said the cop. ‘I am freeing him.’

‘What is it, dad?’ asked Bell. ‘What did he say?’

The cop snipped the zip tie around my wrists with a pair of tiny scissors.

‘What about my money?’ I said, rubbing my wrists. ‘He took all the cash from my pockets.’

‘Cotton,’ said Bell’s dad. ‘Shut the fuck up.’

There was a silence in which none of us knew what to do. Bell was staring at me, ready to give me her sad face, and I was avoiding her eyes. Bell’s step-mom looked sad, as well, though she was still smiling that plastic grin.

Anyway, I was happy to see the cop go. Like, to see him walk away with his hands in his pockets (probably gripping my money) and his tail between his legs. But at the same time I suppose I was also jealous. I didn’t want to walk toward that big house, even though I was “free.” I wanted to walk to meet Shapti. Shapti was all I could think about: rosy cheeks, chubby cheeks. What will she do without me? I wondered. Her hands are going to rot off. Without hands, how would she work? She’ll have to get lucky, I remember thinking. Because there is no way Bell’s father is

ever going to let me off this compound again. Not after what I've done. Or like, not now that he knows what I've done.



Inside the house I didn't know what to do with myself. My t-shirt and jeans were filthy and stiff in the way that clothes are when they've been soaked and dried in the sun, and my heart was still beating from all the excitement. Or maybe it was pounding out of nervousness. Bell's dad had disappeared into the kitchen, after entering the house, and Bell and Meredith had moved toward the living room. But I didn't know what to do. I mean, I'd never been in trouble with somebody else's parents. So I lingered in the entryway, on the massive Persian rug that was probably hand-made in the 19th century. From there I could peek into most of the rooms on the first floor, though all I really wanted to do was backpedal out the door and run down the street.

Everything I saw reminded me of Shapti's hands. The display cabinet in the living room, also an antique, could easily pay for ten surgeries, I thought. And the little angel figurines in the cabinet, the chinaware, the collection of miniature teacups and every other gaudy atrocity that they displayed, they could all pay for probably one surgery each. I mean, there was enough wealth in that entryway alone to supply medicine to every single beggar we'd seen on the street that day, and the painting in the main hall – this hideous “masterpiece” painted in the early 1900's – my God, Meredith had gone on and on about how “difficult” it was to acquire an original what's-his-name. It could probably feed the entire fucking village across the lake for like two to three weeks. And I was just standing there, walking in circles over that

antique rug, cursing myself for being such a fucking idiot – like, for not running straight to Shapti as soon as my hands were cut loose from those plastic cuffs.

Bell's dad found me in the entryway. He was stirring a single ice cube in a tumbler full of whiskey, and he motioned for me to join him in the living room. 'Yes sir,' I remember saying, and I felt like such a tool for trying to be chummy. 'What kind of whiskey are you drinking?' I asked.

'Cotton, just sit the fuck down.'

I sat down on the couch and thought about the family on the lakeside, with the newborn, and it sounded so nice to be with them, under their little hut – to be anywhere but on that cushy couch with that balding fat man in front of me, clutching his whiskey and standing in a shaft of light that poured through the big windows.

'So Caleb,' he began. 'I ... don't even know where to start.' He spoke slowly, as if he were about to fire an employee. 'Maybe I should let you tell your side of the story, and we'll go from there. Because Cotton, Caleb, from my perspective, from our perspective, you've got to understand that this all seems extremely bizarre.' He sipped. 'So tell us what you've been up to since you left the house this morning, and start at the beginning. Tell us everything.' His slow speech was driving me absolutely crazy. I mean, I couldn't help but think that there were more important things to be doing, particularly regarding my little friend's hand, and I was uncomfortable with the way he addressed me. Not because of his familiarity. That was fine. But because of the way he spoke so slowly, as if I were an idiot.

'Well,' I began. 'The beginning began a long time ago, Hank. Before any of us were even born.'

'Don't be smart with me.'

'So you'd prefer that I act stupid?'

‘Cotton,’ Bell said.

‘You’ve already proven your stupidity you little shit. I should send you straight to the fucking airport.’

‘Please do,’ I said. ‘I’d love to...’

‘Cotton!’ Bell interrupted. ‘Don’t talk to my dad that way, alright? And Dad,’ she went on. ‘Be nice to him. He didn’t do anything – what did he do?’

‘Sweety,’ said Meredith. ‘You just stay out of it, okay.’

‘Meredith!’ Bell said. ‘Shut up.’

‘Caleb,’ said Meredith. ‘You’re probably exhausted...’

‘No!’ said Mr. Bipu. ‘I want a fucking explanation. This little shit snuck out of our house in the...’

‘I didn’t *sneak* anywhere.’

‘Don’t interrupt me!’ he yelled; and then turned back to Meredith. ‘This little fuckwit snuck out of our house, walked to my factory, assaulted one of my workers, and tried to rape one of the girls. I bailed him out, and does he thank me?’

‘That’s true,’ I said. ‘I mean, the part about not saying “thank you” is true. So thank you, by the way. Seriously Hank. Thanks for bailing me out of that. And sorry about accidentally elbowing that manager guy in the face, but...’

Hank is not a big man – in fact, he’s extremely short and extremely bald and kind of weathered looking, like the bottom of a foot or a kneecap – and even though he’s dark, I could see his face go crimson. It was strange, I mean, he was like a cartoon character who was about to blow steam from his ears. When he spoke next, froth flew from his mouth. I’d never seen anything like it, and I’m not sure Hank had ever dealt with anyone like me. ‘You little shit...’ he began. And though his screaming was directed at me, all I could pay attention to was his anger as it boiled

over. I sat there smiling – I mean, I couldn't help it – and that only intensified his anger. 'We fly you out here,' he went on. 'We put you up in our house. We feed you.'

'I paid for my own ticket,' I said. 'I paid my own way, and I'm thankful for your hospitality. But if I knew that you were going to count every grain of rice I've eaten, I'd never have eaten it. I never would have come here in the first place if I knew you were such an asshole. So *yes*, I left your house this morning. I got lost. I accidentally wandered into what turned out to be *your* factory – but I didn't know that at the time, and I didn't think I was doing anything...'

Hank Bipu hurled his glass tumbler through the living room's sliding glass door. The sound was enormous, as if an earthquake had struck, and we all watched in amazement as an additional piece of glass came crashing to the floor. The birds chirped outside, we could hear them, and one of the guards came rushing over. He peeked into the living room and saw Bell's dad standing there with his hands on his hips.

'You did this,' said Mr. Bipu, pointing at me. 'I want you out of my goddamn house.' The three of us sat there, staring up at him in shock. It was embarrassing – embarrassing that this man could not control his anger – and we watched him storm out of the living room. He slammed the front door behind him and we sat silence. None of us spoke until we heard his car horn, a signal for the guards to open the gate.

Eventually Meredith said: 'Cotton, you should shower.'

I looked at her. I looked at Bell. They wore different expressions, which is to say that Meredith was better at hiding her emotions. But the general feeling in the air was one of sadness. I had let them down. They had trusted me – Bell had trusted me – and I'd sacrificed that trust.

'It's not what you think,' I said to her. 'I didn't kiss anybody on the lips. I...'

‘Cotton,’ she said. ‘Please don’t.’

I was so confused. ‘Okay.’

‘I’m going to start cleaning up,’ said Meredith. She put her hand on her knees as if she were going to stand. But Bell fell over into her stepmother’s lap and started crying. Which was tough. Like, even though it was over between us, Bell was a friend. She and I had shared so many experiences, and I wanted to embrace her, to tell her that it would all be alright, and to say sorry. But yeah ... Bell’s step mom (her look) made it abundantly clear that I was unwelcome at that moment.

On the stairs, I thought about Opu. Again, I wished he could be there. Just to play lawyer – to be my defense. But then I realized, again, that I’d abandoned him. That I’d run away without saying goodbye. And I felt awful. Like I thought that he’d be mad at me, and each step toward our room felt so fucking heavy. The entire house felt heavy. I wandered down the hall and into the room. Our room, I thought, though there was no longer an ‘us.’



Downstairs, while I showered, there was a conversation. I was obviously not part of this conversation, but my guess is that Belladonna’s step-mom comforted her. My guess is that she said soothing things, statements that are true as much as they are false, important generalities that fall short of describing actual people, actual groups, actual cultures and sexes. For example: ‘Men,’ she may have said, ‘they’re just like that, sweetheart. Their hormones are out of control and you may as well get used to it.’ Or: ‘Sweetheart, it’s okay. Crying is good. It will make you feel better.’ Or:

‘Darling, you know your Daddy didn’t mean to get so angry – that’s just the way he is, you know? That’s the way men are.’

Anyway, whatever went on downstairs included a phone call from the big man himself. The angry man. The man of the house who had thrown a glass of whiskey through his own window.

I shut off the shower and found a towel hanging on the rack. When I opened the door, Bell was standing there. I could tell that she was there make me feel better, to patch up our relationships, to forgive me. ‘Cotton,’ she said. ‘Please don’t say anything.’

Dripping, in my towel, I stood in the doorway of that bathroom with the steam pouring into the bedroom from behind me. Outside, I could see that it was still raining, and I wanted out of there.

‘Cotton...’ she began, and I already knew what was going to happen. That was the worst part: the predictability of every argument we have ever had. ‘I’m really sorry about this morning, about yelling at you, with the window and everything. Sometimes, though, I feel like you don’t care about anybody but yourself.’

‘Yeah...’ I said. ‘You’re the exact same way.’

They were the wrong words to have said in that moment, and I was the wrong man for Bell. I mean, she is beautiful. She is smart and talented and, well, really fun in bed. But none of that mattered in that moment. No item on her resume was enough to make me stay with her.

‘This is exactly what I mean,’ she went on. ‘Every time someone criticizes you, you throw it back at them. I’m honestly just trying to help.’

‘Bell,’ I said. ‘We’ve already talked about all this. We’ve already said these words, like, hundreds of times. Do you know what happens next? I say: Bellybean,

forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt you ... I didn't ... And you know, Bell, I *didn't* mean to hurt you. I wasn't even thinking about you when I kissed that girl, because, well, I'm a selfish asshole. But *seriously*, so are you. So is everybody. There's no way around it unless you're fucking Buddha or something. But I'm trying. I'm honestly trying to figure out how to be more selfless.'

'Good,' she said. 'Cotton that's really good.'

'But this,' I said. 'This is over.'

'What?'

'Us.'

'No it's not,' she said. 'We love each other. It's not over.' I looked at her with such disgust that she completely got it. 'Or okay,' she said. 'Maybe it is.'

'I just can't do it,' I said. 'I mean, part of me wants to hold onto this, because you're so good looking, but we're not good for each other. I'm not good for you and you're, well, one of the most annoying people I've ever met.'

She started to cry, and I had to comfort her. I took her in my arms – and this is what always happens. We say mean things to each other. We apologize. We tell the truth. She starts crying and I feel bad, because I don't like to see girls crying. I embrace her. Then we kiss. Then my libido gets in the way and suddenly we're back together, with her tiny body in my arms and my nose pressed into her thick hair. And that is what happened on this occasion. I could feel what I had to prevent from happening, but it was too hard. Her lips were so soft and plump. We kissed with the passion reserved for make-up sex, even though my mind was screaming at me to pull away. Get the fuck out of here, I was thinking. Grab your passport and leave.

But her hands, her skin, my skin, our tongues – it was impossible to separate. So we fell into bed; my towel slipped away; and in Bed I thought of nothing but the

moment that I was in. It was like a beach in the summer with waves licking your toes and the overwhelming feeling that everything everywhere will always be alright.

We finished quickly and she asked if it was good.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It was great.’

She smiled up from my arms, and I kissed her. ‘Listen,’ she said. ‘There’s something I have to tell you ... My dad called, when you were in the shower...?’ She spoke in questions, though they were statements. ‘He doesn’t want you staying here anymore. Like, he gets like that. You just have to apologize and then it will be fine. But...’

‘The guy has anger issues and I’m supposed to apologize? Apologize for what?’

‘Well you *did* break into his factory and ...’

‘No I didn’t, the door was open.’

‘Anyway, I don’t want to get into it Cotton. You have to apologize to him.’

‘No.’

‘*Cotton.*’

‘Bell,’ I said, ‘listen ... I’m happy to go back to L.A. Like, I want out of here. Out of this. Out of us.’

‘What?’

‘We’re not good for each other,’ I said. ‘Trust me. It’s better if this just ends.’

She moved to the end of the bed and looked at me in horror.

‘What?’ I said. ‘It’s true. I’m telling the truth.’

‘You have got to be fucking kidding me,’ she said. ‘You must be the biggest asshole I have ever met on this fucking planet.’ She stood up and she was so beautiful in the light of the window. ‘I don’t even know what to say, Cotton. Honestly, I need

you to get out of here, like ... go. I don't give a *shit*. I don't care how you get home. I don't care where you sleep tonight. I don't fucking care at all.' She was going to cry, I could feel it. 'Seriously,' she went on, 'what the fuck is your problem? You need to have your head examined.' And I had to think of the factory manager bitching at me, and how I preferred to be yelled at in a language I couldn't understand. 'Go,' she said. 'Just fucking go. Please. Please get out of here.'

'But I'm naked.'

'Fuck you!'

'Well let me get my clothes on.'

She stormed into the bathroom and I heard the door lock. The shower turned on and I could hear Bell above everything. She let a long, loud, piercing cry that slowly built into a scream. It was time for me to leave again, time to collect my things and get the out of there, as she had asked me to. So that is what I did. And I did not come back.

PART THREE

There is something wonderfully liberating about walking down the road with your bag slung over your shoulder, having just told your girlfriend of three years that it's over. This wonderfully liberated feeling lasts anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes. Then, as you walk, you realize exactly what it means to have ended things, and a second reality comes to light. No more cuddling, you realize. No more hand jobs in the movie theatre. You'll be sleeping alone. You'll be diddling your own fiddle. A swirl of emotions spin in your stomach. It will feel good, you think, to have an entire bed to yourself. It will feel great not to have to answer to anybody. But damn, her lips, they were so nice. And that feeling – the feeling of waking up beneath the weight of someone's love – you'll miss that, even if letting go is liberating.

At least those were the thoughts that coursed through my mind, a few weeks ago, when I left the Gulshan compound for the third and final time. With Bell in the bathroom, screaming and weeping, I packed my bag. She wants me out of here, I thought, and her dad wants me out of here, and I want out of here. So there's really no problem. I shoved my dirty clothes in with my clean clothes, double-checked at least seven times that I had my wallet, phone, and passport; and then, once again, I was walking through the doors of that house.

The guards, of course, wanted to speak with me, but I was in a hurry and they could sense it and I simply saluted them and they opened the gates.

I was gone again, and this time for good.

The light was still in the sky at that point, but the clouds had thickened and it looked like it was going to rain. I turned left outside the gates and headed straight toward Gulshan Avenue. My plan was to walk to the ATM, take out some more money, and flag down a taxi for the airport. I wanted out of that city, out of that city,

away from all of those people who brought me down, and I didn't care how long I had to wait for a flight. Just as long as it got me the fuck out of Dhaka.

This city, I remember thinking, is seriously fucked. There's honestly nothing that's going to fix it. Nobody who can fix it. It's too far gone. It's medieval. I should just get out while I still can.

I had reached the end of the road and was standing with Gulshan Avenue in front of me. There was the usual traffic stretching out in both directions, and the usual onlookers with all the stories behind their eyes. I thought of my mother. Like I was thinking about how odd it is that all of those strangers, hundreds of strangers, have seen me, Cotton Walters, as a grown man, but my own mother, who is supposed to love me, has no idea what I look like. She just left, I thought. She packed up her fucking paints, her easel, her bags, and took off without saying goodbye. Who *does* that? Who does that to people they are supposed to love?

Faces in buses, faces in buildings, young men, old men, women and girls, beggars and businessmen were staring at me. And I could see my own eyes in the windows of a passing car. It was so obvious that I could not be like her. I mean, I looked like her. I am half of her genetic make-up, with stark eyebrows and dark eyes, but I am *not* her, I remember thinking. I do not have to do what she has done. I can finish what I was brought here to do. I can fix Shapti's hands, because I promised I would fix them. Because I am not a deserter. I am not a spineless, heartless wench. I am Cotton and there's no excuse for abandoning Shapti.

The traffic in front of me was backed up at a green light, and the intersection was gridlocked. Rickshaw drivers were weaving between cars and somewhere on the other side of the road the leper lady was probably sitting where she always sits. Opu, I realized, has only three-thousand taka, which isn't enough for Shapti's medical bills.

So, I thought, they probably finished their meals at the restaurant and went straight back to the village. I felt horrible for having abandoned them in the first place. I mean, even though it's understandable –I had to run from the cops – it would have been better to have run right back to them after the cop released me.

But okay... I turned around and began heading straight back in the direction I had come from: toward the ferry and the Gulshan Lake, toward the village and Opu and Shapti. I'll take her to the hospital tonight, I told myself. And if she can't go tonight I'll get a hotel and take her in the morning. We will fix her fucking hands. We will get her medicine. She will not be a cripple. Then and only then, I will fly home having done at least one selfless act.

It's funny how a simple shift in mood can swing your perspective. I mean, I turned around and started heading back toward where I'd had just come from. It was raining harder, but I didn't care. started raining. A mad torrent poured down from the heavens, with the low-hanging trees blowing in the wind and the rain coming down sideways. Everything was swaying and the greens seemed greener, the streets seemed cleaner; and I was so happy to be getting soaked and to have all my belongings soaked. Or I wasn't *happy*, but I just didn't care. There was nothing to worry about. The wind wasn't cold and the rain was warm and the necessity of the monsoon seemed so obvious. Like in Southern California it's sunny all the time, so when your mood dips, as moods do, you feel weird about it. You feel as though you should be happy because the weather is so good. But the rain suited me more, in that moment, and I understood that it was okay to have done what I did. The truth trumps the temporary pain I may have caused. Because the pain would pass. Bell would be alright. Everything would come to a logical end and there was no need to feel fear.

At the lake I found the ferryman standing beneath a tree that was growing from the bank side. He had plucked a palm frond from a palm tree and was using it as an umbrella. And he was smoking something. Smoking a tiny, hand-rolled cigarette, and staring out at the lake. I stood in the rain and watched what he was watching. The rain made patterns on the lake water and the ripples it caused, the huge swarms of droplets that fell in certain areas, made unique, gorgeous designs. It was absolutely beautiful, this rain, and across the lake was the village. It was empty. Everybody was inside, I guessed, standing in doorways as I stood there with the ferryman, watching the monsoon.

I thought about Bangladesh. I mean, I thought about the word “Bangladesh” and about how, before coming there, I’d automatically associated that word with flooding. Like horrific flooding. The kind of flooding that they show on the news, where people are stranded on these little islands in the middle of a huge raging river. And I imagined the roofs across from me, in the village, with people standing on them. The corrugated iron would have to hold up women in bright shawls and children with swollen bellies, all of them surrounded by water.

The lake was wider than it had been earlier that day, and I was thinking about this conversation I’d had with Bell, before we came to Bangladesh, when we were deciding on what clothes to bring. ‘You know what’s sad?’ she had said. ‘Like, the village across the lake from my dad always floods because it’s built on, like, a floodplain. People shouldn’t even be living there at all, but the population is so dense that, like, they *have* to live there or whatever...’

With these words in the back of my mind, and the smell of the ferryman’s cigarette in my nose, I thought about a way that I might bridge the river and take every villager into Bell’s father’s home. I thought: He’s got enough space for

everyone. There seriously wouldn't be a problem housing them, and yeah ... he's got plenty of food, as well; he's got so much food that he could probably feed the entire village for several days. But how do I get all the villagers across the lake and into Bell's dad's house? We would have to break down the fences, which is a huge ordeal.

'Excuse me,' I said to the ferryman. He threw his cigarette onto the ground and stepped out from beneath the tree. A moment later, the rain stopped as suddenly as it had come. He walked directly to his ferry and motioned for me to get in. I was going to ask him about moving every villager across the lake, and how much that would cost. But now there was no need to ask, as the rain had stopped. So instead I said: 'I'd like to cross the lake.' I motioned that I'd like to get into his boat. 'Just me,' I went on. 'No other passengers. This is okay?'

He stared at me, shaking his head with incomprehension, and I got the feeling that he was having fun watching me mime like an idiot. I got into his watercraft jalopy and moved to the very front, at which point it occurred to me that I had no money to pay the man. I mean, it only cost two-taka, but I only had credit cards and a bag full of laundry. Anyway, I sat in this gentleman's boat and hoped that some act of God might make him forget the fare. I suspect he thought I would pull out my wallet, but I just smiled at him. Like, he threw his palm frond umbrella into the green water and made a "come here" motion – or I should say, a "now it's time to pay" motion. I turned away from him and looked at the opposite shore, pretending that the motion he'd made meant absolutely nothing to me. The lake water, I noticed, had gone from a crystalline green to an icky-murky green, and I had my feet up on a bench in front of me, so as not to soak my feet in shit water.

It seemed to work. Like, I ignored him and eventually I heard his bamboo pole sliding along the bottom of the ferry. I turned to see him pushing the pole into the shore, pushing us toward the village.

His teeth were bared and every muscle in his body was flexed. Then we were floating. The boat was bobbing back and forth and more shit water was pooling in the bottom, and I was so thankful. I mean, when we reached the opposite shore I figured I could find Opu and he could lend me some money to pay the ferryman. Then I wouldn't have to worry about screwing over the poor man, who was obviously working so hard for such a little wage.



When we arrived on the opposite shore, I stood up and threw my bag over my shoulder and prepared to disembark. The ferryman had hopped into the murky water with his bamboo pole and had pulled us into the muddy bank side. He saw me preparing to jump off the boat, into the mud, and said something to me. Like it wasn't angry or anything, but it was stern.

'Sorry?' I said. 'What is it?'

He made the international sign for 'pay up:' rubbing two fingers together as if playing a tiny fiddle. I answered by pulling out my pockets, showing off how empty they were. At which point the bamboo pole became less a staff and more a lance. Like he lifted it and pressed its brown and disgusting butt straight into my stomach.

'Whoa there,' I said, holding up my hands. 'No money. No taka. I go to village, yes? I get the Opu. He come down talk to you, give you taka.'

He said something in Bengali that I obviously couldn't understand.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I have no idea what you’re saying. But if you’ll allow me to step off the boat, onto the shore, I will happily scurry over to Opu and get your money.’ I pointed up the hill. ‘Opu,’ I said. ‘*O-pu*. This tall.’ I mimed his height. ‘Very talk-talk. Always talk-talk. Opu. *Opu*. O-pu.’ He pressed the pole harder into my stomach. ‘Okay,’ I said, still holding my hands in the air. ‘I totally get it. Like, if you were a cabby or something, I get it ... you’d be pissed of at me for skipping my fare. This is your weapon, and, like, I appreciate you not calling the cops. But I honestly just need to talk to Opu and then...’ The rod jabbed me and I sat down. ‘Alright,’ I said. ‘I’ll find you something. It’s only like two fucking cents, right?’

