Woolly Visions

A short novel by Chris Benjamin

Chapter 1

In fact…well, I still don't claim to know the facts. But I'll give you my opinions straight up.

In my opinion, I was a perfectly ordinary fumbling bumbler, stumbling through life the best I could with a broken ego, overloaded brain, and triggerless decision-making mechanism. Triggerless, you see? I couldn't *kill* anything, which made existence rather difficult since every life equals thousands of deaths, especially where I come from, which is Canada. I know, I know, you think Canada's horsefly harmless and paradise green, but I guess you didn't know that every day millions of Canadians kill bacteria by the billion, not to mention all the cows we nipple rape to make all that poutine, and if you consider carefully the kids who can't be fed because of what we hoard…but I guess you don't care about that stuff. *You* wanna know about last week. Well I was just tryna point out that I was an ordinary overeducated idiot is all, and had no realistic visions or plans of becoming anything else any time soon. The only reason I was even in Indonesia in the first place was a lack of other options; otherwise I'd still be in Toronto thinking things over.

That Monday I was walking down my street, *Jalan Bunga*, which translates literally to Flower Road. I was walking south toward that sledge-grey harbour – *Losari* Beach - watching the smog-grey sky, which at night lights up red in the most beautiful impressionist sunset, sunbeams ricocheting off carbon particles and faeces, and you can no longer tell the difference between the sea and the sky. Monet couldn't do that, only Allah can, with a little help from human emission, or *o*mission, or *a* mission, one of those.

Anyway, the 'Hey Meesters' were out in locust droves that day – Well, they always are, and one shouted "Hey Meester! Fuck Youuuu." He was staring and pointing and eyeing me; maybe he didn't even know what 'fuck you' means, probably heard it at an American movie, thought it was a greeting.

Meester is what they call white folks over there. You hear the same thing all over the Third World, whether you're a bule, gringo, honky, blanco, whatever, you're a whitey in a world of darker-skinned folk, and a source of fascination, desire, envy, curiosity, even hate, depending on who's around. By this point I was used to it. In Indonesia I got google-eyes and whistles from women who thought I looked like Tom Cruise – I'm not kidding. Fuck, I look more like Tom Green. In Indonesia I was a walking bag of cash to the merchants, servicemen, drivers, buskers and beggars; I was striding sex to the girls, and I was a symbol of the great unknown to the rest. But all I really was, and all I really am, is a somewhat shy vagabond in search of relative self-fulfilment.

Anyway I flagged a bus on the street by the water. I love taking buses in the Third World. You climb in and they all smile like 'Wow! White Boy on the bus.' And you climb in real tight and the next thing you know someone's jammed on the other side of you, and maybe she has a chicken or some other fowl in a cage or some fish in a plastic bag or whatever, but it's hot and there's so many smells in the air, fish and fowl and also cigarettes burning or garbage burning. The music is cranked and the bass is booming a driving beat, and you just sit there and dig the scenery: houses on stilts made of sheet metal, oceans or trees, cities with bums and burns on their bodies, and that bus just whips in and out of traffic at 90 miles an hour and you know your life should be flashin' before your eyes, but instead you just chill with the music pumping,

conscious mainly of your own sweat, till you reach your destination, climb over everybody and climb out – pay your 50 cents and go on with your day.

There in Makassar, Indonesia, the bus system consists of thousands of little blue caravans with the side doors open, a skinny bench along each side where people sit, and room for one up front to sit next to the driver. They seat eight comfortably, and 12 usually, 16 or more if needed, plus one driver, and of course any merchandise, produce or livestock to be sold at the marketplace. And that was the first strange thing I noticed that day, is the bus was empty.

Did I mention the ignorance of my intellectual bliss? I don't even know where I get my information from, but I haven't read a newspaper in 14 years. Did I mention the naïve gullibility of my hapless nature? I used to think it was cute, sexy even. It got me into the strangest situations, that hapless nature did, gave me dangerous adventures and accompanying adrenaline rushes, and left me with funny stories to email my friends. Then last week, it got me into – But I'll tell you right now, so we have it straight, I was just a conscientious observer, and not all that conscientious in retrospect, barely conscious more accurately. Anyway the past is just a memory so what can I do but revise it? I'm just kidding; I'm tryna tell the truth to you, as best I can recall it. On Allah's name.

As it was I hadn't seen the news that day, naturally, and didn't have the detective acumen to suspect anything worse than the very best of luck – "Today I get the front seat!" I had never had the front seat before; usually I considered myself lucky if I got a spot away from the inevitable rusted out hole in the floor, through which I would feel the painful heat of the engine against my bare leg.

"*Pagi*!" I greeted the driver, who was literally beside himself when he heard me speak his language. I mean he literally stepped outside of himself, and took a seat in the back, and then

there were two drivers, except one wasn't driving. But they were both amazed I could speak but one word of their language – They spoke none of mine, but they wanted to learn how to say "*Pete-pete*!" in English. "Bus!" I told them. Within minutes, my two apt students were shouting entire phrases into the empty streets around them. "Bus! Take the bus! Hey stupid-head! Take the bus!" I started imagining the laughing faces that should have been crowding the streets; imagine being insulted in a foreign language – the hilarity! But where were those laughing faces? Never had I seen such empty Indonesian streets.

Only the driver, his passenger self and I were laughing, belly laughing till the tears were real and the hilarity hurt. "Take the bus, Stupid-head!"

Somehow through a tear-eyed glaze the front-seat driver caught a glimpse of the crowd in their neon orange real estate blazers, blocking the road in a motor-scooter blockade, chanting "*Menurun harganya bensin*!" They were frenzied in passionate pro-gas fervour; they demanded lower gas prices. See, the Indonesian feds were under a World Bank and International Monetary Fund squeeze to cut debt, or no more eight billion dollar loans, so they cut gas subsidies. President Suharto did the same thing in '98 and it led to his downfall – which is funny because 30 years of murder oppression pillaging pilfering patronage and nepotism to the tune of uncountable billions couldn't do it. Basically you don't fuck with an Indonesian's cheap gas.

The protestors' faces were demonstrative, veins popping blue through brown forehead skin, rocket-ship eyes on battle-mask faces. Had I been truly Indonesian literate and half inclined to read a newspaper I'd have known to stay home, and had I been truly steel-trap minded with intestinal fortitude I'd have never left my love in Canada, nor taken her with me, rather stayed asleep in her goose down bed covered in organic linen, exploring the theories of her skin.

"The skin."

"The skin is the best part."

"Yeah."

"Better than Mastermind games."

"Better than Cannes commercials."

"Yeah." But one never knows when sex expeditions might avalanche into cold boulders of regret either.

As the driver jake-braked 180 degrees he leaned out his window and screamed "Take the bus you stupidheads! *Fuck* youuuuu!" His English was multiplying without my help. I was just an unconscious catalyst.

Behind us engines revved in a real estate salesman motor scooter brigade with all the menace of a biker gang turf war. On empty streets they had finally found a live target at which to aim their anger. The driver smiled bigger and drove faster. Chickens scurried, goats grazed indifferently on roadside grass, colourful houses of purple and yellow streaked past our periphery, others Chinese-style with ornate red dragons and triangular funky architecture spun like 60's psychedelia. Two very dark-skinned West Papuan men in traditional loincloth garb with bare muscular chests were selling tools made from bones and other souvenirs on the street-side, glaring at me through the *pete-pete* window as if they were seeing the devil but refused to show fear. A madman tried to attack a woman in a *becek* and two cooler heads pulled him away from her.

It all blew through our periphery, yet I couldn't remember them being there on our first pass. The motor scooter brigade was hot at our tailgate, bandanna masked for minimum

protection from our noxious smoke, but they ignored or didn't notice the Indonesian landscape as it choked on exhaust fumes, the last of their cheap gas.

The driver rogued down a ghetto side street too narrow for the motor scooter brigade. A column of scooters two wide and four deep made it through and the rest collided with prison bar storefronts owned by merchants of cheap gold, a Makassar specialty. At the end of the alley we bulleted across the main drag and straight toward the Makassar Ambassador Hotel. The driver yanked the jake-brake again and we screeched parallel to the lobby doors. The remaining protestors converged from behind us all around the hotel. We squeezed inside just before the concierge closed and barred the Plexiglas doors. From the inside safety we watched as the protestors hurled rocks against the Plexiglas in staccato collisions.

A tall handsome white man wearing lipstick popped his head through a boardroom door marked #7 and into the lobby, and when he saw what he saw there he opened his mouth and screamed silently, slightly ruffling two hairs out of place. He fixed them, then turned sharply back into Room #7, slamming the teak panelled door behind him. It was then I noticed who I thought was Liza Minelli smoking a cigarette in a pleather chair, as if she was the centrepiece of the marble lobby.

Chapter 2

"Excuse me, aren't you-?"

"Yes, Ingmar," she said. "Ingmar Bergman."

"Ingmar Bergman? Isn't he a dead film guy?"