I unzipped my duffel bag and started rifling through it. But it was all shit, like, you really don’t pack anything expensive when you’re going on a little two week jaunt to Bangladesh. Plus I’d figured I would buy things there, so I’d packed only a few pairs of jeans, some t-shirts that were probably made in Bangladesh, and some toiletries. I pulled out the jeans. ‘What do you think about these?’ I asked, holding them up. ‘They’re from American Apparel. Pretty fucking expensive, actually, like ... here, try them.’ I held the jeans out for him and he reached out for them with one hand and with his other he set down the bamboo pole.

The jeans, in my opinion, were a bit too hot for such a climate. But yeah ... my opinion isn’t really the one that mattered. Like, I continued going through my bag in hopes of finding something that suited him better, and he slipped the jeans on under his sarong. The sarong dropped to the boat floor and he stood there before me. But the jeans were way too big for him. Like, he had a good six inches of room in them (which is fucked, if you think about it, because I’m not even close to fat. Or not by American standards.) And anyway, at that point I’d found something else that I thought might interest him. Like I dug to the bottom of my bag and grasped this

plastic case. It was out in the air before I could even assess what I was doing, and by then it was too late. I'd caught his interest.

He leaned down and tried to grab the plastic case, but I wouldn't let him do it. Or I wouldn't let him do it on his own, because he wouldn't have known how to put the head on the base. Which is to say that, inside this case, was the most amazing electric toothbrush in the world: the Oral B Deep Sweep 5000. This toothbrush, which Bell's mom gave me for my nineteenth birthday, has five settings: Clean, Extra Clean, Touch Up, Gum Care and Massage. It's pretty much like sticking a vibrator in your mouth – or what I imagine sticking a vibrator in your mouth might feel like – and, though that's an embarrassing thought, the tooth brushing experience is out of this world. Like your teeth have never felt as clean. Ever. And I wanted to put the brush straight back into my bag, but he had already leaned forward with outstretched hands.

'You do it like this,' I found myself saying. 'You take this head, which is removable, and put it on the base. Then you put the toothpaste on, but we don't have any toothpaste. Then you select which setting you want and hit this button.'

I turned the toothbrush on and felt its power in my hand. My teeth, I noticed, were a bit dirty, and I wanted to brush, but instead I handed him my Oral B.

It vibrated in his hand for a moment before falling into the dirty water in the boat. 'Oh fuck,' I said. The toothbrush flopped around the boat like a fish. 'At least the head is removable,' I said. 'You can take the shitty head off later, and put a clean one on.'

Anyway, he picked the brush up again and handed it right back to me. And so I put it away, extremely happy that he didn't like it. He looked toward my bag and I tried to search for another item, but all I could find were socks. Like it seriously felt like the whole bag was full of socks, because I love socks. (Honestly, if I were as rich

as Bell's dad I'd wear a new pair of socks everyday.) And I didn't want to give this guy my socks, even if he was interested, so I kept rummaging around.

He eventually grew bored and picked up his bamboo staff. He was still wearing my jeans and I probably should have just gotten out of the boat at this point, but for some reason I wanted to give him another gift. But yeah ... he chose the gift himself. Like he took that bamboo pole and pointed it at my shoes, which made no sense to me. They were really pretty beat up, but he seemed to like them. 'No,' I said. 'Dude they wouldn't fit you, anyway. I honestly have huge feet.'

Again, he pointed.

'No. You've got my jeans.'

And that's when shit got scary. Like, I moved to stand up and he took that bamboo pole and pressed it into my throat – like he pressed it straight into my soft spot in the middle of my clavicle, and it nearly made me choke. I smiled, because I always smile when I'm nervous, and he just sat there staring at me with these intense black eyes that were honestly impenetrable. I had no idea what he was thinking and couldn't imagine or even pretend to imagine what it was like to be him. But I tried. I tried to imagine what this fuckwit wanted to hear.

'Alright,' I said, 'you can have my shoes. But I want you to know that you're a thief. I'm not giving them to you. You're stealing them. So remember that every time you wear them, remember that you stole a tourist's shoes.'

I unlaced, because there really wasn't another choice; and the funny thing is they were just Chuck Taylor's. They cost me fifteen-dollars at an outlet mall and I needed a new pair, anyway. So I took them off and threw them over to his side of the boat. He dropped the bamboo pole and reached down for the shoes and I thought about tipping over his boat in anger, or about taking the pole and breaking it over his

head. But the truth is I was tired. I was honestly so tired and so hungry that I didn't care anymore. I didn't want to communicate with anyone or to see anyone or anything – nobody except Opu and Shapti.

I scampered up the lakeside with my bag and headed toward Opu's house: the house with the poster I had signed. And it started to rain again. I was in my socks and they were soaked through and I was hungry. I mean, I hadn't eaten anything all day. Not once. Not one thing. And as I walked through that empty village, food was suddenly all I could think about. I remember wondering if one of the many huts was a restaurant. But they all looked the same – corrugated iron roofs, corrugated iron walls – and I didn't know where I was going. Like I was trying to find Opu's house, and I remember hoping that his pregnant sister would be cooking, but I couldn't tell one shack apart from another. They were all like the shed of the family I'd seen that morning, the family who'd offered rice, and they were all lit up inside by what appeared to be gas lamps. Because it had grown dark with the cloud cover. The rain was coming down on top of me and the streets were turning into a large puddle and my socks were soaked. I hate wet socks, I thought. More than anything in the world I hate wet socks.

'I'm going to find Opu,' I said aloud. 'I'm going to find him and we're going to share a meal. We're going to talk. We'll arrange whatever needs to happen in order for Shapti to get her hands fixed, and then I'm going back to Los Angeles and I'm never leaving California again.' I must have wandered around, talking and laughing to myself, for over half an hour. Maybe more. I couldn't find Opu's house and I couldn't find Opu.

Eventually the sun went down and it continued raining and I started to shout, like, just for fun. I called out quietly at first: ‘Opu?’ The idea of food compelled me to speed up the manhunt. ‘Opu? Where ... is ... Opu?’ Eyes, of course, began to peer out through cracks in doors, and down the road an occasional child would pop outside to see what was happening. ‘Opu!’ I yelled. ‘Where are you, buddy?’ The children would always dart back inside and I was always left yelling, alone. ‘Opu! Where the fuck are you?’ And then I started to think that maybe he was mad at me. Like maybe he was upset that I had abandoned them earlier that day and he was just sitting inside, ignoring my pleas. ‘Opu?’ There were no humans, but there were dogs. There are always dogs in every neighborhood. And I hadn’t had to deal with them in the darkness before. Like they were always placid in the light, but now that it was turning into night they grew restless and daring. ‘Opu!’ I screamed at the top of my lungs. ‘Where are you?’

I was like a child waking up from a nightmare, and I don’t regret having acted that way. I mean, I doubt I’d have done the same if I wasn’t so tired and hungry, but I was famished, sleepy, wet and disgusting, and I didn’t want to leave that village until I’d arranged the following day’s schedule. Because why else am I still in this country? I thought. Why, if not for Shapti, am I here? I need to apologize to Opu and need to get Shapti’s hands fixed, then I can go.

That’s all I wanted to do. That’s it. I couldn’t wait to get home into my warm bed, but first I had to do my part. ‘Opu!’

Eventually the entire village came out at once to see what the commotion was all about. There were big puddles in the streets, and the dogs ran away, and the sun was now completely down. All the faces were staring at me, and I wanted so badly to cry – like I wanted so badly for one of them to be a friend, or a family member. But

they were all strangers. All of them. And they all stared at me and I stared at them and it rained on all of us. The only familiar face was the ferryman, and he was wearing my fucking shoes.

‘Did you bring me to the wrong village?’ I asked, accusingly. Like, I thought, maybe we crossed the lake and I wasn’t paying proper attention; maybe this is an entirely different place that looks the same as the other slum; maybe there are hundreds of them, thousands of these slums, and I’ll never find my way out of this labyrinth.

But yeah... it was the right village. I mean, I had wandered down the wrong street: a street parallel to the street that Opu lives on, and had been yelling at the wrong houses. Luckily (or perhaps unluckily?) one of the little gremlins who had encircled me that morning recognized me, and recognized that I had left the village with Opu. He must have run over to Opu’s house as soon as he saw me yelling in the rain, and he must have told Opu’s sister and her husband that I was back in town. Because, yeah ... like, I was standing there on that parallel street, with all of those people staring at me, and then suddenly I turned around and there she was, pregnant, with her husband by her side.

News, I noticed, was traveling all around me. The people were staring and they continued to stare. Whispers were passed from person to person. Then Opu’s sister was there, being pulled behind by this little boy, and I rushed toward her. She was so dark and frightened looking, and the townspeople gathered around us to hear what we were saying. ‘Thank God it’s you,’ I said, smiling and slightly exasperated. The rain was falling lightly now, but I was soaked and could only imagine how I looked. ‘I’ve been looking all over for Opu,’ I went on. ‘Like I’m super hungry, and I

feel super bad because I totally left him and Shapti on Gulshan Avenue. So I just wanted to...’

Her husband, or the man who I assumed to be her husband, started answering me in broken English. ‘Hallo,’ he said. ‘You are...? What we are...? How?’ He burst into Bengali and looked around for a translator, but there was no one there to interpret and the kids who had spoken those bits of English were now too shy to step forward.

‘Where...?’ I asked. ‘Opu? Where *Opu*?’

I was in the middle of a circle and all of the faces were either angry or confused. I tried to tune my ear to the conversation, which is to say that I attempted to understand this foreign language, but it was impossible. All I could understand was the occasional “yah” and the grunts of acquiescence. Plus I would occasionally hear the word ‘Shapti,’ and yeah ... they were talking about the little girl, like, she was a priority.

Some people were really upset that she was missing. I mean, like I began to understand that they were all missing, and I began to understand that a large proportion of the people who surrounded me were blaming me for this. Opu’s sister’s husband was leading the debate that I was literally in the middle of – and I got the impression that he was a good man, like I got the feeling that he didn’t blame me for loosing Opu and Shapti. He seemed to be defending me, because he kept resting his hand on my shoulder and barking out to the crowd in a voice that seemed full of hope and sincerity. I didn’t know what to do. I was totally clueless as to what was really being said, and it could have been that he was auctioning off my head or leading the charge to have me put on a stake.

His wife, Opu’s sister, stood beside him in her green and yellow shawl. Behind them the moon was humongous on the horizon, and I kept staring at it and

listening to the words that had no meaning. Her husband continued yelling, with his hand on my shoulder, and I looked away from the moon and watched the villagers nod their heads in agreement. Some were looking serious, with furrowed brows, and others were obvious detractors. I'd watch them raise their voice and demand something: perhaps justice, or my blood.

I stood amongst them, outside of understanding, and I didn't know what they wanted, but I remember thinking that I should probably leave the village. Because Los Angeles is the same way: what happens in the city at night is completely different than what happens during the day. At night there are hundreds of neighborhoods that you are better off avoiding, but during the day there are only a handful of places I'd feel worried about strolling into. And yeah ... I wanted to gently push my way through the crowd and to walk off and find a hotel. I could return the following morning, when Opu would hopefully be back. But there was no way that crowd was letting me out of that circle. Plus, like, I had run earlier in the day and it hadn't worked out. It had only called attention to myself, and made me look guiltier. So I just stood there, in that circle, watching Opu's brother-in-law defend me and watching the moon.

Then a woman's voice called out. Like, she screamed, bellowed, bawled, and again, I have no idea what was said, though I could tell it was important and could tell that it involved me. As she spoke I heard Shapti's name repeated in the crowd. She'd ramble through words that bounced all over the place. They'd say 'Shapti' again and again.

She was beautiful in her sorrow, in her suffering, and I could tell that she was not a fan of me. 'Shapti!' she yelled, pointing at me.

‘But she’s with the old woman!’ I said. ‘She’s with her grandmother, alright? She’s fine. You know, she’s with...’ It occurred to me that I hadn’t bothered to find out the old woman’s name. ‘...the old lady, okay? She’ll be alright. She’s with Opu and the old lady.’ The faces stared back at me, jaws dropped. ‘Does anybody here speak English?’ I asked. ‘Like, anyone? English? Hello?’

‘Hello!’ a voice called out.

‘Who was that?’ I asked.

I looked at all the faces looking at me. The men, with their thin frames and sinewy muscles, their hollow cheeks and beards, were all staring at me with different looks: inquisitiveness and hatred, disdain, awe, and confusion. The women stared at me with outright disgust, or with embarrassment.

‘What is your name?’ the voice said, but I couldn’t find the face. ‘Where is the Shapti?’ the voice asked.

‘I don’t know!’ I said. ‘I honestly have no idea! I’m just ... I’m sorry, but I’m fucking clueless. I just want ... um...’

A voice shouted over mine and we all turned as one. It was the ferryman, at the edge of the group, and he was yelling directly at me and wagging his finger. He said what I could only imagine were horrible, horrible things. True things, some of them, sure, but from a perspective that painted me in the worst possible light. And I wanted so badly to argue against him – to say that I was sorry for not having paid him early, but that I had forgotten that I didn’t have any money.

‘I wasn’t trying to rip you off,’ I said. ‘Listen, everybody, I tried my best. I wanted to take Shapti to the hospital, but I ran into a little trouble that was outside of my control, and now I seem to have lost the trio. Forgive me. Give it time. I’m sure they’ll come back soon...’

‘Sorry...’ the ferryman said, attempting to imitate me. ‘Like ... like like like... sorry. Sorry sorry sorry.’ The crowd laughed and he switched tones and languages. He pointed at me and began speaking with such virulence that I was sure I’d be hung or drowned in the lake. For a moment, Opu’s brother-in-law rebutted and the crowd turned to him. But soon then the ferryman was back in control of the crowd, yelling and pointing at me. When he finished speaking, the crowd turned to me as if it were my turn to defend myself.

‘That dude is full of shit,’ I said, pointing at the ferryman. ‘Honestly, don’t listen to him. I just came here to help with Shapti’s hand and to...’

‘Shapti!’ said the woman who had screamed at me before. ‘Shapti...’ She was crying, weeping what I figured was her daughter’s name.

‘Where is Shapti?’ said the other voice, the voice from the crowd.

I yelled: ‘I don’t fucking know! How the fuck am I supposed to know? I took them toward the hospital, because I just wanted to get her hands fixed. That’s it. That’s all. So why the fuck are you all ganging up on me? I’m not the bad guy here. I didn’t do anything wrong!’

When I finished yelling, all was silent for a moment. Then the shame set in. I mean, I felt like Bell’s dad must have felt in the moment after throwing the tumbler through the window. And so I tried to walk away, as he had done. Like I tried to step out of the circle, to break free, but the people wouldn’t budge. In fact, in trying to break out I soon found myself surround by more bodies. The circle grew smaller and I could feel hands grabbing me.

‘Please don’t do that,’ I remember saying. ‘Please stop.’

But there was no one I could direct my pleas to. There was no one person I could tell to stop, no person to talk to. It was all hands and faces and eyes and I hated all of them as they hated me.

‘Get the fuck off me!’ I yelled.

And when I yelled, they grabbed me more. There was nothing overtly violent or dangerous about it, at first. Like it could have been a big dance party, but yeah... it wasn't fun for me. And it wasn't fun when they hoisted me in the air. In fact, I was terrified. I was being carried, grabbed, groped, and we were moving toward the lake. I was certain that they were going to throw me in, certain that I was going to be drowned like a fucking rat, but no... they put me down, eventually, by throwing me into a puddle. And I no longer saw any women around, which is when I started to panic.



In the puddle, I scrambled to get free, and they stood me up again. A tire was placed over my head – like it was slipped over my head and it fell like an oversized hula-hoop toward my feet. Then another tire was slipped over my head, and another, and another. I was waist deep in tires and completely unable to move my legs or arms. I mean, my arms were being held to the side by the next tire that was slipped over my head. And they called loudly for what I assumed were more tires, but yeah ... like, there aren't a lot of cars in the village. In fact, I hadn't seen a single one. And I guess they were out of tires, because a large steel drum was rolled over. An oil drum, like something hobos might huddle around at night. It was placed over my head, enshrouding me in darkness.

‘What the fuck is going on?’ I yelled, my voice reverberating around me.

Nobody answered. Nobody was paying any attention to me.

I struggled, of course, as is natural when twenty men are forcing you into a makeshift stockade, but I have to admit that none of it felt real. Like, it didn’t seem to actually be happening to me. It didn’t seem like something like that *could* happen to me. The men with their faces in my face and the darkness of the village, the sound of the lake lapping up on the shore, and all that breathing – all existence outside my steel drum seemed make-believe.

I kept waiting to wake up, though I was obviously not sleeping.

I was alive. Fully alive.

‘I’m fucking Cotton Walters!’



Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the different shades of darkness beneath that steel drum. Down by my knees and feet I could see a lighter shade of black, and around me, in front of my face, was impenetrable darkness. On the roof of that tin drum rain poured down, once again, thrumming its own rhythm. And I had no idea what to do. Like, I couldn’t move my arms, because they were trapped at my side, and I couldn’t lift a leg or get a single foot atop one of the tires. It was impossible – impossible to sway the rink-a-dink prison, as well. So I just stood there, with the darkness all around me, and I didn’t regret the decisions I had made – the decision to have left Bell, and the decision to stay in Dhaka until Shapti’s hands were fixed – but in that moment, I would love to have been behind Bell (or any other beauty) in a big bathtub with lots of bubbles and some champagne by our side. Maybe a cigar or a big fat blunt.

But I figured, like, it's better to be in a steel drum, surrounded by enemies, than to pretend that you are in love with someone. That type of lie seems like the worst type of treachery, the worst kind of crime, and yeah ... I remember thinking how strange it is that to pretend that you feel some way that you definitely don't. This is my punishment, I thought. This is my punishment for lying.

I could feel the mud between my toes and it was steamy under the drum – like a sauna, yes, or something else rich people might pay for in order to feel healthier. And the sounds were like sounds from anywhere: the rainfall on steel and the murmur of voices in the distance, the occasional baby crying or man laughing, and the plop of random fish jumping in the water.

They men left me alone, mostly. I mean the tire and drum, I figured, were simply a means of keeping me from running off – not a means of hurting me, but of keeping me still. And I remember thinking about poverty: about how, in some ways, it makes you more inventive. Because you can't go down to Wal-Mart and buy the tools you need, so you have to build makeshift prisons, which work wonderfully; and you use your brain in different ways. Because in L.A., honestly, if I were captured by a band of hooligans, I'm sure they'd have just locked me to a pole of something – like with handcuffs purchased online, and yeah... I guess I was thinking about that and about all the television shows I've seen where a group of thugs chain up a hero. I was thinking about how the hero always gets out of the situation, in some ingenious fashion. But nothing was working for me, which made me wonder: Am I the hero? Or am I just some fuck up who wandered into the wrong village?

Again, I tried to tip the whole thing over. But that was hopeless. Like four tires and a steel drum are super heavy, and they weren't going anywhere, and neither was I. There was nothing to do about that

It's not really their fault, is it? I remember thinking. I mean, all evidence pretty much points to me being a complete fuck up. I can't *blame* them for locking me up: I was the one who was last seen with the missing people; I was the one who was different; I was the one who tried to get a free ride across the lake. At least they haven't hurt me or anything – like, they've just detained me for a little while, which is completely understandable, if you think about it from their perspective.

So I started to relax. Like I was on my feet, it was cold, it was raining, but I hadn't slept the night before, and I'd been walking around all day on an empty stomach, so it wasn't exactly difficult to lay my head against the steel drum and fall into a half-sleep. Bell was still on the forefront on my mind, because I felt guilty for having dumped her; but soon my thoughts started roaming in different direction: roaming over different horizons, different fences I have hopped, different pastures and people.

In that drum, in the darkness, with nothing to do but listen to the rain, the soft voices in the background, and my thoughts, I knew for certain that if somehow the veil could be rent and my mother could be there before me, smiling, I would instantly forgive her. And I wanted so badly to see her – to see the lady so that I could pardon her to her face. For she had wronged me, undoubtedly, and I wanted so badly to let her know that she was forgiven. We could be friends again. But yeah... With a blank slate in front of my eyes – a blank mother in my imagination— it was impossible to know if she was sorry for what she had done. And I believe that's when I completely drifted off. Because I remember having seen her, like ... the drum was not actually lifted, or I don't think it was, but I remember someone lifting it, and I remember she was there, smiling at me, and it was all so confusing and beautiful.

‘Cotton,’ she said. ‘When you were a child I used to rock you in my arms until neither one of us could move. We would fall asleep together, and dream together, and for a moment it was as if you were back in my womb, and I was in my mother’s womb, and my mother was in her mother’s womb, and everybody was safe and warm and happy. Cotton, believe me, I’m sorry for having left you. But when I brought you into this world, I began to panic: everything was ugly, and you were so beautiful to me, and I didn’t know what to do, so I started to slip, sweetheart. I slipped away, like you will, like you have. So Cotton, please, be careful. Everything you see is real and always will be and always has been...’

When opened my eyes, I was still in the drum. There was still light near my feet and voices in the background, but it had stopped raining and I had stopped dreaming. There were hands, though – several pairs of hands smacking the drum that surrounded me, and the noise was so loud and I was so tired and sore. But the hands smacked louder, and more hands joined them, and I remember wondering if my mom would be outside the drum like she had been a moment before. I thought I had a premonition. I thought I was some sort of prophet. I thought: Is it possible that I have seen what is about to occur?

Then I could smell gasoline, or what I thought was gasoline. (It’s honestly pretty difficult to trust your senses when you’re trapped in an oil drum.) But there was definitely a fire. I was sure of it. Because I could see, near my feet, illuminated stripes of orange light, light that was seeping through the spaces between the stacked tires, and I could hear the crackling of that fire and could smell that pungent petroleum and it was terrifying. Everything was real. And the drum was getting warmer, though I couldn’t understand why – like I wondered if they were going to cook me, or if my nervousness was why the drum was becoming so thick with that horrible heat.

Why would they want to cook me? I wondered. What was the purpose? What had I done? And I suppose I still believed that Opu would gallop up on a white fucking horse or something. Like I imagined that he'd gallop up and lash our foes with some sort of makeshift whip. Because that's what sidekick's do. That's what friends do.

But nothing like that happened. I mean, Opu had probably never even ridden a horse, let alone a white one, and he had no idea that I was in danger. Plus, I wasn't entirely certain that he would have cared. Because I'd abandoned him. He may have been mad at me, but yeah... I really needed him to show up. Like his presence would be enough, I thought. He and Shapti would prove my innocence, right?

Those hands hit the drum, until finally it was lifted. And this time I wasn't dreaming, this time my eyes were forced to adjust to the blaze in front of me. The village, I saw, had flooded in some areas, and it seemed like every man in town was standing in front of me in silhouette, a fire behind them. And in front of them was the figure of a beautiful woman.

'Bell,' I said aloud. 'What are you doing?'

It was the masterpiece.

She was still in her white shawl, and the sporadic light exaggerated her angular features. She was staring at me—all of them were staring at me—and she didn't move for the longest time. Like she just sat there with her pouting lips, with her perfect features flickering in the firelight. And I still wanted to run away with her, to run away with almost anybody, but that was obviously not an option.



I counted in my head: one, two, three, four, five, six. Six seconds passed in which she watched me in the light of that distant bonfire, and I was wondering if I looked different. Like, had I changed so much over the course of the day? Or was she going to save me by keeping her mouth shut? The idea of this –the idea that she might want to save me, despite the fact that I’d kissed her against her will— delighted me, and I smiled.

Which is when she turned to the man beside her: her father, I suppose. He was an extremely regal looking man, with a close-cropped beard and a clean white turban, and he leaned down while his daughter whispered into his ear.

‘Fuck,’ I said aloud.

And I watched him turn to the crowd that was surrounding him in a half-circle. He said a single word, a single, short sound, and then he grabbed his daughter’s hand and left me there with the mob. I wanted so badly to say something. To call out to him and his daughter and say: I am sorry. Please understand, I am an idiot. I don’t belong here. I didn’t mean to offend, I simply crossed a border without realizing it.

But I kept silent, because I didn’t trust my ability to communicate, and I didn’t trust my reasoning anymore, and didn’t trust my instincts: those feelings that had led me astray in the first place. And the men encircled me rather quickly. Each one of them scrawny, as individuals, but incredibly powerful as a whole. I cried out and started babbling about how everything that had happened was simply a series of individual blunders. ‘Can’t you understand that?’ I yelled. ‘Can’t you forgive me for such simple, base mistakes?’ And I remember thinking: No, they can’t. Everything that happens in this world happens because of a smaller series of happenings. There is no excuse for being such a fuck-up. I deserve whatever I have coming, and that’s the truth. ‘I don’t want to die in this village,’ I said to no one. ‘I’m too far from home.’

And I suppose I was feeling sorry for myself, which isn't an honorable trait. But it's hard when you realize you've been lying to yourself for so long, telling yourself that everything is going to be okay, everything will turn out alright, when it isn't necessarily true.



The men gathered around me and began to dump a canister of gasoline on the tires, and in my face, and over my head. This is the strangest feeling I've ever experienced: the burning sensation all over your body, as the liquid washes over cuts you didn't even know you had, like bathing in aftershave; and the realization that you are going to do, because why else would an angry mob douse you in petrol? I started to yell, and the liquid found its way into my mouth, and into my nose, and into my eyes. Everything was burning already and a match had not even been struck. 'I want to go home,' I cried. 'I want my mom.' And in that moment I would have traded lives with anybody: any of my assailants, any kid in any slum with a lifetime of hardships ahead of him. Because I was scared, yes. And because I was sick of myself: sick of finding myself in fucked up situations.

The mob laughed as they worked, and the ferryman stood beside me, smoking. Beyond them, the bonfire continued casting its orange and red light. And I thrashed around inside those tires, pressing hard against the rubber with my knees, attempting to rock the stack onto its side. But there was no way out. And the men were still cackling. I needed a miracle, which I did not believe I deserved. For I had been selfish, and I had hurt people, and I was not the man I believed myself to be: I was not

a hero or a good guy. I was just some fuckwit California who thought he was better than other's, and now I was to get what I had coming.

Or so I thought, as I closed my eyes and begged for forgiveness. 'What you are doing to my friend?' I heard, and I thought I was hallucinating. The orange light of the fire, the darkness of the night that surrounded us, I opened my eyes and Opu was screaming from the back of a rickshaw. He was standing up, with one hand on the shoulder of the old woman, who had Shapti in her lap, and he was screaming at the mob in Bengali.

Then someone struck a match and threw it toward me.

It landed atop the ring of tires.

'Cotton!' yelled Opu. 'Fire!'

I could not move my arms, could not move my legs, but could flap my flips; and I blew downward, with my chin against my chest; and the match blew out before it could ignite any gasoline.

Opu, like the hero that he was, raced from the rickshaw and continued screaming at the men. It was an incredibly powerful thing to watch, even though I couldn't understand what he was saying. Because the faces all around me stared at him. Realization dawned in some of their eyes: This is the missing boy. There is the missing child, Shapti, and her grandmother. Other men squinted and their eyes provided arguments. They were hungry to kill something, hungry to enact some punishment on another for the mere sake of it, but without the consensus of the mob they did not act. And Opu seemed to know what he was doing. He had the truth on his side, I suppose—the truth being that I had not kidnapped them, and that I had been trying to help—and he explained everything, though he made sure to do so from the pulpit of the tires themselves, standing on the bottom tire so that they would have to

go through him if they wanted to get to me. He spoke like a politician, swaying his constituents, and I stood on weak legs with the strong smell of gasoline in my nostrils. I would have collapsed at that point, but was still held up by those tires.

‘You are kissing one of the village girls?’ he suddenly asked, turning to me with a wrenched-up face.

I perked up and began to splutter: ‘Um...yes, but like...I wasn’t thinking very clearly at that point, and...’

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘Why you are kissing a village girl? They are not so good looking, like your pretty girlfriend. Better you are having your girlfriend, no? Or many of the girls in Hollywood are pretty, yes?’

‘I was in love,’ I said. ‘She was beautiful.’

‘How you are falling in love when she is not speaking in English? What you are talking about?’

‘Love is love,’ I said.

‘Is this love?’ he asked. ‘When you are feeling that someone is beautiful, it is love?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

He looked at the crowd, and then looked back at me, whispering, ‘I cannot tell them that love is love,’ he said. ‘Why you are kissing her, Cotton? This is not kind. This woman who is not your wife, you are kissing her, why?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I wish I hadn’t.’

‘I am having to tell them that you are a very crazy man,’ he said. ‘With maybe a broken head, no?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Broken brains,’ he said, tapping the side of his skull. ‘You are crazy.’

‘My brains are fine,’ I said. ‘I’m fine.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘You are not.’

‘Yes I am.’

‘*No*,’ said Opu. ‘You are having a very crazy head.’

He turned back to the men, and I suppose he began to explain to them his theory: his theory that I have a mental illness. He spoke with verve and obvious intelligence, and I tried to follow along, but was lost. Other thoughts overtook these words I couldn’t understand. Maybe I do have a problem, I thought. Maybe I am a bit off the rails, like, from the stress or something. The theory seemed possible, and I began to wonder how anybody in their right mind could get into the situation I had found myself within. Like the only other person I could think of, who could find themselves trapped in a ring of tires in a foreign country, was Indiana Jones, and he’s obviously fictional. It’s true, I thought. Either all of these people are insane, which is definitely a possibility, or I’m insane, which could also be true. Even though I feel perfectly healthy. Even though I feel completely sane. And it’s funny, like ... I don’t know if you’ve ever lost your mind, but the more you begin to question your sanity, the more you feel it slip away. And I thought, for a moment, about the decisions I had made throughout the day.

‘Opu,’ I said, interrupting his diatribe. Which was dumb, because he was defending me. ‘Do you really think I’m crazy?’

He held up a hand up to the men, asking for a moment to speak with me.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Do you *actually* think I’m crazy?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I am thinking this when you are thinking that the woman on the opposite shore is the mother of you, even though you are not knowing your mother. This is craziness, yes?’

‘Really?’

‘Cotton, they are still wanting to burn you. Please you are allowing me to be speaking with them. We can be talking later talk again about this craziness.’ He turned, once again, and began addressing the men in that bouncy language. Which impressed me. I mean it impressed me that someone his age, someone thirteen or fourteen years old, was able to speak with such confidence and force. I looked out at the men who surrounded us and watched them lap up every word that spilled from his lips. Even the ferryman was listening. And I wished that I could understand him, because I was proud of him. Proud that this stranger had befriended me, of all people, and that this stranger was now willing to risk his life in order to save mine.

Beyond the crowd of men, in the back of the rickshaw, sat Shapti and the old woman. Shapti was sleeping on her grandmother’s shoulder, and her hands were still hovering in front of her chest like a boxer. But now those hands were gloved—bandaged, wrapped in white—and it made me so happy to see that she had somehow been treated, so happy that I broke into a humongous smile right there amidst my captors. I would have wept if my attention hadn’t been distracted by the old woman.



She was staring right at me, with dark eyes sparkling in the firelight, and I remember wondering if she’d ever seen a mob before, a mob that was prepared to burn someone alive. I figured she had. Like, I figured she’d seen so many things that I could not

even imagine. Because she was old enough to have lived through the British occupation of India, the separation of India from Pakistan, and the Independence of Bangladesh. Whereas my grandmother, I remember thinking, has only lived through World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, Desert Storm, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She supported them all, but none of them (save two isolated incidents) were on American soil. And my mind drifted on and on like this. She stared at me and I stared at her and compared her to the old woman who had helped raise me. They're really not alike at all, I remember thinking, save to say they're both old and female and human.

'Okay Cotton,' Opu said. 'The men, they are saying that, because I am safe and because you have fixed the Shapti's hands, they are happy for you to be safe. But they do not want you to be staying in the village. They are not trusting you with the women, because you are a crazy man.'

The old woman, I noticed, was crawling out of the rickshaw.

'Sorry?' I said to Opu. 'What did you say?'

'You are free,' he said, 'because you are helping the Shapti.'

'Oh,' I said. 'But I didn't really help, did I?'

Opu smiled. 'No, I am doing many of the talking and walking. But you are also helping because you are paying the bill of the hospital.'

'I'd be happy to,' I said. 'Do you mean *now*, or tomorrow?'

'Already,' he said. 'You are helping so very much. No problem.'

'*What?* Did you spend the money I gave you for college? Was that enough for a whole surgery?'

'Yes,' said Opu. 'This is enough. But also I am spending much of the money that you are giving to the begging people who are on the street.' He was looking at

me, sheepishly. ‘Cotton,’ he said, blushing. ‘I am asking for your forgiveness, because I am never giving this money to those begging people. They are not deserving it. They are poor like me. So I put the money in my pocket.’

‘But you showed me your pockets,’ I said. ‘Didn’t I ask you to show me your pockets?’

‘Yes, but I am putting the money in my underwear pocket. Also I am spending this money to fix the hands of the Shapti.’ I didn’t know what to think, I mean, because Opu was helping me, though he’d also essentially stolen a wad of my cash. ‘No problem,’ he said, hopping off the tires.

He began to yell at the men, and with outstretched arms he pushed them away from the tires. I was thankful for this, as some of them were smoking and I was still obviously drenched in gasoline. Then I saw the old woman walk forward. She was pushing through the crowd, heading straight for me, and I was happy to see her – like, I just wished that I could remember her name, or that I could know something about the life that she had been through. But I was glad that she was alive, and glad that her granddaughter’s hands had been fixed. I was happy that I hadn’t completely let her down. I wondered if she had been through as much as I had experienced in one day. I was certain that she had been through so much more in her lifetime—so many more travesties—and I actually felt sorry for her, and sorry that I hadn’t thought about her history when I’d tried, earlier, to take Shapti from the village.

Anyway, I smiled at her and watched as she plucked a cigarette from the ferryman’s mouth. She took a huge drag, glowing the cherry, and then walked up to me and held the cigarette in front of my face, as if to burn me.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, and it was all so strange. She seemed possessed; and I watched her push that cigarette into the tire, attempting to set me

ablaze, and I began to freak out again. Like, I began to writhe in an attempt to free myself. But this was not the movies. The cigarette did not ignite the tires. Nothing happened.

Nothing happened until Opu noticed what was going on, and yanked her away from me. When he yanked, her frail and tiny hand let go of that cigarette and it fell to the ground. Nothing exploded. Nothing changed at first. But then, we all noticed at once that the cinder had lit the gas and the gas was everywhere. It only took a few seconds for the blaze to engulf me.

‘Opu!’ I remember yelling, and my arms were trapped at my sides. ‘Opu, help me!’ I let loose about a thousand fucking swear words, but I couldn’t do anything, like I couldn’t get out of the tires, and the old woman was right in front of me, cackling like my mother cackled in the chasing dream I’d had as a kid.

It happened fast, but here are the details:

Opu pulled back the old lady, so that she wouldn’t burn to death, and I was swearing in the middle of this fire, while the same men who were about to roast me a moment before suddenly came to my rescue. They pulled one flaming tire off of me, which released my arms from my side – and they did this without gloves and without hesitation. The second tire was pulled off by another group of me, and then I was able to leap out of the blaze, into another blaze that was burning on the ground. I rolled across the flames, toward a patch of dirt, and continued rolling while the men beat my face and arms and legs with their open palms. They smacked me while I screamed, and then I was picked up and carried to the lake. They threw me into the shit brown water, which was black in the moonlight, and I sank into the mud and continued rolling until I was completely submerged.

My body was in shock and I could feel my heart beating through my veins, palpitating as it does when you believe that you are going to die. Underwater, I broke into tears. And I don't know if you've ever cried underwater, but I used to do it a lot as a child. Like we used to have a pool at our apartment complex, and Dad and I would go there on a regular basis. This was when I was pretty young, and I would often dive to the bottom of the deep end and cry when I need to cry. Because no one can see your weakness when you're underwater. No one can see that you're upset.

Under the lake water, I screamed and cried and ran out of breath. I came up, gasped, and dove down again. The men, I knew, were watching me from the bank side, but I didn't care. I didn't care that the water was full of shit. All I wanted was to be swaddled in fresh sheets, or to rub my face into a clean pillow. But there was nothing like that around me. No, there was only the water and the muted voices on the bank side. I cried because I could.

'Cotton?' Opu eventually called from the lakeside. 'You are alright?'

I lay there, having floated to the surface, and tried to relax. In the distance the fire burned and Shapti sat in her crazy grandmother's arms, and I lay there and looked at the moon and imagined the moon was looking back at me.

'You are alright, friend?' Opu asked, again. 'You are not burning?'

I couldn't speak, or I didn't want to speak. Because I knew that if I opened my mouth I would burst into tears again. So I just floated there, on the lake water, and eventually two men pushed into the lake and grabbed me beneath the shoulders. They pulled me ashore, and left me on the bank side. And in that moment I remember not knowing if I should trust them, or if I should start throwing punches. But anyway, I was too weak to fight. And I was so happy when they left me there in the mud.

Opu cleared his throat. The men were standing beside him.

‘They still want you to leave,’ he said. ‘We still have to go.’

I looked at him, and he looked so fucking sincere and it was so refreshing.

‘You’re coming with me?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Of course.’

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Because you are my friend,’ he said. ‘I am your friend. We are friends, Cotton. We will go to Hollywood together and be very famous.’

‘Opu,’ I said. ‘You know that I can’t, like, promise that you’ll be able to visit me, right? Like you know that it’s not up to me or whatever. That like...’

‘Cotton,’ he said. ‘There is no problems. Someday, maybe, we go to Hollywood. No problem.’

‘Cool,’ I said, sitting up.

He smiled and offered a hand, and I took it. Like he helped me up, and I threw an arm over one of his shoulders and we started walking back toward the bon fire, where a crowd was milling about. Some were standing near the fire and others were standing near the burning tires, and I could not believe that the mood in the air had shifted so quickly. Like everyone had calmed down, as if a concert had just finished, and was milling about, perhaps talking about what they had just witnessed and participated in, or perhaps talking about what they were going to do the following day, or the following week, or how fucked up it is that their employer pays them peanuts while they’re children starve.

‘I’d like to change clothes,’ I said to Opu, as we walked past the crowd. ‘But my bag has disappeared. Do you know where it is?’

‘Cotton, I am just arriving and am seeing you in the circle of the automobile tires. I am not knowing where is you’re bag.’

‘Well could you ask around for me?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘We are needing to be leaving now. But if you want the clean clothes you can have some from me. They were my father’s clothes. There are many extras for when I am growing older.’

‘But my passport’s in the bag,’ I said. ‘I have to get home somehow.’

‘No problems,’ he said. ‘First we are getting you drying and into the fresh clothes. Then we are thinking about the passports.’

‘Alright,’ I said. ‘And you know a nice hotel where I can stay?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Are you wanting to be saying goodbye to Shapti? Maybe you are wanting to see her hands?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘As long as her hands are fixed, it’s fine. I don’t need to see her, like ... I’m just glad that she’s going to be alright.’

‘Yes, she is going to be good. The doctor he is operating on both of the Shapti’s hands. Now they are much better. And if she takes her medicine, the doctor says that they will heal. Next few days I take her to get the bandages reapplied.’ We were slowly meandering toward his home, and all of those faces were becoming memories and only memories. ‘Her hand is healing,’ said Opu. ‘The Shapti will be whole again.’

‘Cool,’ I said. ‘That’s really good news.’

‘They are saying that the Shapti is the very lucky child, because she is not having the rotting go to her bones. Only it is rotting her skin. But the skin it is healing.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yes,’ said Opu. ‘But Cotton ... at the hospital, it is very painful to watch. They are taking the Shapti’s hands and they are ripping the fingers, one by one, even

though this is ripping the very many puss scabs. They are needing to separate these fingers. That way she is not having them growing together.'

'Are you serious?'

'Why am I going to be lying about this? Of course I am serious.'

'That's crazy,' I said.

'No,' said Opu. 'That is very smart, not crazy. She is going now to have her hands, they are growing back.'

'You sound really interested,' I said. 'Maybe you should be a doctor instead of a businessman.'

'No. If I am a businessman, I am buying many doctors to be helping many people. Also I am being very rich, which is the best thing you can be.'

I smiled and followed him into the house that we'd stepped into so many hours before. It was lit by a gas lamp and his sister was there with her husband. They were talking in low voices, and when we entered they looked at us, and nodded. It was as if they had forgotten that, moments before, I had been on fire. And so, I nodded back and smiled, attempting to forget what I had just been through.

In the back of the shack was the poster that I had singed, and I could see, on the dirt floor beneath our feet, hundreds of footprints, and my big shoe prints, which would now be the same shoeprints as the ferryman.

'We will get you my father's clothes,' said Opu. 'Because they are fitting you very well.' He pointed to a corner. 'You can be changing into my father's clothes over there. No problem. We are drawing the curtain.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Thank you.'

'This is nothing,' said Opu. 'Thank you for fixing the Shapti's hands and for being the friend of Opu. You are a very good man, Cotton. Please you are believing

me when I say this, because I am thinking that you are not knowing. But you are good. Please believe me.'

'Okay,' I said, smiling.

And I took the clothes he offered me and stepped into the corner, drawing a curtain behind me. Against the corrugated iron wall, while I changed into the sarong and button-up shirt of his dead father, it was easy to imagine myself as an adopted brother of Opu's family. Or it was nice to imagine this – to imagine that his sister was my sister, and that the baby in her stomach would soon be my new niece or nephew. I missed my family, of course, but it was warm in that hut and I was filled with warm thoughts of befriending families all over the world and having them visit me in Hollywood as I would visit their homes abroad.

'You are finished?' Opu called.

I stepped out, dressed as if in costume, and Opu broke into a smile. 'Yes!' he said. 'You are looking very good, my friend. Very Bangladeshi. We are needing to give you the Bangla name. What is a good Bangla name for you?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Mohammad?'

'Yes!' said Opu. 'That is good. But also I am thinking that maybe we are calling you Chanchai.'

'Chanchai?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It is meaning someone who is never able to sit still, but must always be active.'

'Is that how you'd describe me?'

Opu laughed. 'I am calling you Chanchai,' he said. 'This is the perfect name. Chanchai.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Whatever you want.'

‘Now we are taking you to a sleeping palace, yes?’

‘A hotel?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘There are many hotels not so very far from here. There you are sleeping a very nice time, all the night, with no one to disturb you.’ As Opu spoke about the hotel, I listened. But I also envisioned that the hotel he was speaking about was a pigsty –like an absolute shit hole—which he might mistakenly think of as nice, since almost anything would be better than sleeping in a tin shack. ‘It is very nice,’ he said. ‘Many four star qualities.’

‘Does it have clean sheets? And a shower?’

‘Of course,’ he answered. ‘Clean sheets, shower, very nice place. All of the international tourists, when they are coming to Dhaka for the businesses, they are staying at this hotel.’

‘That sounds amazing.’

‘It is fucking amazing,’ he said, smiling.

I smiled back.

‘We are leaving?’ he asked.

And I stood there, in the light of that gas lamp, in the clothes of his father, staring at my little friend. His skin looked like bronze in the orange light, and it was smooth, like the handrails at train depots. ‘Do you have an address or something?’ I asked. ‘Like, if I want to write to you, how do I reach you?’

‘Email,’ he said.

‘You have email?’

For some reason I figured that Opu would never have even touched a computer. Like computers seemed so incongruous with the setting that we were in.

‘Of course,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Rad.’

‘You are writing your email address,’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Please – that would be great.’

‘On the poster,’ he said, ‘below where you are signing the name of the Jack Dawson. That way I am never losing the contact address.’

‘Really? Won’t that make the poster lose its value?’

‘Well...’ he smiled. ‘Before the village kids, they are thinking that maybe you are Mr. Hollywood from the *Titanic* movie. But now they are thinking that you are from the lunatic’s place of residence. So they are maybe not valuing the poster so much...’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘Like...’

‘No sorry,’ said Opu. ‘Never sorry, please. Better if you are leaving your email address, okay? Please be writing it on the poster – then I will never be losing it.’

‘Alright,’ I said, and Opu reached down toward the dirt floor and found the pen. He handed it to me, and I scribbled my real name (as opposed to the actor’s) and wrote down my email address and my postal address and my telephone number.

I also wrote a little note: *To my Bangladeshi brother, Opu, big thanks.*

‘You are ready now?’ Opu asked.

‘Yeah,’ I said, turning around. ‘I’m ready.’

‘You are hungry?’ he asked.

‘Yes!’ I said. ‘So hungry. But I can get food at the hotel, right? I mean, like, it looks like your sister is already lying down and...’

‘No problem,’ said Opu. ‘I am cooking for you.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Thank you. But let’s get out of here, alright? I don’t want to get dropped in another set of tires because I didn’t leave fast enough.’

‘Never is a problem,’ said Opu. ‘We are...’