"If he was a dead he, he wouldn't be me," she told me. "Although come to think of it you'd be surprised how many dead guys there are around here – you'd think it was a fucking ghost writers convention. Ha! I should write that down. Hey, what's going on out there?"

"Gas protest, if I'm understanding them right."

"Gas. What could they possibly have against gas?"

"Well, actually I think they are protesting against the high *cost* of gas. They're demanding that the price of gas be lowered."

"Why are they here?"

"That I don't know. Are you sure you're not-?"

"Yes! I'm sure. I'm Ingmar Bergman. Ingmar fucking Berman you got it, kid?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"What do you want? Why are you bothering me?"

"Oh, sorry, I just wanted to – I thought you were – someone else. Sorry."

"Oh excuse me, you thought I was someone else. Ingmar Bergman isn't good enough for you, huh? You wanted someone better than that. Excuse me for being little ole Ingmar Bergman!"

"Now, clearly I didn't mean it like-"

"Who the fuck are you might I ask?"

"Me? I'm Koko. Koko Valentine."

"You're named after chocolate. Must've been your mother's idea, named after what she wished she'd been doing instead the night you were conceived – drinking hot cocoa maybe."

"No, it's not- Hey listen, Ingmar! I don't need to take that from you."

"Did I ask for this conversation? Did I flag you down and beg you to come over here and accuse me of being someone I'm not and *then* being disappointed at who I am and *then* cry because I make fun of your stupid name?"

"It's Koko, K-O-K-O. It's an Indonesian name actually."

"You don't look Indonesian."

"It was my grandfather's nickname during the war. He was stationed here for a while, and he hung out a lot with the locals, so the guys he served with gave him a local name to tease him."

"Ha! More likely he had a local concubine who couldn't pronounce his real name. And the last name was?"

"Valentine."

"Valentine, how romantic, Koko. Hey, wanna coffee, you sexy bitch?"

"I'd love one, Ingmar."

"What about your friend?"

"Oh, uhh, *kopi*?" The two drivers nodded sure, they'd love one, and the three of us sat down with Ingmar, who ordered three cups from the concierge, who in turn seemed confused by the order as he walked slowly to the adjoining restaurant and ordered them for her.

"Aren't you having a coffee, Ingmar?"

"Yes, that's why I ordered three, genius."

"But there are four of us."

"You, your friend, and me, that's three people. Are you on something? Can't be gas, apparently it's too expensive. Must be crack. Are you on crack?"

"No. I have *two* friends, see? This is the *pete-pete* driver, and this is his twin."

"His twin…You *are* on something."

She was on something, I thought. There they were the two identical drivers smiling huge and confused but clearly happy to be there, off the road and sitting with foreigners. I brokenly asked them to say something for her benefit.

"*Pagiiii*!" They greeted her in unison.

"Hear that?" I asked her. "Two voices."

"Crack, it's definitely crack. No, wait, a hallucinogen. I've never tried them myself, coffee and wine are the only drugs I use, and some prescription painkillers, for my back, in moderation of course. Do you really see, and apparently hear, two people there? Or are you just fucking with the old lady for kicks?"

The concierge brought us three coffees, and the two drivers gratefully shared one. Having never been that confident in my own perception of reality, I decided to change the subject. "Ahh, I'm just fucking with the old lady for kicks I guess. I'm a real jerk sometimes. You know though, in all seriousness, you're supposed to go get the coffee yourself. I'm not even sure we should be drinking it in here."

"He didn't seem to mind."

"He's too polite to say anything. He was probably deathly afraid of loosing potential customers the whole time he was gone."

"But there are 20 other people working here who could sign them in!"

"Ingmar," I explained, "every person in this lobby has a role. You just sent the concierge, whose primary role is to sign people into their rooms, to get us coffee, when you could have gotten it yourself. Now his post is vacant, and strange as that may seem, that's how it works here."

"Wow!" she said with MTV enthusiasm, "You learn something new every day you're in this dump!"

It was then that the tall handsome man from Room # 7 literally waltzed into the room with an apple in one hand and a plastic black purse in the other, and spun to an abrupt halt before Ingmar.

"Chairman!" bellowed Ingmar, right into his pretty face from poking distance. "What the fuck do you want now?"

Chairman took a seat, bowed his head, and slowly looked up at her, face full of angst. "Are you planning to rejoin us today or should I just go ahead and do," and that was when his voice hit a fevered screaming pitch, "the whole fucking 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important' speech myself!?"