‘Yeah I know,’ I interrupted. ‘Never is a problem until you're surrounded by fucking flames. It’s cool, Opu. Trust me. We’ll walk to the hotel, I’ll get some food, I’ll go to bed. It’s perfect – trust me.’

‘Okay,’ said Opu. ‘Thank you, friend.’

‘For what?’

‘For being my friend.’

‘It’s my pleasure,’ I said. ‘Really, I’d be dead without you.’



We stepped into the clear night sky. The stars were hanging overhead and the moon was large over the lake. The crowd of villagers, as far as I could see, had all gone to bed, and Opu walked toward the lakeside and I followed him. We were walking in the opposite direction of how I had first walked into the village, which is to say that we were walking toward the family I had stopped in on – the family who had offered me rice, shelter and company. As we walked, however, I could not longer tell which hut belonged to that man and wife and newborn, and which hut belonged to other families. All was dark and the lake was peaceful and it felt like I had succeeded. Like in some small way it felt as though I had come to Bangladesh for a reason, as if I had accomplished some goal, even though it had almost cost me my life.

‘You are having a good trip here in Dhaka?’ asked Opu, as if reading my mind. And I had to tell him the truth. ‘Not really,’ I said. ‘I mean, I don’t know...?’

What is a good trip? Like is a good trip a vacation that's all relaxing – all white sand beaches and fat tourists trying to bargain shitty souvenirs from poor locals? Because that sounds awful, like that sounds pretty much like Los Angeles, except the locals aren't as poor and the souvenirs are twice as shitty. I'd prefer this, I guess – even if I almost got killed.'

'What is *this*?' asked Opu. 'What is this that you prefer?'

'This,' I said, motioning at him at me. 'This is good, like, walking in the middle of the night with a new friend who you'll probably never see again, and who is, like, different from you, but...'

'You think we are different?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Don't you?'

Opu walked for a moment in silence. The moonlight was reflecting bottle tops and I wasn't sure if I'd offended him or confused him. 'Maybe yes, we are different,' said Opu. 'Maybe we are wearing different skins and also wearing different clothing and many times thinking very different about many things. But I am thinking also we are having much in similarities. We are both wanting to be friends with each other. We are both wanting to help the Shapti. Both of us, we are liking to eat the good food and to talk and laugh.'

'Well I didn't exactly *want* to be friends with you,' I joked. 'We just sort of met, right? Like you just sort of started following me around and I couldn't exactly get rid of you.'

'Sorry?'

'I mean, now we're friends,' I said. 'Like how could we not be friends, right?'

'Why you are always saying these things?'

'What things?'

‘Always you are saying that you are loving this place, you are hating this place. Loving, hating. Always changing. Why you are not calming down and enjoying that we have been making a new friendship? This is good, no?’

‘I’m just being honest,’ I said. ‘Like to tell you the truth, your country is kind of shit. Not just because it’s poor, but because you’re people just tried to light me on fire.’

‘They are believing that you are the thief of the Shapti! She is the very favorite daughter of the very important man of the village, so they are wanting to teach you a lesson. This is normal, no?’

‘Nothing here is normal to me,’ I said. ‘Everything’s fucked.’

‘But beautiful?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Just fucked. Like this has got to be one of the most fucked up country’s on Earth. It’s unbelievable how you people live, seriously. If you...’

‘That is not all of Bangladesh,’ said Opu. ‘Also that is not *always* the Bangladesh. We are the land of many kings before the English are coming, and we are having many plants and fruit trees and also fishing. Also, if you are really thinking, you are knowing that there are the very many British colonization’s coming to...’

‘Just one,’ I said, holding up a finger. ‘Just one colonization, Opu. And you can’t keep blaming all your problems on the English. Like it’s not colonization’s fault that your country is so shit. It’s over. It’s been over for a few decades now. Accept that and move on, you know?’

‘You are the very stupid man right now,’ he said. ‘Do you know that we are knowing that, of course, the colonization it is over. We are moving on into the civil war after the colonization. Then we are having many times political unresting, because this is a very new country. This is how my father is dying, and also many

people. They are dying because they are wanting their baby country to be a better country. Not to be 'shit,' like you are calling it. So please, before you are telling me how horrible my Bangladesh is, be thinking. Because also it is a very beautiful country with the very many beautiful people that I am loving. It is my home country, Cotton. And you are...'

'Then why do you want to go to America so bad if it's so fucking beautiful? Why do you want to go to Hollywood?'

'Because you are rich!' he screamed. 'I want to be rich, too. Isn't that *good* to be rich? I want to be rich so that I am making my Bangladesh very rich. Why you are so mean to me now? Why you are talking like this? I am your friend.'

'We're not friends,' I said. 'We just met. You're just some kid who started following me around and now you won't fuck off.'

'You do not mean this, Cotton. We are the friends.'

'Friends don't steal from each other, alright? And friends don't let other friends get lit on fire by old women.'

'*What?* I am sorry if I am stealing the money from you, Cotton. But I am thinking you are not knowing the way that is the city of Dhaka. If you are giving all of your money to the beggar, you are having no money. This is the Bangladesh, Cotton. This is not the Hollywood, USA. There are many many...'

'Exactly,' I said. 'We're different.'

We walked for a second in silence.

Then Opu stopped. 'I am thinking that maybe you are wanting to be alone,' he said, as I continued walking. 'Maybe you are never wanting to see me again?' He called ahead to me. 'So okay – no problem. I am saying good bye to you now, Cotton.'

The hotel, it is straight forward and you are turning left at the very big street. You are seeing this hotel, okay? Good-bye, friend! I am loving you.'

I continued walking, which I regret now more than anything I have ever done in my life. Like, the moon was up and the night was clear and I guess I was just super upset about all that I'd been through. Or maybe I was just tired and hungry, you know? But now, I wish I could say sorry. I wish I could look Opu in the face at this very moment and tell him how much I love him, and am thankful for him, and how sorry that I am for having walked away like a jerk. Because that's what I did. I mean, I'm not proud of it, but I continued walking. And the lakeside was peaceful and I wanted to sink into it and die amongst the muck, because that is what I felt like: shit, muck, trash. I walked toward the street that Opu had told me to go to and I sort-of cursed him as I had cursed Bell that morning. I mean I told myself, over and over again, that Opu was just a poor kid from a fucking slum, with no sense, who was using me simply to advance himself. But I knew even then that I was the one who full of shit. And at the far end of the lake, when it started to sharply bend, I continued forward, toward a streetlight, and found the road.



It was a lot like Gulshan Avenue, except there seemed to be more lights and several of the buildings had large windows instead of roller doors. The street itself was empty, like there were only a few guys, I noticed, sleeping in their rickshaws on the side of the road, but they hardly felt real. I mean, nothing felt real, and the only thing I could think about was a soft bed and a warm meal and warm shower. I would have loved to go home at that moment, but a hotel was close enough; and I walked as quickly as I

could, praying that I was heading in the right direction, and thinking basically nothing.

My legs felt so heavy, but I continued toward what looked like a hotel. In the streetlight ahead, I saw dogs—a pack of them, maybe ten or twelve—and they were all roughly the same size. Like the size of a coyote, or a collie. And I could see them circling around each other, occasionally bullying one another, and I regretted having been such a dick to Opu. Because he didn't deserve it, and because I am selfish: which is to say that Opu would have known what to do. He would have known how to handle the dogs. But I walked forward, with my eyes closed, and prayed that they wouldn't notice me. Which was obviously ridiculous. I mean, they must have noticed me as soon as I stepped into the streetlight, and I could hear the patter of their paws on the cement and the onset of growls deep in their throats. But I walked because I didn't know what else to do. They were there all around me, and my heart rose into my throat. My veins seemed to be outside of my skin. Like I could feel each pulse, every breath I took, and could feel the warm night air and the cement beneath my bare feet.

When one of them barked, I opened my eyes and turned to see a smallish dog with barred teeth growling right in front of me. The hair on his neck was raised and he was in a crouching position, as if prepared to strike. I didn't know what to do. Like we don't have street dogs in Los Angeles. We have guard dogs, in junkyards and at train stations, and I've dealt with them—I mean, I've hopped the wrong fence before and they've nearly torn me to pieces. But this was a pack of fucking rabies staring me in the eyes. No shit. And I was sure the leader was going to pounce, but he didn't. The dog behind me pounced, instead. He bit right into the back of my fucking leg and I freaked out and started running. Which again, may have been the dumbest thing I

could have done. But anyway, I ran and there were dogs all around my legs, nipping at my ankles, sinking their teeth into my knees.

I punched one dog on the snout, freeing myself, and they chased me to the glass doors of a fine looking establishment: the Gulshan Hotel. I swung open those doors, which were so much like the doors at the place where I used to work, and inside it was well lit. The dogs barked behind the glass as I strolled in huffing and puffing.

They had made me bleed, I realized. And I stood in the lobby of that fancy hotel and inspected my calves and knees. There were several decent sized bites on my legs, and several scratches from their claws, but I was so tired and hungry, so over it, that I straightened up and ignored the blood as I ignored everything: the attack, the fact that I'd abandoned Opu, and the ring of fire I'd been encircled within. All I wanted at that point was to be alone in a warm room. That would be home. That would be enough to recharge me for the next day. And I walked over those cold, marble tiles with my sarong half falling off and blood running down my ankle. I approached the front desk, where a concierge was standing. He was the only other person in the lobby: an older gentleman in a navy blue uniform with gold buttons. He was clean-shaven, with a large nose and a sour face.

'Hi,' I said.

I could see myself in the front desk, which was shiny black like a grand piano. My hair was singed on one side and completely frazzled; and my eyes were drooping, my face was hanging. Luckily he could not see my bleeding leg.

'Hello,' he said. He was fiddling with a set of keys and did not look up at me. So I waited. Because I wanted to make a good impression and everything. I wanted to make sure I got a room, even if I looked dangerous.

‘Excuse me,’ I finally said. ‘I’d like a single room. Just for one night.’

‘No room available,’ he said, and he continued to fiddle with the little key chain.

‘I’ll take any room. A single, a double, a suite ... I honestly don’t care as long as it has a shower.’

He glanced up at me, smiled, and then looked back down at his keychain. ‘There are no rooms,’ he said. ‘Our sincerest apologies. You can find another room at another hotel.’

I tried to see why, exactly, this keychain fascinated him, but his hands were enveloping it. ‘Are you certain?’ I asked again.

‘Yes,’ he said, without looking up.

Above me was a chandelier and above the chandelier I imagined there was a room, with a bed and clean sheets. ‘When will the next room be available?’ I asked. ‘Is anyone checking out in the next hour or so?’

He ignored me.

‘Do you mind if I sleep in your lobby?’

Again, no answer.

‘Dude!’ I yelled. ‘Will you stop playing with that fucking keychain? I just want a fucking answer. Where can I sleep? I’m tired, I’m hungry, I’m...’

‘Sir,’ he said. ‘The next available room is at checkout, which is at ten o’clock this morning. Until then I cannot help you.’

‘What time is it now?’ I asked. But again he’d turned to his keychain. ‘Hey!’ I screamed. ‘What ... time ... is ... it ... now?’

Without looking up, he pointed over his shoulder. There was a massive clock on the wall, which I hadn’t noticed, and it was late. Like it was already 1:30 am, but

waiting until ten was obviously not an option. I was ready to pass out on my feet and was obviously having trouble doing even the most mundane tasks, like noticing clocks or being nice to good friends. And I wanted a restaurant with a big booth and endless cups of warm coffee, pancakes, a fat waitress who calls me “hun,” and some scrambled eggs and bacon. I wanted a fucking room.

‘There is another hotel on Gulshan Avenue,’ he said. ‘But this is not so very close. So you should take a taxi.’

‘Okay...?’ I said, hopefully.

He was still staring at his keychain, and I realized that there was some sort of game on it. Like a game for little kids, the kind where you try to maneuver a marble into a slot. ‘Would you like me to call you a taxi?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I would love that.’

‘Alright,’ he said. ‘Please hold on a moment.’

I turned around and looked toward the door. When I turned back around, he was still playing with his keychain, and I thought that he just wanted to have one more try, which makes sense to me. I mean, I’ve been addicted to games before and they’ll drive you crazy until you beat them.

He stood there for a minute straight while I waited for him to call a cab. Eventually I cleared my throat. Which did nothing. ‘Are you going to call it?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said, without looking up. ‘I will call them now.’

‘Right now?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I will call them right now.’

I reached for my wallet, thinking about the cab and hoping that they take credit cards because all I had was credit cards. But, like, when I reached for my wallet, it wasn’t there. Because I didn’t have pockets. I was in Opu’s dad’s clothes

and my wet jeans, I realized, were on the floor of Opu's house. With my wallet in them.

'Fuck,' I said aloud, and the concierge looked up. 'I don't have my wallet. It's not with me. So I don't have money. So I can't ... you've got to be ... this has got to be the worst fucking day of my life. I mean, *what the fuck?* This is insane...'

At that point I was done for. I couldn't bother to explain to him that I usually have money, but that I didn't have money at that moment, and that I would need the cab driver to trust me, and to drive me to Opu's village, which, I realized, wasn't even an option, because you pretty much *have* to walk to Opu's village, and because they might beat me up if they found me in Opu's village, and yeah...

Beyond tears, beyond caring about anything anymore, I turned around and walked directly through the glass doors.

The dogs were waiting for me, sniffing each other's asses in the streetlights outside the hotel. Their heads perked up as I came outside.

'Fuck you,' I said to them.

They were all cancerous and disgusting, and it's strange, but for a moment, while I was standing there in front of those doors, I felt like I was at home – like I felt as if I were working at the hotel in Glendale, as if the dogs were the hotel clients. And I felt as if I had just smoked a massive joint, like I usually do before work.

The dogs approached, and I tried to kick one as hard as I could. I mean I honestly wanted to catch it under the jaw and send that thing flying through the air. But it was fast—it dodged my kick—and they all barked before running off.

It's not just Bangladesh, I remember thinking. It's everything. I couldn't go back to the village to retrieve my wallet, and I couldn't handle go to Bell's house, and I couldn't go the airport because I didn't have my passport. So I walked, as I had

walked throughout the day. And I believe that with the sunrise I would find good fortune. Today, I told myself, was just a bad day. Tomorrow will be better.

More street dogs approached me, and growled, and I growled back with such ferocity that they scampered away. Their cancers were disgusting, and the streets felt scary and empty. Everything was turning into an oil painting, but still I walked. And the houses, abandoned, looked as though they were underwater. How do they stand? I wondered. The big shop front windows with clean clothes inside – I wanted in. Anywhere, I'd have gone anywhere that wasn't there in the street of Dhaka. Give me the streets of Los Angeles, I thought. Give me the gutters of San Francisco. I just want to be some place that isn't this place, in a body that isn't my own.



The call to prayer was ringing from the mosque and dawn smelled like a homeless person. I mean everything smelled like a homeless person, including myself, and I opened my eyes to find my bare feet stretched out in front of me. I was sitting on the cold cement and my feet were caked in mud, the hair on my legs was matted in dry blood, and my entire body ached.

Plus there was a head resting on my shoulder – black hair half-covered in a dirty shawl that smelled like rotting flesh: the head of the leper lady. How the fuck did I end up here? I wondered. How did this happen, and who is this? She was using my shoulder as a pillow, and we were both leaning against a shop door. I had been using her as a pillow, too, I realized. My cheeks had been resting against her head when I woke up. How disgusting, I thought. How horrible.

But she was warm, undoubtedly, and I could tell that she was happy. I mean, she was breathing so steadily, so comfortably, and we were pressed into each in a way that is usually reserved for family members, lovers, and close friends. It was beautiful, and disgusting, and we were both happy to be right there in that moment.

Yes I loved the moment. I understood the moment. Like there was a bus that drove past, two toned, and I could have thrown myself in front of it – not because my life is horrible, no. I am one of the luckiest people I have ever met. Blessed with decent looks, nice teeth, a kind father. But still, had I wanted to, I could have thrown myself in front of that bus, or thrown myself off a random rooftop, or drown myself in the Gulshan Lake like a poet. But I didn't want to. That was the simple truth. I sat, with my back to the shop door, and that moment may have been the lowest low or the highest high of my life, but either way I was happy to be alive, I mean ... not that there is anything wrong with suicide. We have no idea what awaits us in death. Perhaps its more blissful than we could ever imagine. Perhaps life is torture. Perhaps it's stupid to struggle against anything. I don't know and I don't really care. Or I didn't care in that moment. Like, in that moment, life was good enough, even if it was shit.

The leper lady's stumpy arm fell into my lap and I took it in my hand and held onto it. It was rougher than I'd expected, like the palm of a worker, and I clenched it, as you would with a sister or friend. Her head did not lift, her legs did not move, and I rested my cheek against her and closed my eyes.

It must have been dawn when the noise of the streets woke me up again, and I rested with her until the sun rose over the horizon and bathed Gulshan Avenue in orange light. The woman were passing in front of us in groups of two and threes, beautiful in their multicolored shawls with their multifaceted emotions, and we

watched them ignore us. We watched them talk and laugh amongst themselves. And I was embarrassed at first, that's true. Because I knew I was disgusting: I knew I had acted disgustingly and would do so again. But in the end, I didn't care. Like I was no more disgusting than anyone else there, no more filthy than a king, and so I sat. We watched them. I didn't move a muscle, but relaxed on the sidewalk and allowed the occasional glance to fall upon me. The lady, my friend, eventually lifted her head from my shoulder, and I continued to hold her arm. We continued to sit side by side, watching them as they watched us.

And I looked for my masterpiece, of course. The masterpiece who had condemned me to death – or who had paid me back for the shame I had caused her. But I couldn't find her, though I did see my cousins, the trio. They were actually the only one's who stopped and looked at us. We were not begging, but we looked like beggars, and the little one, in the middle, spoke to us. The older one tugged at her, embarrassed, and the youngest looked disturbed by my face and smile.

My friend, the leper, answered the little girl, and the trio burst into laughter.

The little one said something, once again, and then she waved and walked away. The oldest one followed, but the middle child stayed behind for a second. She stared straight at me, so confused, and then unwrapped something that was hidden in her shawl, in a little pouch. It was a bill, which she uncrumpled, slowly, and slipped atop my legs. It was the sweetest act of charity I had received, and I thanked her with a grin and nodded.

'What do we do now?' I asked my new friend, as the girl walked away. 'Like, do we sit here all day? Do you mind me hanging around like this?'

'Yes,' she suddenly answered. And it startled me so much, like, I had not expected her to answer back –I was simply talking to myself—and now here she was

talking in English and looking at me with that scared and horrible face, smiling with cracked lips. 'I do mind,' she went on. 'You're bad luck.'

'You speak English? Like, this whole time you were able to talk? What the fuck?'

'Yes, this whole time.'

Her eyes held so much pain.

'I didn't know,' I said. 'Otherwise I would have spoken to you much more.'

'But I didn't want you to speak to me,' she said.

'Really?'

'You can speak with me, but do not speak to me.'

'What?'

She smiled wider, and I saw her rotting teeth and smelled her bloody breath and it was not a dream.

'Where did you learn English?'

'Same place everybody learns English. From the television.'

'Really?'

'Yes always it is playing in the house I am working in before.'

'*Really?*'

'Yes,' she said. 'But now this.' She motioned to her face.

'Oh,' I said, and I wanted to say how sorry I was, but somehow it seemed disrespectful. So I said: 'Do you want this?' and I held out the bill that the girl had given us. 'Because I think I can...'

'You keep it,' she said. 'You are the one who is needing it.'

'It's true,' I said, smiling. 'But...'

'Will you take me to the water? I'm not able to walk very far on my own.'

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Anything you want.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Koop balo.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Koop balo,’ she said. ‘It is a Bangladeshi thank you.’

‘Koop balo,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’



She was like a child in my arms, and I was afraid of dropping her, so I held on tight and I tried to be delicate, and she peered forward, as if navigating a ship. She didn’t smile or anything, but I could tell she was happy to have someone holding her.

‘Am I hurting you?’ I asked, as we crossed Gulshan Avenue and headed toward the lake. ‘Or is this okay?’

‘I am comfortable,’ she said. ‘I hope that I am not bothering you too much.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘But I was wondering...’ She looked up at me and her eyes narrowed. ‘How did I end up sleeping beside you? Like, the last thing I remember I was searching for a patch of sidewalk, and then I woke up and you were there.’

‘You were sleeping on the street,’ she said, ‘and I was moving toward my usual place, in front of the old newspaper shop. I saw you. You looked familiar.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘You remember that...’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘I know you. And so I moved close to you, last night, to see that you were still breathing.’ She waited for a truck to pass. ‘And you opened your eyes. You thought I was your mother.’

‘What?’

‘Yes.’

‘You?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘and you grabbed me and pulled me close to you. I was scared, because you looked very sick. But you just wanted to hold me. You held onto me, as if I am your mother, and then you fell asleep. I fell asleep next you. That’s all.’

‘I don’t remember any of that,’ I said, and we turned onto the road that leads to Bell’s dad’s house. ‘That’s so weird that I thought you were my mom.’

‘You were not well,’ she said. ‘Now you are looking much better than you were looking yesterday.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Or ... um ... *koop balo*.’

She smiled her rot mouth grin.

‘It’s nice that we can talk,’ I said. ‘I didn’t know that you knew English so well.’

‘Yes. You are the first person I am speaking with in a very long time – in *any* language. And you are the first person who has touched my skin since I got the disease. It is nice to have a human touch. You do not know how much you are missing it, until it goes away.’

‘Why didn’t you get treatment?’ I asked. ‘Isn’t it curable?’

‘It is much too explain,’ she said. ‘One day everything was fine, the next day everything you could imagine happening was happening to me.’

‘Totally,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘But thank you for your help. Thank you very much.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It’s nothing. It’s honestly not that big of a deal. Like I probably already have rabies and a thousand other diseases, so...’

‘Leprosy is not transmittable. You will be fine.’

‘I know,’ I said, and we walked past the compound. The gates were closed and I was so happy to be outside of them. So happy to be in the streets, barefoot, in the early morning. Bell, I knew, was better off without me. Her father was undoubtedly happy to have me out of the house, and I was happy to have my new friend in my arms, and to be walking toward the lake, which was placid and inviting in the early morning light.

Across the lake I could see the village, and the black tires strewn about, the tipped over oil drum, the remnants of a horrible night. There were people, too, scurrying about and preparing for another day at work. But I didn’t see Opu. And I wanted so badly to see him, like, as we dropped down the bank side, toward the water, I wanted to scream out and apologize.

‘Cotton,’ she said. ‘Are you alright?’

I was standing at the edge of the water, holding her and staring toward the village. ‘I’m fine,’ I said. ‘Do you need help bathing, or, like, can you manage on your own, or...?’

‘Koop balo,’ she said, looking at me with those bloodshot eyes.

‘So...?’ I said. ‘Does that mean...? What does that mean, in this case?’

‘Please, Cotton,’ she said. ‘I cannot manage without arms.’

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘No worries at all.’

I slowly squatted to one knee, and then put down the other, and felt them both sink into the mud. And I brought my new friend into the water, which is to say that I let her float, for a moment, on the surface, like a buoy. I held her back in my hands and she was lighter than ever. ‘Is this okay?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said.

The water around her was a different color, as if the dust of years was washing away, and I said: 'Hold your breath,' and dipped her in, submerging her entire frame in the water and tilting back her head. 'Is that okay?'

'It's terrific,' she said.

She began to scrub her skin with her arms, and I supported her by resting her in my lap. With my hands I scrubbed her hair and the sores of her face. We did not have soap, of course, but it didn't matter. She was so dirty that the water itself was a huge improvement. And she was so light. So helpless. I remember thinking that, if I wanted to, I could walk away and she would drown without me. Not that I was interested in killing her, but that it was impressive, to me, to have something in my arms that depended upon me for its survival.

'I'm ready to go home,' I remember saying. I was gently rubbing the sores on her face, running my fingers into the corners of her eyes, around the rims of her nostrils. There were folds on her skin, from her disease, and I washed these folds, and ran my fingers over her dried and flaking lips. She was so beautiful in her ugliness, so amazingly human, and I felt lucky to have met her. 'I want to go home,' I repeated, 'even though I've learned to like it here. Like even though it's fun and interesting and exciting in Dhaka, it's just not home.'

'That is how I feel about my place in front of the newspaper shop,' she said. 'I could go anywhere that I want – to the hospital clinic, or somewhere. Maybe to where I was born, up north in Rajshahi. But the streets have provided for me for the past years, and at the end of the day I want to be home.'

'Wait...' I said. 'Aren't you homeless?'

'I have no roof,' she said. 'But I have a home.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I guess so.'

‘You are finished?’ she asked. ‘I am clean?’

‘You’re definitely cleaner than you were,’ I said. ‘Seriously, when’s the last time you bathed?’

‘Many months ago,’ she said. ‘So thank you.’

‘No problem,’ I said, standing up. ‘Never is a problem with me.’

‘Sorry?’ she said.

‘What’s your name, anyway?’ I asked. ‘Sorry if I already asked, but...’

‘Shapti,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘Shapti.’

‘Shapti?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It is a very common name.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’m Cotton.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Last night you introduced yourself many times.’



The American Embassy wasn’t difficult to find: I simply asked people and they pointed me in the correct direction. But first I brought Shapti back to the cement patch in front of the burned out magazine stand, because that’s where she asked me to take her. And it wasn’t a big deal or anything. I just lifted her out of the water, letting the rivulets run off of her and over me, not caring how I was getting drenched, and together we walked down that same road that I’d walked so many times the day before. Or she didn’t walk, for obvious reasons, but that’s beside the point. The point is we went together, talked about nothing, and on the way there I found a fresh

looking newspaper, which I set down on the sidewalk for her. Then I placed her on top of it, and said my goodbyes.

‘It was a pleasure to meet you,’ I said. ‘Thank you for taking care of me or whatever. For, like, last night – for the company.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It was nice to be meeting you. I will forget you for helping me, Cotton. I will remember you. That I will make sure of.’

‘I’ll remember you, too,’ I said. ‘I actually don’t think I could forget you if I tried. And I’m sorry, like ... I’m sorry for...’

‘Koop balo,’ she said, nodding. Her red eyes were looking right at me, and I could feel that it was time to go. So I smiled and waved as I walked away.

A moment later, though, I came back. ‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘Um ... the American Embassy? Which way is it?’

She pointed down Gulshan Avenue, in the direction of the 24/7 Mart, away from the hospital I’d never made it to. And then I was gone again. The street ahead of me was covered in traffic, and the sidewalk was covered in pedestrians. I weaved through them, taking in every face as if I were searching someone. But I wasn’t searching for anybody. I was simply interested in the faces that passed, and in the eyes that watched me approach, and in the stories behind those eyes. I wanted to ask strangers where they were going, and where they had come from, and how their day was going. And I wanted them to tell me about their favorite places in Dhaka, and their favorite Bollywood movies, or to tell them about my favorite places in Los Angeles, and about how excited was to go home to see my family and to have a space to myself.

I was terrified of getting lost again. So when I saw eyes staring at me from behind a pair of spectacles, I stopped. He was a young man in an old suit, with a thin

beard and a camera slung over his neck, and I smiled and asked if he knew where the American Embassy was located.

‘Down this street,’ he said. ‘You are going there? I will take you.’

‘Oh, that’s alright,’ I said. ‘Please don’t worry about it. I’m sure I’ll find it, like ... so it’s just down there, right? Just keep walking down this road and I’ll see it?’

‘I will take you,’ he said, turning back in the direction he had come from. ‘Not a problem. It is very close, but not on this road. I will take you.’

As we walked, we talked, and he asked me the usual questions: where I was from, why I came to Dhaka, and if I was enjoying myself.

‘The people are lovely,’ I said, because I didn’t think I could answer each of questions in the time I figured it would take to get to the embassy. ‘I’ve honestly been treated like a friend by almost everybody I’ve come across.’

‘This is very good news,’ he said, smiling. ‘What is your name?’

‘Cotton,’ I said.

‘Oh!’ he answered. ‘Cotton.’

‘Like the textile,’ I said.

‘Cotton,’ he repeated. ‘Like the textile. I am Naimul.’

‘Naimul,’ I said. ‘I hope you don’t mind me saying, but your English – you’re English is terrific. Are you a student?’

‘I am studying aviation,’ he said, ‘and working to become a pilot. But before, at Dhaka University, I was studying astrophysics. I am the president of the Astro-Gazer’s club. Now we are still in charge of operating the largest telescope in South Asia. Also we are collecting data for different organizations in Great Britain. Also in Canada. But my occupation will soon be piloting aircrafts for commercial photography, aerial photography. What you are doing, Cotton? You are a student?’

I had no idea what to say, as ‘unemployed bellhop’ seemed lame in comparison to astrophysicist. So I lied. ‘I write novels,’ I said. ‘And stories.’

He stopped walking for a moment. ‘Wow! That is the most important profession. You are in charge of documenting ... how do you say this in English?’ He started walking again, and so did I. ‘You document man’s deficits and honors, yes?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘You are writing fiction or non-fiction?’

I hadn’t really thought about it until then. ‘I write everything,’ I said. ‘All of it.’

‘And what you are writing about now?’

In the street, a child was begging and about one-thousand people were walking around her. We walked past her, as well. ‘Uh...’ I said. ‘You. People. I write about people, pretty much people who interest me. Sometimes people who don’t interest me, as well.’ It was all bullshit at the time, but the words sounded good as they came out. ‘There are many voices in the human choir,’ I said, borrowing from writer personas I’d seen portrayed in movies, ‘and they’re all important. All of them, even the boring one’s, because they’re part of being human and everything.’

‘That is true,’ he said. ‘I like that.’

He asked if it was difficult to write novels, and I said it was. But now that I’ve almost finished this, my book, I realize it’s not difficult at all. I mean, when I got home everyone was asking what happened. ‘Why did you come home early?’ they asked. ‘Where’s Bell? What’s the deal?’ I told the story a few times, and that was easy enough. So a few weeks later, when I realized that some of the details were starting to fade, I thought I’d write them all down, which was super fucking boring. So yeah ... I figured it was a good idea to write everything down, even though I’ve

never really written anything, and that's what this is. Or the truth is, like, I didn't even really write it. I've just recorded it into my phone, the whole story, and I figure that I can type it out later.

But anyway, eventually took me down a side street and there it was: the American flag on flagpole behind a huge barbed wire fence. There was an intercom system, and a sign that asked people to only press the buzzer once, and that's what I did. Like Naimul and I said goodbye on Gulshan Avenue, and then I was alone in front of this intercom. I could see cars in the parking lot behind the fence, and the building was made in the typical, governmental style, like a post office with tons of cement everywhere and tinted windows. I was so happy to be there. Like I was honestly beaming when I hit the bell on the gate.

'How can we help you?' said the voice behind the intercom.

'Um... I'm an American citizen...? Like, and I've lost my passport and wallet and I want to go home...?'

'Please state your name, sir.'

'Caleb James Walters of Hollywood, California. My friends call me...'

'Just a moment, Caleb.'

The gate made a buzzing sound and I pushed it and stepped through. I was officially on American soil, and now I'm back in Hollywood. Like, honestly, the details were arranged with a surprising amount of ease: new passport, new ticket issued. I had to pay for these things myself, of course, and now I have no money, but it's good to be home. And it was good, on the plane, to look through the porthole during takeoff. Like I looked down on the green swaths of land, all divided into squares, and the rivers cutting through them all brown and lethargic. The world felt both big and small, and I could imagine all the pockets of people in almost every nook

and cranny of every continent, denser in the cities and less so in other places. I don't want people to stop being themselves, I realized. Even if some people are assholes. Because, I mean, if everybody were the same I wouldn't fall in love with anybody. And I thought of the Shapti's and of all the people I've promised to remember. From that vantage point nothing seemed to matter, yet everything felt so fucking important.

Of the Earth:
Writing *The Cotton Is High*

VOLUME TWO

An exegesis in two parts

July 2013

Introduction

My novel, *The Cotton Is High*, is not the novel I set out to write when I began this PhD. My prerogative at the beginning of my enrolment was to write a narrative that would encapsulate conflicts surrounding the global soul¹—that is, I wanted to write a novel about a character who is forced to travel so often that he loses all sense of belonging; a character who is, essentially, homeless. In writing the novel, however, I undermined my original intent by placing my narrator within the context of the developing world, where problems such as starvation, extreme poverty, and literal homelessness (i.e. lack of shelter) soon took precedence. My narrator's conflicts, when compared to the crises in the lives of the characters who surrounded him, soon appeared silly. A new thesis thus emerged during the writing process—a thesis that is, in my opinion, more interesting and important than my original intent.

Instead of focusing on the life of an itinerant cosmopolitan, my novel focuses on the similarities and differences of life in a more developed nation versus life in a developing nation. It asks questions like: How do the problems of citizens in more developed countries compare to the problems of citizens in developing countries? In a world where nations are increasingly interdependent, how can the economic gap between more developed and developing nations continue to be so large? Is this gap worth striving to close and, if so, how does one go about closing it?

¹ “A person [that] can't really call himself an exile (who traditionally looked back to a home now lost), or an expatriate (who's generally posted abroad for a living) ... a nomad (whose patterns are guided by the seasons and tradition); and [has] never been subject to the refugee's violent disruptions: the Global Soul is best characterized by the fact of falling between all categories...” (Iyer 23).

My goal was never to write an American novel or an Australian novel, so much as I wanted to create the type of art that Goethe champions when he speaks of *Weltliterature*: “It is to be hoped that people will soon be convinced that there is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science. Both belong, like all good things, to the whole world...” (qtd. in Strich 35).² In fact, I wanted to take Goethe’s conceit to the extreme by eliminating a definitive home for my protagonist to have come from and to return to. And that goal was achieved. The narrator’s sense of homelessness is one of the conflicts within the novel. But, again, my original intent was trumped by the notion that problems within Cotton’s life are luxurious in the context of the developing nation. A different novel thus developed on its own accord—a satirical comedy in which the main character, Cotton Walters, is presented not only as a global soul, but as a global soul that goes mad attempting to answer questions that have no immediate answers (questions like the questions outlined above). Cotton ponders these questions, and attempts to act upon them, while lamenting his lack of home, and thus emerges as a kind-hearted, albeit selfish buffoon. These duelling characteristics are often humorous, as is Cotton’s battle with the worth of his anxieties; and this ends up being one of the novel’s main messages—a message arrived at organically, through the writing process: Life, when compared to the lives of those with no food, shelter or safety, is not bad (i.e. “the cotton is high”).

I started writing the book in May 2009. At the time, however, I was unaware that the words I was scribbling in my journal would one day appear in my first novel. Journaling was simply a daily practice that began in 2008 as a means of combating guilt, for at that point I was an unpublished twenty-four year old who called himself a writer, though I hardly wrote. Journaling is how I developed as an artist and I continue to journal daily. It is how and why I decided to write *The Cotton Is High*

² From Goethe’s journal, *Propyläen*. For bibliographic information, see Strich.

using personal experiences, and it is how I discovered my voice: “the choice to be close to this character, distant from that character—to be in this or that point of view. You can learn these things,” the writer John Irving said in an interview with *The Paris Review*. “[Y]ou can learn to recognize your own good habits,” he goes on to say, “what you do well in the first-person narrative voice, and what you do to excess, for example...” (qtd. in Wolf 103).³

The voice I discovered through journal writing was both comedic and honest—almost honest enough to appear blunt at times, at other times naïve—and stories of mine that started to get published in magazines such as *Voiceworks*, *Wet Ink*, and *The Big Issue* were journal-style narratives often based on true-to-life experiences. Still, in the first year of my enrolment in the PhD program I attempted to write in a voice that was not my own: to write about subjects I knew little about, such as life as a refugee. By doing so, I failed to construct a convincing narrative and was forced to start over. And so I did. In the second year of my enrolment, I wrote a more personal narrative, almost memoir, based on travels to and within Australia. This narrative’s tone was better—it was written in a more authentic voice—but the subject matter was trivial and I eventually aborted that novel, as well. In my third and final year of enrolment, I started to panic. Time was running out. I returned to the journals I had been keeping daily for several years, searched for ideas, and there found the entries I had kept during my month long stay in Bangladesh. The pages of the Bangladeshi journal were filled with dualities and confusion: “This country is an absolute mindfuck,” I wrote in an entry dated May 18th, 2009. “I can’t explain myself properly ... The world is full of suffering. But to watch it happening before my eyes, it’s quite shocking. It’s realer than real” (Whalen). Two sentences after that sad and somewhat empathetic remark, I found the following sentence: “I’m sick of it. I’m sick of the weight of the world and it’s only the beginning...” (Whalen). Throughout the journal I described people and places as both “disgusting” and “beautiful,” and my

³ From *The Paris Review* Summer-Fall Issue 1986. For bibliographic information, see Wolf.

final sentence in the country is almost a complete reversal of my first impressions of Bangladesh: “It’s the eve of our departure. Can’t say I want to go—I don’t” (Whalen).

In reviewing these entries, I saw myself in a new light. I was, at times, kind hearted and selfless, at times selfish and cynical, and this contradiction was, to me, quite funny, for it contained sides of self I had previously refused to acknowledge. That is, I started to see myself as a character. I was, in a sense, an intellectual buffoon—a Bellovian-type character who felt both lucky and guilty to have been born in a more developed nation. Within the context of the developing world, this conflict was both ironic and amusing. And thus the novel began, though still there was a problem.

When previously writing short stories about Bangladesh, before beginning the novel, I had attempted to juxtapose intellectual conflicts with more physical conflicts, such as malnutrition. These attempts were unsuccessful, as they presented Bangladeshi characters in a pitiable and helpless light. That is, they pointed out the absurdity of the gap between developing nations and more developed nations, but refused to find this absurdity humorous. Where they failed, however, I believe *The Cotton Is High* succeeds, as I believe this exegetical component of my PhD succeeds in retracing the steps taken to overcome such obstacles. The exegesis’ two parts strive to answer the following questions: How does a writer in an increasingly globalizing, post-colonial world ethically depict socio-economic differences between developing and more developed nations? Can a writer in the twenty-first century ethically depict an ‘other’ culture, and, if so, how does one go about doing it?

What follows are two main sections. Part One highlights debates surrounding the creative representation of an ‘other’ culture; or, more specifically, an ‘other’ culture that exists within the developing world. Such depictions often fall under the rubric of postcolonial discourse, or postcolonialism; as such, the benefits and pitfalls of this literary/sociological theory are discussed in detail and will be the lens through which literary influences on *The Cotton Is High* are examined. Part Two discusses geo-political research and personal experiences that informed the writing of *The*

Cotton Is High. It also discusses difficulties encountered in the writing process, strategies for overcoming these difficulties, and the intended effect of authorial techniques on the reader.

By discussing post-colonial discourse, and by examining both historical and contemporary novels that have engaged with fictionalizing developing nations, as well as by describing my own writing process, this exegesis, as a whole, demonstrates how *The Cotton Is High* has placed itself within the context of border-crossing fiction that portrays the developing world.

Part One:
Depictions of Developing Nations

Overview

One of the oldest pieces of literature in known history—*The Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2400 B.C.E.)—features a protagonist who leaves home to travel “abroad in the world” (“The Epic of Gilgamesh”). It is thus reasonable to assert that literary characters have been travelling for a long time; and it is reasonable to assert that such quests have proven to be some of the more influential narratives in human history. Guatama Sakyamuni, before he was Buddha, travelled in search of enlightenment; Moses travelled with his people through the wilderness, after leaving Egypt; Odysseus travelled from the Trojan War to his home in Ithaca; and Jason travelled in search of the Golden Fleece (Campbell 28).

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell identifies plot devices that, he argues, are common to all hero quests:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (28)

The Epic of Gilgamesh undoubtedly fits this formula: Gilgamesh leaves his home in Uruk, the “world of common day,” and with Enkidu, his friend and fellow demigod, travels to a “region of supernatural wonder” identified by late twentieth-century scholars as modern-day Lebanon (Campbell 28). Gilgamesh later returns home to “bestow boons on his fellow man,” in the form of carving his quest narrative into the walls of the city. However, as written in *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration*: “[T]he destinations reached by Gilgamesh are more fantastic than real”

(“Gilgamesh Epic”). That is, though the Cedar Forest may be modern-day Lebanon, “the existence of the ferocious giant Huwawa and the splitting of the earth during the heroic duo’s battle with the monster remind us that we have journeyed into a fantastic, mythological place of larger-than-life creatures and landscapes” (“Gilgamesh Epic”). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is therefore not travel writing in the sense that it is to be used as a particular point-of-reference to a particular destination.

But what about when quests *are* set in recognizable places with descriptions of particular cultures or people? Should an ‘other’ nation be used to represent Campbell’s “region of supernatural wonder,” and, if so, how can a writer in the twenty-first century ethically go about describing an ‘other’ culture?

Such questions and debates tend to fall under the umbrella of postcolonial studies, or postcolonialism; defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* as: “A loosely-applied rubric for a large variety of work (creative and critical) across a range of disciplines ... with a shared interest in the effects of colonization on the culture of both the colonizers and the colonized” (“Postcolonial Studies”).⁴ Postcolonial theory must therefore be examined; however, as noted in *The Oxford Encyclopedia or Aesthetics*:

⁴ Before delving into such discourse, it should be noted that the *The Cotton Is High* does not attempt to posit itself within the realm of postcolonial literature: “Literature in English emerging from the anglophone world outside Britain, Ireland, and the United States” (“postcolonial literature”). Though postcolonial theory and postcolonial literature inform each other, they are not the same. This exegesis will therefore discuss border-crossing fiction that engages with postcolonial theory, as opposed to postcolonial literature.

There is no simple bundle of theories or ideas that, packaged together, constitute a single, unified entity of postcolonial thought; rather, postcolonial theory is a hotly debated set of conflicting beliefs and interests, with scholars, artists, authors, and critics fiercely advancing and defending opposing views on what postcoloniality is, whether and where it exists, and who is best fit to understand and explain it. (“Postcolonialism”).

Due to the limited space allotted to this exegesis, I will therefore focus primarily on a July 2009 TED talk by the contemporary novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which synthesizes many important concerns of postcolonial theorists.⁵ This lecture, which had a strong influence on my novel, will also be used as the foundational model by which the novel’s literary influences are examined.

Providing a Theoretical Framework:

The Danger of a Single Story

A TED talk is an online lecture available through Ted.com. These lectures feature notable scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors, and artists addressing various subjects of their expertise;⁶ and one such talk is *The Danger of a Single Story* by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Its main premise is based around what Adichie calls “the single story:” the definition of which is never precisely stated, though a series of anecdotes demonstrate that it is essentially the idea that a subject is defined through

⁵ Most notably, Edward Said, Homi Babba and Chinua Achebe.

⁶ Notable guests include Bill Clinton, Jane Goodhall, Bill Gates, and several Nobel Peace Prize Winners.

one's experience with that subject. For example, in the anecdote below Adichie speaks of her "single story of what books are:"

So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books. I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven ... I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to...

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

Now, I loved these American and British books I read ... But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

In sum, one's experience of a subject formulates their conception of reality. Limited experiences—or the same type of repeated experiences—narrow one's definition of a subject; and conversely, experiences with many types of stories widen one's definition of what a subject entails. The single story is thus essentially a matter of experience.

From the single story of literature, Adichie moves on to describe her single story of an individual. She speaks of Fide, her family's "house-boy," and how "the only thing [her] mother told [her] about [Fide] was that his family was very poor." Adichie speaks of the food and clothes that her family sent to his family; of how her mother would reprimand her when she did not finish a meal by saying, "Don't you know people like Fide's family have nothing?;" and she speaks of the "enormous pity" these repeated stories made her feel toward Fide and his family. "Then one Saturday," Adichie relates, "we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautiful patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made." Adichie continues as follows:

I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

The single story can thus be applied to individuals and, again, it is determined by experience. Limited experiences with Fide, or, in other words, repeated experiences of the same nature, narrowed Adichie's conception of a Fide as an individual. As she experienced another aspect of Fide, however—as she learned more stories about him and his family—her definition of him broadened, which shifted her perspective. Thus, with more stories to formulate one's conception of an identity, one is able to identify an 'other' by more than a single definition; that is, as more than poor, more than a stereotype, and more than a one-sided character.

Several more anecdotes broaden Adichie's discussion to include the single story of a culture. She speaks of a college roommate in the United States who had “a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe.” This roommate apparently defined Adichie foremost as an African, and her conception of African identity was severely restricted by limited experiences with people from Africa. “She asked if she could listen to my ‘tribal music,’” Adichie relates, “and was consequently very disappointed when I produced a tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed I did not know how to use a stove.” Adichie also speaks of an American professor who deemed Adichie's novel as not “authentically African,” because the characters were, “like him, an educated and middle-class man.” That is, her characters “drove cars” and “were not starving,” therefore they were “not authentically African.” Lastly, Adichie implicates herself in falling victim to the single story of a culture when she speaks of her “single story of Mexicans.” In this anecdote, Adichie discusses how she had been “so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans [and Mexican immigration to the United States] that they had become one thing in [her] mind, the abject immigrant.”

By providing such examples, Adichie demonstrates how her roommate, her professor, and herself defined their conceptions of an 'other' culture based around

limited experiences of that culture. To Adichie's roommate and professor, Africans were solely defined as representatives of tribal culture and underdevelopment. Likewise, before travelling to Mexico, Adichie solely defined Mexicans as people who "[fleece] the [U.S.] health care system" and illegally cross the U.S. border. Thus, the Mexican people were dehumanised when they were viewed as one thing and one thing only: the abject immigrant. The fullness of the 'other' identity was flattened. Their humanity was objectified.

Identity, like experience, is thus central to Adichie's thesis. Anecdotally she shows how the identity of an 'other' is constructed through experiences with that 'other;' and she shows how, by comparing the story of one's 'self' to the story of that which 'self is not,' one often constructs their identity as different and/or oppositional to an 'other.' Such concepts are integral to postcolonial theory. The author of the "Postcolonialism" entry in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* writes:

Postcolonial analysis comes out of an awareness of cultural borders—the imagined separating spaces from which people project the beginnings and endings of their own identities and the identities of those they call Other (the imaginary oppositional subjects whose invention supports the definition of the self).

In her lecture Adichie only uses the term "colonialism" on a single occasion, but she is undoubtedly engaging with postcolonial discourse. Alongside her anecdotes about identity formation, she discusses the "tradition of telling African stories in the West: a tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness...." Much postcolonial discourse similarly attributes the origin of such oppositional descriptions to Western literature. As written in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*:

...there have been far more investigations of the literary text as a means of cultural domination than of the impact of other forms of aesthetic production. The literary text is often seen as the site within which the identity of the “native” is constructed and affixed by the colonizing culture. (“Postcolonialism”)

Adichie’s TED talk is thus, in a sense, an anecdotal version of a lecture on postcoloniality. But Adichie does not blame literature and literature alone for creating the single story of particular cultures. By speaking of the news media that informed her conception of Mexicans, and by anecdotally presenting how her mother’s words circumscribed her definition of Fide’s family, she shows how other forms of aesthetic production are implicated in single story telling.

She also explains why the single story exists. “It is impossible to talk about the single story,” says Adichie, “without talking about power.” She goes on to say:

Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of *nkali* [an Igbo word that loosely translates to, “to be greater than another”]: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability to not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and start with, “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with

the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

In other words, power structures define who gets to tell the story of an ‘other’ culture. More developed nations are in more economically and culturally powerful positions, therefore stories from more developed nations are more widely disseminated. The proliferation of these stories posits more developed nations in the role of “truth-teller” (i.e. the tellers of the “true story”); and, in this way, power structures define which cultures are central and which cultures are circumscribed as ‘other.’

This idea—the idea of a central and marginal narrative from and about particular cultures—is common within the works of many postcolonial theorists;⁷ and while many forms of postcolonial literature are interested in ‘writing back’—that is, in shifting the positions of power by producing literature, media and other stories that dilute the West’s story-telling hegemony—the power structures of the world, as they currently stand, ensure that more stories from the West continue to be more widely circulated. Developing nations therefore continue to be the ‘other,’ and one’s experiences with developing nations continue to be, in a sense, forcibly limited by storytellers that insist on portraying the developing world in the same, pitiable light. That is stereotyping. “The single story creates stereotypes,” Adichie says, “and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story the only story.” To Adichie, this is dangerous, for stereotypes

⁷ As written in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*: “The field [of postcolonialism] is primarily concerned with the cultural history and situation of territories of people made ‘marginal’ by the self-positioning of Western societies and cultures as ‘the center’ of the civilized world” (“Postcoloniality”).

dehumanise an individual and point out that individual (or culture's) differences, as opposed to their similarities.

It is important to note here that Adichie does not call for an end of Western storytelling about an 'other' culture. She simply suggests that the types of stories conveyed by Western media and literature should more widely vary. For example, after describing tragedies within her own biography, Adichie states: "All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me." Now, while there are several aspects of Adichie's lecture that impress me, this idea, in particular, is important to my own questions of ethically representing an 'other' culture. My fear, with regards to postcolonial theory, is that it makes an author self-conscious to the point of inaction. That is, writing about an 'other' culture can be difficult, for there are many ethical concerns to navigate, but in an increasingly globalizing world I believe it is inevitable that borders will be crossed, and to me it is important to address our equal humanity without denying that there are, indeed, differences between peoples, nations and cultures. I like that Adichie states that the single story of an 'other' culture is "incomplete," but not necessarily "untrue." For example, she states:

Of course Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo, and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

To me it is important to address the similarities *and* differences, for to deny certain differences seems not only false but also unethical (as if one were turning a blind eye

to the humongous economic, social and political differences between former colonial states and the states of their former colonizers).

The other aspect of Adichie's talk that I particularly commend is how she notes her conception of Nigeria and the African continent would be different had she been born elsewhere:

If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family.

Adichie's ability to empathize with an 'other,' even when that 'other' is a former colonizer, appears boundless. She does not silence any writer or storyteller. Again, she simply asks one to consider differences and similarities before commencing their narrative.

Finally, I like how Adichie's closing statements on how to combat the single story provide hope; as opposed to some postcolonial theorists who believe there is no possibility for the subalterns voice to be heard by injecting their voice into the master discourse of dominant culture⁸. Adichie provides another argument. She speaks of Chinua Achebe's call for a "balance of stories;" that is, for more stories from the marginalized to be disseminated on a global scale. She asks that one consider similarities before perpetuating the single story of difference:

⁸ One such example is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Please see bibliographic information: Spivak.

So what if before my Mexican trip I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. *and* the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor *and* hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world?

In this way, Adichie provides possible solutions instead of mere critique. She provides hope and, in a sense, attempts to look beyond the single story. "[W]hen we reject the single story," she states in the closing line of her lecture, "when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise." Adichie's postcolonial discourse is thus particularly important to my novel because it provides hope that one might be able to tell a story about an 'other' culture without harming the subject of representation. Her lecture does not deny me a voice, but simply calls for more voices to provide counterpoints to the overwhelming chorus that is the single story of people, places and cultures.

Colonial Writings:

***The Heart of Darkness* debate**

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was published in 1899 in a collection called *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. "Reviewers seemed unsure what to make of the middle story in the *Youth* volume [*Heart of Darkness*], which was not an immediate success," write the authors of the "Heart of Darkness" section of *The Oxford Reader's Companion To Conrad*. They go on to say: "Its fame spread only gradually, and the first translations did not appear until 1924, the year of Conrad's death." Since then, Conrad's portrayal of Marlow's quest up the Congo River in

search of a station master working for a Belgian ivory trading company has been anthologised, criticized, and adapted into many other art forms; and today *Heart of Darkness* is widely accepted as a classic of high Modernism deeply-rooted in the Western canon. This canonical standing, however, has been criticized by many scholars—most notably, Chinua Achebe, who in a 1975 essay, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'* deemed Conrad a “thoroughgoing racist” (2040). Achebe’s criticism now stands beside Conrad’s novella in many anthologies and its “controversy,” write the authors of the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, “has been an important stimulus to certain kinds of Conrad criticism, and the continuing debate serves to confirm the relevance of the story in discussions of multiculturalism and post-colonial discourse” (“Heart of Darkness”).

The novella begins on the River Thames in London, England. Our unnamed narrator is aboard a cruising yawl, the *Nellie*, with four other individuals, waiting for the turn of the Thames’ tide. Marlow—who Conrad portrays as an enlightened individual with an “ascetic aspect,” “arms dropped, the palms of his hands outward, [resembling] an idol” (1958)—begins his tale about a past trip up the Congo River; and from the outset the narrative is shrouded in mystery and shadow. Marlow notes that London, too, “has been one of the dark places of the earth” (Conrad 1959). He then proceeds to imagine the Romans conquering the land that would one day become England and, by doing so, foreshadows the tale of his adventure into the Congo, the heart of darkness.

The narrative thus begins and in many ways follows Joseph Campbell’s definition of the “monomyth,” or hero’s journey. The novella’s hero, Marlow, tells his tale of venturing forth from the world of “common day” (i.e. London and Brussels) into the Congo, the metaphorical region of “supernatural wonder” (Campbell 28).

When Marlow engages with both the native Congolese and the Belgian colonialist, “fabulous forces are there encountered,” and a “decisive victory is won” when Marlow retrieves Kurtz, the ivory trader, and returns to London “with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 28).

This definition of the monomyth, however, should only be loosely applied to *Heart of Darkness*, for in many ways the narrative both follows and inverts the paradigm. For example, Marlow’s decisive victory is in obtaining Kurtz from the inner station; however, the journey both enlightens and disturbs him. Furthermore, upon returning to London, Marlow has “the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” by releasing all of Kurtz’s notes to the ivory trading company, and by telling the true story of Kurtz’s death to Kurtz’s betrothed, but by doing so he would release Kurtz’s dark experiences (and his own) to society at large, which he chooses not to do. Instead, he keeps the darkness he has witnessed to himself. That is, the “boons” are not bestowed to his “fellow man” until many years later, when he relates the entire story of his trip up the Congo River to his shipmates aboard the *Nellie*.

Where much of the postcolonial debate surrounding the novella arises, however, is in Conrad choosing to represent Campbell’s “region of supernatural wonder” as a specific locale with descriptions of a particular culture. One must once again ask: Should an artist use an ‘other’ culture to serve as a foil to the “common day” life of the character and/or to represent Campbell’s “region of supernatural wonder”? Does Conrad *ethically* depict an ‘other’ culture, or is he, indeed, a racist, as he has been charged with?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “racist” as: “An advocate or supporter of racism; a person whose words or actions display racial prejudice or discrimination.” If we are to go by this definition, I would have to say that Conrad’s

main character, Marlow, is indeed racist, and thus Conrad, in sincerely championing Marlow's point of view (as opposed to ironically or satirically championing it) is guilty of providing a racist point-of-view. His prejudice is obvious in many ways. For one, the journey into humanity's darker aspects, its Id, is racist in that it chooses to represent the Congolese natives as prototypes of the Id. Marlow's journey up the Congo river also parallels Dante's decent into the underworld, but in *Heart of Darkness*, the "devils of the land" are the Congolese, the Congo is the "center of the earth," and Kurtz, who has no doubt succumbed to the darkness that the natives constantly live with, is the chief. Only when Kurtz is taken out of this darkness does he begin to see the "horror" of his ways, "as though a veil had been rent" (Conrad 2010); only then, aboard the steamship out of the darkness (away from the Congo) does Kurtz see to which depths he has descended. And this portrayal is prejudiced. For Kurtz, the Westerner, is able to come out of the darkness as he escapes the Congo, but the natives are in-and-of themselves evil. That is, they are portrayed as avatars of the Id, no matter what they do.

Furthermore, as Achebe notes in *An Image of Africa*: "[The novella] opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peaceful 'at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that people its banks'" (2035-36). The River Thames is thus compared and contrasted to the River Congo; and Achebe then quotes Conrad to show how the River Congo is depicted as the antithesis of the River Thames (i.e. the antithesis of civilization): "Going up [the Congo] river," writes Conrad, "was like traveling back to the earliest beginning of the world" (1982). These rivers are, indeed, used to compare and contrast civil living (on the Thames' banks) and uncivilized living (on the Congo's banks). "Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad?" asks Achebe. "Yes, but that is not the real point.

It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry” (2036). Conrad, in portraying the Congo as the antithesis of the Thames and therefore the antithesis of civilization, is discriminatory. Within the narrative he does not recognize that the Congolese, too, have their own civilization, and in no way does he suggest that this African civilization is equal or comparable to Western civilization.

Conrad thus perpetuates the single story of Africa. As Achebe writes: “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (2035). Within the novella, the beasts, or “brutes,” are undoubtedly the natives, and the charge of bestiality is a reference to the African woman who has been Kurtz’s mistress. Achebe writes:

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First she is in her place and so can win Conrad’s special approval; and second, she [is] ... a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman [Kurtz’s betrothed]. (2038)

Achebe’s charge, in terms of characterization, is that, to Conrad, Africans and Europeans must be “in their place” (2038). That is, the native Congolese must act like natives, “clapping their hands and stamping their feet” (Achebe 2030). When they act like Europeans they are out of place and therefore absurd. For example, Conrad writes about a native African who is working as a fireman aboard the steamboat: “He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs” (Conrad 1984). Africans are in this way continually dehumanised. They are either a blur of black limbs or they are playing the part of the European and thus “acting” civilized.

From the onset of the novella, the ‘other’ culture is portrayed in such ways: as violent, terrifying, animalistic, cannibalistic, unintelligent and uncivilized. Their first mention is one of violence: “It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives” (1962). This stereotype—the stereotype of the barbarous native—is used throughout *Heart of Darkness* to heighten the drama of the narrative. Rarely are Africans portrayed with the same attention to detail that Conrad allots to Europeans, rarely are they round characters, and rarely does Conrad depart from the single story of Africans. Furthermore, as noted above, the common ancestry of the rivers, as well as the men and women who inhabit the banks of these rivers, trouble our hero. As Marlow notes about the African continent in part two of the novella:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their being not inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. (1984)

African characters are thus humanized, though only fractionally—so fractionally that, indeed, their humanity is called into question. The similarities between these “savages” and our narrator, as the representative of an enlightened Westerner, are meant to both terrify and inform the reader. This is Conrad’s main premise: that the heart of darkness exists in all of us, whether we want to admit it or not. “Marlow’s insistence that the ‘horror’ is not limited to Africa,” write the authors of the *Oxford Readers Companion to Conrad*, “has sometimes had the effect of encouraging critics to dismiss the specific circumstances of the Congo and to consider Kurtz’s situation as emblematic of the alienation on modern man or the meaningless of Western civilization” (“Heart of Darkness”). Whether or not this is true, one must ask: What are the repercussions of using a specific culture to represent this ‘horror’? Is it fair to the culture? Is it ethical to portray an ‘other’ culture as an opposite—a dark shadow to European whiteness and civilization?

I would say: No, in the twenty-first century it is not ethical. *Heart of Darkness*, however, was written at the end of the nineteenth century. Imperialism was in full force and Western exploration of previously unmapped territories had been conceived of as a positive thing for centuries. As the unnamed narrator states early on in the novella, “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, [explorers] had gone out on that stream [the Thames], bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire” (Conrad 1955). To our narrator, the question as to the pros and cons of European power, of European “might,” is not a question at all. “What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!” he exclaims (Conrad 1959). So explorers are heroes to this narrator. And the fact that there are no more uncharted territories, to

him, is more lamentable than the idea that exploration may, in fact, dispossess a people.

It is important to filter *Heart of Darkness* through postcolonial theory, because it is important to recognize that the novella perpetuates the single story of a place and people. But one must realize that this filtering is done retrospectively. That is, it is important to note Conrad's racist tendencies; however, to deem him a "thorough-going" racist is not only unfair, but also anachronistic. In Conrad's time there was no conception of postcolonial discourse. How could there be? You cannot have *post* colonialism while colonization is still widely practiced. Furthermore, I would argue that by also portraying the colonizers as "devils," and in many instances lambasting colonialism, Conrad, for his time, was quite progressive. For example, Marlow narrates:

[Colonialism] was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.... (Conrad 1961)

This statement, as with the narrative itself, is shrouded in mystery and is inconclusive. But it is clear that Marlow is not championing the barbarous ways in which colonialist treated the indigenous men and women from whom they stole their land, and it is clear that he recognizes their humanity.

Conrad also seems to believe, however, in an “idea,” the idea of progress, though I would say that, through the course of the narrative, this idea is called into question. Western civilization in Europe is contrasted to what that civilization has done in Africa; that is, the act of educating the “brutes” is tied together with violence and “horror” (Conrad 2010). This shows that Conrad was not entirely comfortable with the idea of progress, for Marlow cannot abide by the darkness—that is what separates him from Kurtz (an ideologue who perpetrates violence in order to “educate” the natives).

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad stands amidst the colonial debate and notes its benefits and pitfalls. He calls into question its practices while simultaneously revelling in the excitement and danger of travelling within a foreign land. He also plunges into the darkness in all of us and provides this darkness as his only concrete statement. Other than this statement, however, the novella provides no answers. But it does ask plenty of questions: Is the ‘other’ all that different from the ‘self’? Is progress a good thing? Should we recognize our inner darkness and, if so, why?

Heart of Darkness is no doubt racist in that it portrays the Congolese natives as avatars of evil and thus perpetuates the single story of Africans, but for its time the novella was quite progressive. In many ways it has influenced my novel. That is, as Marlow stands amidst colonialism and analyses its benefits and pitfalls, Cotton stands amidst postcolonialism and does the same: He analyses whether or not an ‘other’ *can* be portrayed in the 21st century and mocks this debate while mocking the idea that one culture is better or more civil than an ‘other.’ As Marlow descends into darkness, Cotton descends into madness. This madness destroys Cotton’s perceptions and thus provides insights into how we are all similar. *The Cotton Is High* is thus indebted, in many ways, to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, as it is indebted to its critiques.

Modern Colonialism:

Eat Pray Love and Developing Nations as a Means of Self-Discovery

In *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything in Italy, India and Indonesia*, the narrator and author, Elizabeth Gilbert, begins her journey at a low point, and developing nations are used as a means of her ascension into a more enlightened state. The memoir has thus been described as a 'self-help narrative,' for it apparently helps some readers learn how to improve their 'self' by following Gilbert's quest. Like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the 2006 memoir also fits Campbell's definition of the monomyth. Its hero, Elizabeth Gilbert, "ventures forth from" New York, "the world of common day," to travel to into regions of "supernatural wonder:" Italy, India and Indonesia (Campbell 28). A "decisive victory" is thus won when Gilbert's self-described "quest for everything" is achieved; and Gilbert "returns from this mysterious adventure" to write her memoir about her experiences, thus "bestow[ing] boons on [her] fellow man" and completing the cycle of the hero's journey (Campbell 28).

The hybridisation of these two genres (self-help and travel narrative) has been deemed by some academics as the "middle-aged narrative." According to Kate Cantrell:

The middle-aged narrative follows the traditional quest of the male hero who leaves home as a rite of passage, except the prototype of the protagonist has changed. The narrator is now a restless female who is writing at mature age and usually, in the midst or aftermath of an existential crises. This crisis is often knotted in the restraints of

domestic duty. Her narrative, which emphasises a desire for personal growth and balance, employs travel as the register for this self-realisation. (2)

Alongside travel memoirs like Alice Steinback's *Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman* and *Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World* by Rita Golden Gelman, Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* typifies a growing trend in contemporary literature (Wood 1). This type of memoir, writes Cantrell in *Eat, Pray, Loathe: Women's Travel Memoir as Moving Metaphysical Journey or Narcissistic New-Age Babble*, "appeals to a readership that is just as interested in self as with other" (2). For its focus on the self, *Eat, Pray, Love* has been heavily criticized as, "narcissistic New Age reading," and "the worst in Western fetishization of Eastern thought and culture" (Callahan). These criticisms, as well as the memoir itself, greatly influenced my novel. Whereas *Heart of Darkness* showed me the benefits and pitfalls of using an 'other' culture to represent Campbell's region of "supernatural wonder," *Eat Pray Love* showed me the benefits and pitfalls of largely ignoring said culture (during travels within an 'other' country) as well as the benefits and pitfalls of using an 'other' nation as a means of Western character transformation.

Eat, Pray, Love begins, essentially, with Gilbert in supplication on the floor of her "upstairs bathroom of the big house in the suburbs of New York which [she'd] recently purchased with [her] husband" (10). Gilbert is questioning her roles as wife, woman and professional, and is thus in the throes of an existential crises (a common trope in the middle-aged narrative). "I don't want to be married anymore," writes Gilbert in an opening chapter. "I don't want to live in this big house. I don't want to have a baby" (10). Gilbert goes on to lament that she is sick of being, "the primary breadwinner, the housekeeper, the social coordinator, the dog-walker, the wife and the

soon-to be mother” (11). Following these crises, Gilbert divorces her husband and ensues in a tumultuous relationship with a New York actor. A subsequent journey to Bali to cover a story about yoga vacations for a magazine (Gilbert is a writer and journalist) then allows our narrator to meet a “ninth-generation medicine man,” who she compares to the “Star Wars character Yoda” (14). Her call to adventure begins when this medicine man reads her palms and informs her that she will come back to Bali to live with him. “So you will come back to Bali to live here and teach me English,” he says through a translator. “And I will teach you everything I know” (14).

The quest is thus set in place, but the metaphorical monsters that Gilbert must defeat are not natives or the foreign setting, as they are in many traditional travel narratives (particularly colonial narratives), so much as they are internal struggles: the struggle of recovering from her divorce and subsequent relationship, and the struggle to achieve balance between self-indulgence and self-abnegation. Gilbert outlines the goals of her quest while speaking with Ketut, the medicine man, stating that she wants to be “with God all the time,” but doesn’t, “want to be a monk, or totally give up worldly pleasures” (15). Gilbert goes on to say: “I guess what I want to learn is how to live in this world and enjoy its delights, but also devote myself to God” (15). In order to accomplish her goals, Gilbert travels to three separate countries: Italy, India and Indonesia. These countries are chosen because they have “traditionally done ... one thing very well” (10). That is, Italy is known for its food, India for its spirituality, and Indonesia (Bali) for its balance—with “people for whom the maintenance of perfect equilibrium is an art, a science and a religion” (10). Like *Heart of Darkness* and *The Cotton Is High*, the memoir engages with specific locales with descriptions of specific cultures (that is, it is more real than fantastic); however, unlike *Heart of*

Darkness and *The Cotton Is High*, Gilbert's narrative is primarily inward-looking, as opposed to dealing with internal conflicts *and* externalities.

Eat, Pray, Love thus follows Wood's definition of the middle-aged narrative, for Gilbert's quest is a quest for self-discovery: a travel narrative that is, "less concerned with what is seen than with who is doing the seeing" (Cantrell 1). As Gilbert outlines in an opening chapter of *Eat, Pray, Love*:

It wasn't so much that I wanted to thoroughly explore the countries themselves; this has been done. It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country, in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well. (4)

In light of this definition and the postcolonial discourse that has previously been discussed, one must ask: What are the implications of setting a quest in a particular place with a particular culture, and then largely ignoring said culture? When one's quest is a quest for self-fulfilment, should an artist use an 'other' culture as a means of character transformation? Is this a good way to engage with the 'other' in an increasingly globalizing, post-colonial world?

For many post-colonial theorists, the answer to such questions are: No, one should not base a narrative amongst an 'other' culture simply to further a character's self-development. For example, in a Salon.com article entitled *The New Colonialism of 'Eat, Pray, Love,'* Bangladeshi author and filmmaker Sandip Roy deems Gilbert's memoir "new colonialism" (Roy 1). "It's not Gilbert's fault," he writes, "but I have an instinctive reflex reaction to books about white people discovering themselves in brown places" (Roy 1). He goes on to say:

In a way I almost prefer the old colonials in their pith helmets trampling over the Empire's far-flung outposts. At least they were somewhat honest in their dealings. They wanted the gold, the cotton, and laborers for their sugar plantations. And they wanted to bring Western civilization, afternoon tea and anti-sodomy laws to godforsaken places riddled with malaria and beriberi. The new breed is more sensitive, less overt. They want to spend a year in a faraway place on a "journey." But the journey is all about what they can get. Not gold, cotton or indigo anymore. They want to eat, shoot films (or write books) and leave. They want the food, the spiritual wisdom, the romance (Roy 1).

By travelling to an 'other' culture merely to use it as a backdrop to a Western character's self-development, Roy suggests that the traveller is simply exploiting the 'other' culture. This is a central critique to the tourism industry in general: the idea that a subject believes they understand a culture simply by visiting it for a short amount of time. As academic Nancy Barbour writes in *Global Citizen, Global Consumer: Study Abroad, Neoliberal Convergence, and the 'Eat, Pray, Love' Phenomenon*:

To ignore or efface the political in these narratives tends to re-inscribe harmful stereotypes and to limit opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement by reinforcing the dominance of Western voices and silencing the subaltern. (11)

Barbour is thus suggesting that the absence of engagement with an 'other' culture, while travelling amongst it, both perpetuates the single story of that culture and silences the 'other.'

In *Eat, Pray, Loath: Woman's Travel Memoir as Moving Metaphysical Journey or Narcissistic New-age Babble*, Kate Cantrell notes similar criticisms, but applies them to the genre of the middle-aged narrative in general:

The central problematic then, in many book sold as travel memoirs, is that they actually minimalize and even dilute the travels they seek to voice. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, this usually happens in one of two ways. Either the place Elizabeth Gilbert ventures to (for example, the Balinese village of Ubud) is romanticized as an exotic other, or it is reduced, in the case of Naples and Mumbai, to a backdrop in her personal dramas. As a result, the memoir pushes the boundaries between self-insight and self-preoccupation. The consequence of this pushing is that the female travel writer has come under close scrutiny and supervision. She is dismissed as a pulp producer, a pawn under industry pressures and an over-exuberant performer whose work emerges, in what Jonathan Raban call, 'literature's red-light district' (1987). The consequences of this surveillance for the travel memoir, is that its reception draws polar responses from the reading public. (3-4)

Thus, *Eat, Pray, Love* and other middle-aged narratives have been described as a new form of colonialism. While this definition may be hyperbolic, there is no denying that Gilbert perpetuates the single story of particular cultures by describing those cultures as a place where "one thing" is done well: Italy as a place of great food and only great food, India as a place of spiritual insight and only spiritual insight, and Indonesia (Bali) as a place of balance and only balance. Furthermore, by generally ignoring both the foreign setting and foreign characters, and by using them simply as a means of Western character transformation, Gilbert in no way challenges Western

story-telling hegemony and in no way strives to debunk stereotypes of ‘other’ cultures. “The natives mostly have clearly assigned roles,” writes Roy in describing Elizabeth Gilbert’s character in the Hollywood rendition of the best-selling novel. “Language teacher. Hangover healer. Dispenser of fortune cookie-style wisdom (knowledge is never so meaningful as when it comes in broken English, served up with puckish grins)” (2). Roy goes on to say: “The expats have messy histories but the natives’ lives are not very complicated (other than that teenage arranged marriage in India). They are there as the means to her self-discovery. After that is done, it’s time to book the next flight” (2).

Such narratives have been further criticized for being, ‘wealthy, whiney and white’ (Barnes-Brown and Sanders 1). The middle-aged narrative, and more specifically *Eat, Pray, Love*, has been deemed ‘priv-lit’ by an independent, quarterly magazine based out of Portland, Oregon, which is a self-described “feminist response to pop culture” (Barnes). Priv-lit, as defined by authors Joshunda Sanders and Diana Barnes-Brown (in an article entitled *Eat, Pray, Spend*) is: “...literature or media whose expressed goal is one of spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women’s hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers are primarily financial” (1). Many postcolonial scholars point out a similar critique. For example, Roy states:

As [Gilbert’s] character complained that she had ‘no passion, no spark, no faith,’ and needed to go away for one year, I couldn’t help wondering, where do those people in Indonesia and India go away to when they loose their passion, spark and faith? (1)

The label “priv-lit,” as well as Roy’s critique, point out the imbalance between crises in more developed nations and crises in developing nations. Elizabeth Gilbert’s

problems are problems that many in more developed nations can relate to, as shown by the fact that her memoir spent fifty-five weeks at the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list. But these problems, when placed in a developing nation, appear absurd. Perhaps that is why Gilbert infrequently describes people from ‘other’ cultures, for, compared to their struggles, hers are, indeed, privileged.

Such critiques were particularly helpful to me while I formulated the character of Cotton and conceived of the struggles he would have to go through in *The Cotton Is High*. As the novel is set in Bangladesh, ignoring Bangladeshi’s, to me, was never an option. The novel thus directly and purposefully engages with an ‘other’ culture, as opposed to *Eat, Pray, Love*, which purposefully has an inward focus. Nevertheless, as the main character in my novel, Cotton’s development as a character was both important and necessary. My goal was therefore to develop him while simultaneously engaging with Bangladesh and Bangladeshi’s. And this proved difficult, as Cotton’s problems, when compared to problems such as starvation and malnutrition, appeared absurd and inconsequential. This, however, turned out to be a primary theme in the novel. That is, by increasing the absurdity in some parts, I was able to satirically comment on the gap between more developed and developing nations, and I was able to *directly* engage with the ‘other’ culture by comparing and contrasting its dilemmas (through the eyes of Cotton) to Cotton’s own dilemmas.

Cotton’s development is as follows: He begins by being completely inward-focused, much like Elizabeth Gilbert’s character, but gradually turns his gaze outward as the novel develops. At first, he is able to note only differences between his life and the lives of the characters who surround him, but, as the novel develops, he begins to see similarities as well as differences. The Bangladeshi characters thus become more rounded and Cotton’s perception of the ‘other’ shifts. As noted, my novel directly

engages with an ‘other’ culture; and in this way it is very different to the goals of *Eat, Pray, Love*. Nevertheless, without literary formulas such as Gilberts, *The Cotton Is High* would not exist—for to mock a trope, the trope be put in place. That is, like *Heart of Darkness*, *Eat, Pray, Love* showed me how I did not want to engage with an ‘other’ culture.

How Best To Engage With the Developing World:

The Crowded Self and Crowded Style

The closing statement of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk is as follows: “[W]hen we reject the single story, when we realize there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” Thus far, I have shown how colonial writers have engaged with colonial themes, and I have shown how contemporary writers have also perpetuated the single story by using (or misusing) travel in developing nations as a means of Western character transformation. How, then, does one reject the single story? How does a writer regain this ‘paradise’ that Adichie speaks of?

Shameen Black’s 2010 academic study, *Fiction Across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth Century Fiction* suggests several methods. Most notably, what Black deems the ‘crowded self’ and ‘crowded style,’ or “images of subjectivity and literary form that work against familiar forms of invasive imagination in the encounters with difference” (14). Black’s thesis statement and the thesis of this exegesis are similar. Whereas my exegesis asks how a writer in an increasingly globalizing, post-colonial world might truthfully and ethically depict socio-economic differences between developing nations and more developed nations, Black’s thesis

asks if it “might be possible to imagine an other without doing violence to one’s object of description?” (1). Like Adichie, who points out that “stories have been used to dispossess and to malign,” but also “to empower and to humanize,” Black states: “While novels have been blamed for fostering images of cultural constraint, they have also been credited with helping shape expanded views of human potential” (9). She also writes: “If novels have the power to promote and perpetuate ideologies of inferiority, they may logically have the capacity to help us begin to question them. (250).

Black’s theory is that after thirty plus years of postcolonial discourse, authors have engaged with such discourse and developed an ethics for representing characters with distinct difference. Black attempts to show how late twentieth-century novelists have used the discourse to develop an ethics that moves beyond postcoloniality’s constraints and, in doing so, contrasts many postcolonial theorist who believe that authors cannot ethically imagine characters from different socio-economic, ethnic, or gender groups. In fact, Black criticizes such theorists by citing their tendency to, “valorize a work’s oppositional or negative tendencies over possibilities for ethical perception of significant otherness” (139). Works that do ethically depict otherness, Black argues, should be recognized for their positive traits. She deems such works ‘border-crossing fiction,’ and through the course of her study attempt to answer *how* an author can “imagine an other without doing violence [to their] object of description” (1). “Border-crossing fiction” is defined by Black using the following criteria: “First, it foregrounds a dramatic dissonance between the subject and object of representation; second, it seeks to surmount these productions of social difference” (3).

Thus border-crossing fiction, as defined by Black, presupposes that there are differences between characters from differing social, ethnic or gender groups. It suggests that these differences can be overcome—or, more succinctly, that a border-crossing author purposefully *strives* to overcome such differences. Black goes on to say that, secondly, border-crossing fiction “embraces the challenge of representation with an intensity that surpasses the general concern with alterity that preoccupies fiction at large” (4). She uses the following analogy to illustrate her point: “Just as one might argue that not all work written by or about women constitutes feminist literature, not all writing on themes of border-crossing challenges its readers to consider the ethical stakes of imagining alterity” (4). By this definition, neither *Heart of Darkness* nor *Eat, Pray, Love* could be described as ‘border-crossing fiction.’ *Heart of Darkness* outlines differences between social groups, but does not seek to overcome them, while *Eat, Pray, Love* largely ignores such differences. Only contemporary novels that specifically engage with postcolonial debates surrounding alterity and difference can be deemed “border-crossing fiction.” And Black shows throughout her book that a new body of contemporary fiction is, indeed, emerging.

Fiction Across Borders examines the works of authors that Black believes fall into such criteria. Namely, Ruth Ozeki, Charles Johnson, Gish Jen, Jeffrey Eugenides, Rupa Bajwa, Amitav Ghosh, and J.M. Coetzee. “Seen individually,” Black writes, “each of these writers offers an especially vivid and instructive encounter with the question of what it means to challenge invasive imagination” (10). As opposed to grouping authors by how they are often grouped—by shared nationality, which Black believes is limiting—Black affiliates them “through their shared participation in a specific intellectual preoccupation” (11). In the first half of her book, she discusses authors that “favor sentimental and comic sensibilities,” where “social borders appear

more moderate,” and, in the second half, examines authors with “more ambitious and complex works,” where “crossing social borders appears as a significantly more vexed ethical undertaking” (12). Each of the authors Black discusses thematically engage with border-crossing in different ways, and each have “specific intellectual predicaments” (12). Black is thus suggesting that each of the novels differs greatly in *how* they deal with postcolonial debates, but that such novels can be grouped together in that they actively participate in such debates and strive to ethically imagine an ‘other.’ Furthermore, Black suggests that certain styles have arisen in late 20th and early 21st century fiction that allow authors to ethically engage with such discourse. That is, Black argues that authors employ specific principles and ethics of identity representation and reimagination, and that these principles and ethics help define a border-crossing writer.

Literary works that Black engages with are all informed by postcolonial theories, such as the theories outlined at the beginning of this exegesis, and they all strive to ethically interact with and overcome the limits of such theories. Black proposes three chief concepts that “help create practices that elude hegemonic or identitarian effects” (14); in other words, practices that allow an author to skirt the single story and curtail the power struggles discussed in the above section on the danger of a single story. The three chief concepts Black suggests are as follows: “[modeling] acts of perspective taking,” “[undergoing] active self-reflection,” and “[working] to diminish privilege” (14). Black suggests that by using such concepts, and by engaging with difference, authors works are similar in that their practices enable what she calls ‘crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles.’ Again, crowded selves and crowded styles, “model acts of perspective taking, undergo self-reflection, and work to diminish [the author’s] own privilege” (14). By writing through these terms,

Black suggests that “ethical contributions of border-crossing fiction” are possible (14). That is, by imagining or attempting to imagine an ‘others’ perspective, by being self-reflective in their work, and by striving to diminish privilege, an author can combat the single story of a particular people or culture.

The idea that these three terms are necessary to overcoming ethical, postcolonial obstacles echoes Adichie’s call that “by realizing there is never a single story of a place” one can combat the ‘single story.’ Different authors do so in different ways—some through comedy, some by making their lack of insight into an ‘other’ obvious, or by thematically showing that to do so is impossible. “[Charles] Johnson and [Gish] Jen,” for example, writes Black, “rely on comic reversals to enable effective representations of significant otherness,” whereas the novels of Ghosh and Coetzee have “increasingly radical textual sacrifices” that “prove vital to acts of imaginative border crossing” (15, 16). What they share, however, is, again, the practice of crowded selves and crowded styles.

Crowded self is, to Black, a “metaphor for subjectivity,” and crowded style is, in a sense, the written manifestation of the crowded self. Black envisions the crowded self and crowded style as a practice whereby, “the borders of the self jostle against the edges of others, and this mediating position allows for the contours of each to become porous and flexible” (47). That is, “characters attempt to see the world as another does without wholly letting go of their own original vision, because their perspective-taking exercise may alter that initial point of view” (47). Black uses the metaphor of the crowd to illuminate the idea of one’s individuality *simultaneously* being part of a larger collective. In this metaphor, the idea of ‘self’ and the idea of ‘the collective’ are important. The self inhabits a fixed space, but as part of a crowd the borders of the self “jostle” against others (47). “This tension,” writes Black, “between the

centrifugal and centripetal seeks to capture the central balancing act of border-crossing fiction, as representatives strive to offer more than displacements and impersonations” (47). Black thus challenges the idea of binary opposition that is common in much postcolonial discourse.

Without having read Black’s discourse until the first-draft of my novel was complete, I believe that the ideas of the ‘crowded self’ and ‘crowded style’ were incorporated into my novel, though they were based on themes in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. In this poem, Whitman both seeks to define his self-hood, whilst connecting this individuality to the many characters who inhabit his poem. In the opening line, Whitman writes: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (25). Whitman thus conceives of himself as a singular entity, while also acknowledging his shared humanity. He notes differences between himself and others, and also incorporates those others into his self-hood.

The Cotton Is High also uses the concepts of ‘crowded self’ and ‘crowded style.’ The novel presupposes differences between characters from differing social and ethnic groups, while striving to overcome these differences through the course of the narrative. In this way, *The Cotton Is High* positions itself as border crossing fiction. The novel also directly engages with the theory of binary opposition—that is, Cotton at first defines himself as *not* Bangladeshi, *not* brown, *not* poor—and his identity is defined by that which separates him from the characters who surround him. The novel then strives to subvert such oppositions and to bridge the gap between individuals by dismantling these differences through the downfall of Cotton Walters. It strives to show how all humans are similar, as opposed to colonial texts that are in many ways interested in difference.

As an outsider in Bangladesh, Cotton undoubtedly notes differences between himself and the local characters who surround him. Furthermore, the gap between developing nations and more developed nations are, to him, enormous and insurmountable, for everywhere he looks there are signs of Bangladesh's poverty and underdevelopment (so much so that he has trouble looking past these differences and acknowledging the similarities between him and the characters). As Black notes:

Representations of this sort have long been considered a problem. Postcolonial, feminist, and ethnic-minority forms of literary criticism produced in the late twentieth-century tend to describe such endeavors as hegemonic exercises that commit new forms of representational violence, even (and often especially) when the subject hopes to valorize or redeem its object of description ... The very desire to know another is frequently marked as suspect and contaminated longing, one that leads to new forms of self-deceit in the guise of seeking the truthful and real. While such theories were once radical and necessary challenges to hegemonic forms of representation, their influence is now so widespread as to constitute a new set of critical givens. (2-3)

Working with these critical givens, as shown throughout this exegesis, I have thus attempted to engage with and surmount certain limitations put in place by postcolonial discourse. That is, by meditating on acts of hegemony and purposefully representing and mocking them, I hope to have moved beyond certain representations that could be considered colonial. Cotton is a dunce and the Bangladeshi characters are described in many multifaceted ways through the eyes of this dunce. By doing so, I believe I have called attention to certain traditional representations of the 'other' that could be considered to perpetuate the 'other's' single-story. But by mocking Cotton

and his perceptions, I have also mocked those who perceive the ‘other’ through such a lens. My novel is, in this sense, a satire—and in that way it differentiates itself from the novels that Black dissects in her literary analyses, while also falling under the category of “border-crossing fiction.”

Part Two:

Fictionalizing a Developing Nation

Overview

“This country is the opposite of Australia, with its crowded streets and its unruly behavior. No drunks, just one billion insane people” (Whalen). This sentence—taken from an entry written in my Bangladeshi journal—is a sentence that epitomizes why I would eventually choose Bangladesh as the setting of my novel. Written from the vantage point of a twenty-four year old American who has never visited South Asia before, the entry is ripe with ethnocentrism, hyperbole and logical fallacy. It employs the fallacy of faulty generalization by suggesting that a large percentage of the population has a certain attribute because a sample of the population evinces that attribute. Moreover, by suggesting that Australia is a country filled with “drunks” and Bangladesh a country of “insane people,” it perpetuates stereotypes and thus highlights how people are different, rather than how they are similar.

It is a point of view I end up mocking in *The Cotton Is High*. For this is the point of the novel: it is a journey away from differences, toward similarities. That is, Cotton begins the story with the mentality described above, noticing only differences between his past and present settings, and therefore separating himself from others. Indeed, some of the novel’s core conflict revolves around this struggle to understand and assimilate what Cotton sees as irreconcilable discrepancies between the setting he finds himself within and the settings in which he has previous lived. Setting is

therefore of primary importance to the novel, as are characters. People (characters) eventually help Cotton see similarities between the setting of Bangladesh and the setting of Hollywood. Setting is also of primary importance to this exegesis, and to postcolonial discourse in general, for the ‘other’ is often located in settings that are not the protagonist’s home or norm. Stories like *Heart of Darkness*, *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The Cotton Is High* (i.e. travel narratives) are thus bound together with questions of representation; that is, questions as to whether or not a writer can or should depict an ‘other’ culture, nationality or people.

But why Bangladesh? Why Bangladeshi’s? Why America and Americans? My objective was simply to contrast the two ‘worlds’ Cotton believes himself to be caught between—the more developed and developing—and to thus highlight and mock the struggles of Cotton’s upbringing by comparing and contrasting them to the struggles of character’s who surround Cotton on his journey abroad. Cotton could therefore have travelled to any developing nation, as he could have been born and spent time in any more developed nation. With that being said, Bangladesh and the United States were chosen for particular reasons. Namely, each country has a recent history, GDP, population density and geographical setting that greatly contrasts the ‘other;’ each country has a conventional image that I wanted to engage with, examine and recreate; and each country is a country I have researched through first-hand experience. For all of these reason, I chose Bangladesh as Cotton’s present setting and the United States as his past setting.

Providing a Framework to Fictionalize:

Country Profiles

Bangladesh (“land of the Bangla speakers”) is primarily fertile river delta, with two of the largest rivers in the world—the Ganges (*Pôdda*) and Brahmaputra (*Jomuna*)—flowing through the land (*desh*) on their way toward the Bay of Bengal. These major rivers and their respective tributaries annually flood the countryside during monsoon season; thus replenishing fertile silt deposits and sustaining the food supply of the nation. In fact, as Stuart Butler writes in the sixth edition of *Lonely Planet Bangladesh*: “...if you arrive by air during the monsoon season, you’ll be astounded at how much of the country appears to be under water – around 70%. And this will probably be just the normal flooding that occurs” (35). Severe storm surges (i.e. the not-normal flooding that occurs) also regularly damage crops, displace large proportions of the population, breed disease and cause significant loss-of-life. A March 1990 article in *The Geographical Journal* reports that: “Thirteen tropical cyclones struck coastal areas [of Bangladesh] between 1960 and 1970, culminating in the November 1970 cyclone and storm surge in which an estimated 300,000 people perished” (Brammer 12). Significant floods in Bangladesh have also been reported during the following years: 1954, 1955, 1956, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1970, 1974, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1991, 2004, 2005 and 2007 (Butler, “Bangladesh”).

In 2009, the year in which *The Cotton Is High* is based, another cyclone displaced over 500,000 people. Natural disasters, however, are not thematically explored within the novel; so much as the effects of natural disasters are of extreme importance. That is, severe floods displace significant amounts of Bangladesh’s rural population, causing villagers from all over the country to leave their homes and relocate. Many of the villagers travel to Dhaka—the capital city and setting of the novel. As such, Dhaka has experienced rapid mass urbanization that far surpasses its

industrial development.⁹ Dhaka is also constrained by “physical barriers such as the low-lying flood prone areas of the city,” reports Shahadat Hossain (7-8). Therefore, around 4.7 million people are “forced to live in a variety of slums in the city which are most vulnerable to flooding, unhealthy environments and diseases, and generally unsuitable for habitation” (Hossain 7-8). Cotton, who is living in the Gulshan district of Dhaka, stumbles into one such slum during the course of the novel. Its residents, and in particular, its children, make a significant impression on him. Such impressions prove to be turning points in the novel.

Bangladesh’s rainfall and countryside are also of significant importance to *The Cotton Is High*. Enamoured by the countryside, Cottons speaks of the “green swaths of land, all divided into squares, and the rivers cutting through them all brown and lethargic” (157). Bangladesh’s setting is thus characterized as green and brown, whereas the United States, in contrast, is typified by a wide range of geographies, including deserts, mountains, and plains. “The major characteristic of the United States,” writes Willard M. Wallace in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* ed. 7, “is probably its great variety. Its physical environment ranges from the Arctic to the subtropical, from the moist rain forest to the arid desert, from the rugged mountain peak to the flat prairie.” Of course, at 9,526,468 square kilometres, the United States is over fifty times the size of Bangladesh and can thus support a number of ecosystems. Southern California, where Cotton is from (and which he speaks about often), is an arid climate known for Santa Ana winds, which blow toward the coast from the Mojave Desert, as well as wild fires. Its surrounds thus provide a stark geographical foil to Bangladesh, known for its tropical climates and monsoons.

⁹ The growth rate of Dhaka’s population from 1974 to 2000 was 6.9%: the highest growth rate, during this period, of any city in the world (“Bangladesh”).

Another stark contrast between the United States and Bangladesh are the two countries differing populations. In terms of countries with over seven million people, Bangladesh—with an estimated average of 1,034 persons per square kilometre—is the most densely populated country on the planet.¹⁰ The United States, on the other hand, in terms of populations over seven million, is significantly less densely populated, with around 35 persons per square kilometre. “It’s no joke, Southern California has a lot of people. But Cotton ... Dhaka is like Disneyland on its busiest day, when the park is sold out and filled to capacity. But it’s half flooded. All those people are packed into half the space. *That’s Dhaka*” (7).

The sheer amount of people in Dhaka—an estimated 14.2 million—is a constant source of delight and horror to Cotton. “Faces in buses, faces in buildings, young men, old men, women and girls, beggars and businessmen were staring at me...” (100). Staring is another typical feature of Bangladesh. It is a common phenomena and is not necessarily perceived of as rude. “For most of us,” writes Butler in the culture section of the *Lonely Planet: Bangladesh*, “visiting Bangladesh is the closest we’ll come to achieving celebrity status. Anything unusual is a crowd magnet ... Keep it in perspective. You may be the most interesting thing that’s happened for a long time” (25). Cotton, however, does not keep it in perspective. That is, as he grows used to the staring he begins to enjoy the attention, which stirs his ego and eventually leads to trouble.

Though Cotton comes to enjoy the dense population, the truth is that it places an enormous burden on Bangladesh’s productive capacity, creating a food deficit. Underemployment also remains a problem in both rural and urban areas. According to

¹⁰ Bangladesh’s estimated population in 2009 was 158.5 million people (“Bangladesh”).

the CIA World Fact Book, “finding alternative sources of employment for the increasing number of landless peasants continues to be a daunting problem for future governments” (“Bangladesh”). Industry, typically the manufacturing of garments, knitwear, jute goods and textiles, represents only 11% of the workforce, though it accounts for 28.6% of the nation’s GDP; and typically women work in the garments industry—another significant factor in the context of the novel, as Cotton falls in love (or lust) with a garment worker he sees whilst wandering the streets of Gulshan.

I sought my idea of perfection, and found her, and held onto her with my gaze. She was my masterpiece. A coconut-skinned beauty with swollen lips and high cheekbones, she had dark eyes and a white shawl draped over a figure that could not be concealed. (18)

Despite Cotton’s infatuation with one such worker, sad facts remain. “Thirty percent of the population live on less than US \$1 per day,” Stuart Butler reports in *Lonely Planet: Bangladesh*, and, “on average, four people live on one person’s earnings” (26). On top of this fact is the fact that Bangladeshi policy makers must balance downward price pressures, which keep them competitive on a global scale, and development, which improves the country and increases prices on the global market (“Bangladesh”).

The United States is, once again, a different story. According to the CIA World Fact Book, “The US has the largest and most technologically powerful economy in the world.” Over three-fourths of its nominal GDP is dominated by the services sector; only 1.2% is based on agriculture, 19.1% on industry; and it has the highest GDP in the world, calculated either nominally or with purchasing power parity. The United States is thus one of the richest countries in the world, while Bangladesh is

one of the poorest.¹¹ The United States also ranked thirteenth on the Human Development Index (HDI¹²) in 2009. Bangladesh, conversely, fell into a category deemed Low Human Development, towards the bottom of the list.¹³ Furthermore, 41% of children under five in Bangladesh are reported by the CIA Fact Book to be underweight, whereas “one in three children in the United States [are reported to be] obese or overweight” (Abelson). Demographics could thus hardly display more polarized nations—one economically fat, the other starving.

Again, these were significant factors in my choice of representing Bangladesh and the United States as Cotton’s past and present settings. Another reason is that the single story of Bangladesh differs greatly from the story of the United States. That is, Bangladeshi and American stereotypes are quite different. “For many Westerners,” writes Thierry DiCostanzo in *Past and Present Perceptions of Bangladesh*, “Bangladesh rings with utmost misery. Very few in the media world manage to get away from the traditionally dominant tragic view of the country, one of cyclones and floods and ferry disasters...’ (12). The United States, on the other hand, is often

¹¹ The CIA World Fact Book’s estimates for nominal GDP per capita in 2009 are as follows: Bangladesh (\$226 billion USD), United States (\$14.4 trillion USD).

¹² A means of comparatively measuring life expectancy, literacy, education, standards of living and quality of life.

¹³ While the United States’ life expectancy at birth is 78.37 years, Bangladesh’s is 70.6 years. Literacy of the total U.S. population is 99%, whereas Bangladesh’s is 56.8% – 61.3% for men and 52.2% for women. The average citizen in the U.S. receives sixteen years of schooling; in Bangladesh, the average citizen receives only eight. (“Bangladesh,” “United States”).

portrayed as the land of opportunity. The “American Dream,” as defined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, is:

That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (214-215)

It is an idea embedded in the United States Declaration of Independence, which states “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (US 1776); and it is something in which Cotton debates in certain sections of the novel:

... and I wanted so badly to tell him what I had grown up hearing from my father. I wanted to say: Opu, you can do it. You can do anything you put your mind to. You are great. You are capable. You’re amazing. But I couldn’t say any of that, because the odds were not even remotely stacked in his favor. (81)

The single story of America—from the perspective of Cotton and many other Americans—is one of a place where dreams can be made; whereas Bangladesh is often perceived of as a “basket case.” As Stuart Butler notes about the late 2007 cyclone that claimed several thousand Bangladeshi lives:

Within hours of Cyclone Sidr smashing into southwest Bangladesh, the world’s media and aid organization were on the move and Bangladesh

was about to find herself wrenched back out of obscurity and once again presented to the global community as a classic ‘basket case’ of disaster. (11)

Butler thus suggests that Bangladesh is, in some sense, a forgotten country, unimportant in the minds of the Western media (and Westerners) until disaster strikes and reinforces tropes that have been presented since Bangladesh’s independence. He also references a quote from the former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, and Kissinger’s assertion that Bangladesh “is and always will be an international basket case” (Butler 11). This is an assertion that is unfortunately still dominant in current media sources, as shown by Sadanand Dhume 2010 *Wall Street Journal* article:

Not long ago when you thought of a South Asian country ravaged by floods, governed by bumlbers and apparently teetering on the brink of chaos, it wasn’t Pakistan that came to mind. That distinction belonged to Bangladesh.

Tragedy, poverty and chaos are therefore the single stories of Bangladesh; and, again, they are true stories—as the story of America’s wealth is true—but to present them as Bangladesh’s only story is to leave out the factors that attributed to its current state. Namely, a recent history that includes colonial rule, civil war, military coups’ and a particularly harsh geographical position that is prone to disaster. To present Bangladesh as a country of “insane” people (as I did, privately, in my journal entry) is to insult a nation that has produced people like Muhummad Yunus, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who invented the microfinance concept, or Fazlur Kahn, the “Einstein of structural engineering,” who designed the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the United States. Bangladesh’s country profile does present a country that is extremely poor, and to ignore that fact is to ignore 250,000 people who today live in severe

poverty, but to stereotype Bangladeshi's as "insane" is to insult a nation. For poverty does not equal sanity, and poverty is not Bangladesh's only story. To present it as such is, simply, incorrect.

First Hand Conflict:

The Influence of Personal Experience

On the morning of May 17th, 2009, I arrived in Dhaka with my then girlfriend, now fiancée, and was picked up at the airport by N and G: two friends of the family, a couple. At the arrival gate their driver took our bags and led us toward the small, crowded parking lot. Their vehicle was an SUV with tinted windows and leather seats. The driver was a Bangladeshi man, friendly, with dark sunglasses and a habit of chiming in when conversation lulled. We drove toward N and G's house, through Dhaka city, and on the way passed a seemingly endless stream of women dressed in colorful shawls. These were factory workers, I would learn. "Nike has a factory here," N would tell us. "These girls make around ten to fifteen cents a day." I was shocked. The concept of "factory girls" had always been just that—a concept. Now here were the very real faces behind the concept.

That afternoon I made my way to the bedroom where my girlfriend and I were to sleep. I sat at the desk by the window, opened my journal, and wrote my first impressions of Bangladesh: "Today ... I stared out the window of our fine, embassy automobile. Women poured in a flood through the streets: turquoise robes, orange

robes, saris, all of them with their left nostrils pierced” (Whalen). This entry, adopted three years later for my first novel, *The Cotton Is High*, reads as follows:

She disappeared as quickly as she had come, but was followed by another girl in another shawl. That girl passed and another came. They kept coming. Groups of two’s and three’s, talking and giggling. They were all wearing the most beautiful fabrics I had ever seen: blues like the firmament and reds like the center of the earth, greens like rivers and oranges like egg yolks ... They all had gold rings in their left nostrils and red dots between their brows – *all of them*. (16-17)

Of course, back then I did not know that the ideas I was madly scribbling in my journal would one day reappear in my first novel. Journaling, as mentioned in the introduction, was simply a daily practice that I had been doing for over a year. While experiencing Bangladesh, it did not occur to me that I might want to keep detailed notes for a future book, and yet I seemed to have an inclination that the experiences might one day make an interesting story—an inclination that the experiences were, in some way, important on a scale larger than myself. Indeed, the need (and inability) to capture the stories pouring into my senses is a theme that runs throughout the Bangladeshi journal. “[I]t dawns on me,” I write in an entry dated May 20th, 2009, “that there are one million stories, one million images, lives, tragedies, I’ll never be able to get them all down on paper” (Whalen). And that is the truth: I was not able to get them all down on paper. But I tried. And I tried again when I returned from Bangladesh, in the short story form.

Now, nearly four years since last I visited Dhaka, I have tried, once again, in the form of a novel. To do so is to write a *roman a clef* (French: “novel with a key”). Many writers have previously written in a similar fashion; that is, they have written

novels in which “real people or events appear with invented names” (“roman a clef”). Hemmingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Kerouac’s novels are famous examples. *Heart of Darkness* is also said to be derived from Conrad’s personal experiences in the Congo. And that is how I chose to write my novel, for—as noted in the introduction—my best writing tends to be based off true-to-life experiences.

My experiences in Bangladesh were, undoubtedly, life changing. It was not the first developing nation I had been to. In fact, by the time I arrived in Dhaka I had visited much of Asia, including Indonesia, Malaysia and so forth, and I had visited Central America, as well. But Bangladesh was like a slap in the face. “It’s overwhelming,” I wrote in one entry:

It’s like drugs—overindulgence of the senses—without drugs being necessary. The light these people cast—infinite arrays of intelligences. One thousand eyes staring through your skull—the muscles of brown backs in unbearable sun, like slaves. Underdeveloped to an unbelievable degree. How could I account for all these things? How could I possibly remember a day as good as this? (Whalen)

The confluence of horror and beauty, like a leper with a joyous grin, was shocking. The influx of images, stories, information and history pouring into my senses from all sides was too overwhelming to manage. That is, Bangladesh was both shockingly appalling and shockingly beautiful: a theme running through the journal as well as the novel. Everything was intense. Each moment etched itself in my memory, and some of the etchings were lurid. Some involved children. Others involved my own culpability in a system that allowed children to go hungry. Indeed, the disparity between my life and the lives of those who surrounded me is what troubled me most.

As mentioned, my fiancée and I were staying with friends of her family. These friends were involved in extremely good causes. One worked as a water specialist and was, at the time, involved in a scheme whereby inflatable dams were set up in villages to allow the villagers to better control the flooding of their rice crops, thus increasing harvest potential and food supplies for the nation. The other friend was involved in working and fundraising for a school of handicap children, a particularly marginalized group in Bangladesh. These projects were by far more humanitarian than any paid occupation I had ever been involved in, and still I had trouble living in our friends' home—a veritable mansion—whilst being surrounded by such destitution. This conflict, however, also seemed childish.

My adolescent years were one's of relative wealth, even within the American context. But I was unaccustomed to being chauffeured by a driver, fed by a cook and cared for by maids. In the context of Bangladesh, I knew it was perfectly normal for families to have domestic help. But still it was strange (and, at times, difficult) to live amongst such splendour while surrounded by such poverty. The environments I had been raised within—the ideals of the American dream and Australian fair go—were deep seeded, but in Bangladesh these concepts were obsolete. Life was not fair. The poor and uneducated would most likely remain poor and uneducated. To ignore the gap between their lives and mine was also not an option—it surrounded me—and yet there was no clear clue as to how to close this gap. At the same time, this conflict felt naïve. I could hear my hard-nosed father arguing in my ear: “Are we to go without food because those people are hungry? Should we starve with them? Should we go without clothes because those who made them were underpaid?” The obvious answer seemed to be: No, these problems are larger than one person. But never before had the gap between my life and the lives of other been so visceral.

We walked, one day, through the slum across the lake from where we were staying. I had peered at this slum from the rooftop of N and G's mansion—had admired the sun as it set behind the ramshackle huts—and now we were walking through it: me, my fiancé, and G, who had taken us there to visit a friend. We walked in the slum and it was muddy, as you might expect, and we met a young girl, probably ten to twelve years old, same age as one of my cousins (a cousin who is very dear to me, like a sister). And like my cousin, this girl was beautiful, with a healthy, youthful glow, big brown eyes, a shy smile and a gaze that seemed to take in everything around her. Unlike my cousin, however, this girl was severely injured. Through a translator she explained that she had been swimming, several days before, in the lake next to their house, like the children always do. She had reached out to move a branch, but the branch turned out to be a live wire and her hand had been singed to the bone with a severe electric burn. She stood there before us, embarrassed that we had noticed her ugly hand, and we examined it and decided to take her to the hospital. For the flesh was rotting. This tiny girl's hand was rotting because the burn had gone untreated. And that affected me. It bothered me—in fact, it angered me, as it still does—that this little girl, no different than my cousin, with the same youthful curiosity and the same beauty, had nearly lost her hand doing absolutely nothing wrong. It angered me that the country was so underdeveloped as to allow for live wires to sit in their lakes, and it angered me that she was only one of many at risk of such easily avoidable dangers, one of many untreated for want of money.

The point is, Bangladesh deeply affected me. So much so that I felt I *had* to write about my experiences there, for they seemed to represent a deeper malaise that many are sick of talking about: the gap between developing and more developed nations. “Who will write about these things if not for me?” I ask in one entry. And I

realize now that this question is precisely what disturbs so many postcolonial scholars. For it implies that the Bangladeshi people are not capable of speaking for themselves. It implies that they are in need of a voice to speak for them. But that is not my intention. My intention is to point out the absurdity of the gap between nations like Australia and Bangladesh. My novel does not attempt to speak *for* Bangladeshi's, nor does it attempt to speak for Americans and Australians. I have attempted to address the world, instead.

“The very desire to know another,” writes Black, “is frequently marked as suspect and contaminated longing...“(2). To “know another,” I should point out, was not my goal. My goal was to truthfully translate my experiences. By doing so, I have attempted to speak to that which unites us all. What Whitman would call, “the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands” (41); what Faulkner labelled as “the old universal truths, love and honor and pity and pride and sacrifice and compassion” (“William Faulkner – Banquet Speech”).

For we roamed the streets of Dhaka. We visited the neighbourhood across the lake. We compared our lives to the lives of those who surrounded us, as we all do. I wrote in my journal about these experiences and would eventually adopt and transform them into *The Cotton Is High*. I would point out the absurdity of the gap between developing and more developed nations, for the absurdity, during my stay, was palpable. A family member, back in California, was steadily dropping their life savings into slot machines; meanwhile, kids around me were starving while I walked through their lives intellectualising their dilemmas. This absurdity is what drive *The Cotton Is High*. It is a direct by-product of the setting in which the novel is based, a direct by-product of my personal experiences within that country. “The slum,” I write in an entry dated May 20th, 2009, “was a labyrinth of ramshackle huts, filled with

people—a literal city made from the leftovers of the actual; the bottom of the bottom of the bottom: the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh” (Whalen). Learning how to engage with my experiences, however, would take several years. The passage of time and the ability to more objectively read myself, as well as several drafts, would eventually produce *The Cotton Is High*. But I had to learn through trial and error how to represent a fictional version of Bangladesh without relying on colonial tropes of excessive sentimentality.

Fictionalizing a Developing Nation:

Writing *The Cotton Is High*

At first, I failed—the short stories I wrote about Bangladesh, upon returning to Australia, tended to point out the absurdity between developing and more developed nations, but refused to find the absurdity humorous. They noticed differences, but refused to notice similarities. They featured American characters in Bangladesh, and the Americans were always selfish; the Bangladeshi’s were often pitifully and helpless. They were all stereotypes. The juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness was there, but only as a backdrop. Mostly it was the ugliness of the country, the heaviness, and the frailty of the narrator that shone through.

This, I am sure, is due to the fact that the experiences were, at first, too close to me. I had returned to Australia noticeably shaken by the recent trip overseas—so much so that I did not feel capable of speaking about the experiences, let alone writing about them. The sights and sounds, good and bad, were still very vivid. The gap between what I had seen and felt versus what I was able to describe was

enormous. My writing skills, I felt, were not yet good enough to capture the conflicts going through me. But eventually I tried.

Indeed, writing about what I had seen helped me to better understand what I was feeling. I wrote serious stories. Serious in the sense that they took themselves very seriously. But I could not, at that point, see myself as a character. I could only write moral tales, lectures on the travesties in Bangladesh. My stories were, in a sense, “hegemonic exercises” that perpetuated another form of “representational violence” (Black 14). They presented the single story of Bangladesh; and like Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, my characters all had specifically designed roles: the wealthy American whose heart will be moved, the poor Bangladeshi girl who inspires pity. The overwhelming emotion my stories conveyed was one of guilt. “You should feel guilty and lucky for having been born in Australia,” they seemed to say, as I felt guilty and lucky for having been born in the United States.

Luckily, none of the stories were accepted for publication. They were read aloud, however, to a sizeable audience at the 2009 National Young Writers Festival in Newcastle. This reading proved to be an important learning experience. For I realized during the reading, when a significant proportion of the audience rolled their eyes and/or guffawed at me, that if I were to reach my audience I would have to engage with them in a different tone. At that point, however, I did not know which tone that might be. And so I gave up on writing about Bangladesh, figuring that one day, when I was a better writer, I would be able to capture what I wanted to convey.

Three year later, I returned to the Bangladeshi journal (and the Bangladeshi stories) and saw my experiences and myself in a new light. I was a disaster tourist, I realized—one who travels to a disaster area out of curiosity—and I was absurd. My constant questioning, worrying, guilt, and judgments were humorous. The

juxtaposition of my life and troubles versus the life and troubles of those around me was also humorous. I had made fun of American characters, had made fun of Australian characters, but had refused to make fun of myself. And I had refused to make fun of Bangladeshi's, thus, essentially, discriminating.

To engage with the absurdity of the gap between developing and more developed nations, I realized, would have to be done so with humour. Humour was the tone I was searching for. Of course, children with oedema due to malnutrition are not in the least way humorous. However, in reading my journal and my reaction to a "malnourished pot belly," I found humour. "His instinct," I wrote in that entry, for some reason in the third person, "was to laugh and poke her belly in jest, as he would with his American niece: a girl of the same age" (Whalen). Reading the journal, I wondered: What was I thinking? To "laugh and poke her belly in jest"? Why would I want to poke this poor girl's stomach? The journal entries were oftentimes filled with such strange impulses and observations. "Her face is completely covered in boils," I wrote in an entry dated May 16th, 2009. "I can see it now! though I could only look for an instant. Stare and you feel obligated to pay. Stare and you may never get to sleep again" (Whalen). The entries are often sad, yes, but in retrospect I could not help but laugh at my true and often politically incorrect descriptions.

By seeing myself as a buffoon, I could see how I needed to present my main character. That is, I would have to accentuate his buffoonery—to eliminate all sense of guilt from the narrative—and to thus relieve some of the weight that such topics bring to the fore. To do so would highlight my themes. That is, I was able to address the topics I had always wanted to address by mocking everything: more developed nations and their problems through the eyes of a buffoon, developing nations and their problems through the eyes of a buffoon, and, of course, the buffoon himself. The

novel was satirical, I realized. That was the key to engaging my audience. Make it funny. Keep it light. But do not change the themes.

I immediately set to work, having spent the first two years of my PhD writing novels that did not pan out, and in just over a month I had a full first draft ready. The themes were there, but it was rough. I submitted the draft to my supervisor, received positive feedback, and continued from there by writing full time for the next three months. During the writing process I stumbled upon two more resources that would provide both direction and distraction: *Henderson: The Rain King* by Saul Bellow, and the animated sitcom, *Southpark*. Both of these influences were humorous; both dealt with heavy themes, as well, without taking themselves too seriously. In *Henderson: The Rain King*, the main character, Eugene Henderson, is an intellectual buffoon, much like Cotton. By the time I got to this novel I had already finished a first draft of my novel, but *Henderson* would help guide subsequent drafts. The balance between humour and sadness, I realized, was key, as was the importance of making the often-rude Cotton likeable without making him appear weak or too likeable. Furthermore, *Southpark* was key. After long writing days, sometimes twelve hours or more, I would relax and watch an episode of this crude comedy. The sitcom was satire. It stands amidst an issue and makes fun of the extremes, which is precisely what I wanted to do with *Cotton*. That is, I wanted to simultaneously point out how ridiculous it is to constantly separate people based upon divisions of nationality or economy; and I wanted to point out how ridiculous it suggest that there are no differences. I wanted to mock the postcolonial idea that we cannot write about an ‘other’ culture, while at the same time mocking past attempts that have unintentionally perpetuated “representational violence” on the subject they aimed to

capture. In other words, I wanted to stand amidst postcolonial debates and make fun of the extremes.

And I have. Not only did I write about an ‘other’ culture, but I have also made fun of that culture. In my opinion, this does less harm to my object of representation than softly treading around the subject of difference. In other words, all characters are equally mocked. By doing so, I have worked “against familiar forms of intrusive imagination in the encounter with difference” (Black 14). My subject is not harmed, for the view of the subject is obviously from an untrustworthy, absurdist narrator. It is my own, past point-of-view mocked to its utmost degree, as it deserves to be. In this satire, I see potential. That is, the potential to question “ideologies of inferiority” (Black 14). For through the eyes of Cotton Walters, the setting is *sincerely* disturbing, though oftentimes it is disturbing due to what Cotton chooses to describe. For example, upon entering a sweatshop for the first time, he says:

I hadn’t expected all those beautiful girls to be sitting behind sewing machines, and I remember thinking: Who the fuck still sews? The only person I know who owns a machine is my grandmother, and last time I checked it was gathering dust in her attic. So I don’t know *anyone* who sews. Not a single person. But there—under high ceilings with bare bulbs, sitting at long tables—were hundred of girls behind machines that sounded like firing guns. (23).

Preoccupied with cleanliness, accidentally socially inept, Cotton illuminates the themes that have interested me since I began my travels abroad; themes I have longed to write about since first setting foot in another country. Again and again, the problems of the developing world are thus illuminated by Cotton’s perceptions—perceptions that, for better or worse, are often based on my own thoughts, experiences

and journal entries. "Yesterday we walked around the slums and then ate at the fanciest restaurant in town," I wrote in an entry dated May 7th, 2009. Indeed, the world is, at times, absurd.

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