The hotel staff were scurrying all around us, the protestors' rocks were still playing percussion on the Plexiglas window, and Ingmar just looked back at Chairman with these big brown still eyes, batted her lashes as she lit a cigarette and seductively sucked it. None of the hotel staff paid us any mind as they ran rhythmically round our centrepiece selves, doing some kind of occupational hazard dance. There were no guests to be seen. Chairman paid the drivers and me no mind; the drivers sat smiling like corporate employees posing for an annual report picture.

The crowd outside was getting ever more frenzied as Ingmar pulled a big bottle of *Bintang*, a local beer, out of a cooler beneath her chair. She cracked it with her hands, though it wasn't a twist-off, took a sip, then a drag, and said, “I'll be in shortly, Timmy – Be a dear and wait for me a moment.” I was inexplicably enthralled by Ingmar's and Chairman Timmy's conversation, their confrontation. I don't know why; the melee outside should have been much more interesting really, but I had nowhere to go, and this whole thing felt like fate for an unconscious conscientious observer like me, maybe because I could just watch and not really be there, like the quiet smiling backseat driver.

Chairman Timmy's surface calmed a lot and he asked her, “Is something wrong? Why don't you just come in now – I think they're ready for us.”

“Because.” She sighed silently. “Because I'm still a little ill. I've had food poisoning. Stay away from the curried mutton," she advised with a knowing wink and a sip of her big beer.

“Of course!” cried Chairman Timmy. “I'd never eat of a murdered sentient being.” He chomped his apple as if it was an exclamation point.

“But how do you know the apple tree didn't feel loss when its apple was picked, or that the apple isn't softly crying as we speak?” I piped in, but was met with two looks of disdainful scorn, so I shut my mouth. Besides, now was not the time for such trivial pursuits, Indonesia was at stake - I could feel it in my ignorant intuition.

“Shall we go in?” he asked again. “You don't look sick to me, Madeleine, you look pissed. What's in yer bonnet?” Madeleine. He called her Madeleine.

“I'm not pissed,” said Ingmar/Madeleine. “I'm sick.” And another big beer sip.

“Bullshit!” said Chairman Timmy, slamming down his black handbag. He grabbed the passing concierge by the sleeve and ordered a coffee.

"You're supposed to go get the coffee yourself," said Ingmar/Madeleine. "I'm not even sure we should be drinking it in here." And another big sip.

"He didn't seem to mind."

"He's too polite to say anything. He is probably deathly afraid of loosing potential customers."

"But there are 20 other people working here who could sign them in!"

She looked hard into Chairman Timmy's eyes like she was looking at the reflection of her own failure. "Timmy," she explained, "every person in this lobby has a role. You just sent the concierge, whose primary role is to sign in guests, to get coffee, when you could have gotten it yourself. Now his post is vacant, and strange as that may seem to you, that's how it works here."

"Okay," he answered, "so you've just proved my theory that you're pissed."

"Oh fuck," said Ingmar/Ingmar. "Okay I'm pissed!" She sipped. "This whole thing's a mess. All I wanted was to save the world. The men and women in that room are the brightest minds the world has ever seen. I get them here to talk about saving the world, creating lasting peace and harmony among all races, creeds, genders, ages, classes, levels of celebrity, levels of intelligence and ability, levels of good-lookingness, size, all species in fact, even the fuckin' viruses coulda been happy in the omni-tolerant society we would have created, Timmy, but what do these crackerjacks do? They fight! We've been here three hours and we are still debating whether or not mankind, i.e. humanity, as Virginia Woolf persistently reminds us–"

"Well she has a point, Madeleine. It's not just about men you know, the poor woman feels excluded from her own species."

"Shut up! You're as bad as they are for Christ's sake. They are still fighting over whether or not humanity has free will. Well, if humanity doesn't have free will we might as well all go the

fuck home right now! Fuckin' Tolstoy – I should've known he was a crackpot. His wife tried to warn me. Goddamn it!" Her between-talking beer sips were becoming gulps now.

"Madeleine," said Chairman Timmy, "calm down. You know these things take time. It's like my fight against the meat industry's abuse of animals. Thanks to my high level of intelligence, youthful good looks, appropriate size, high social standing, celebrity, and a little bit a faith, meat consumption per household has decreased by two percent in the past five years!"

"Two percent?" Madeleine/Ingmar laughed hard, stopped short, slugged the last of her *Bintang*, and cracked another. "TWO? Ha! Every second the world belches two percent of American meat consumption. Two percent is a flick of God's hand as He sends a fly away; when His hand settles the two percent comes back. It's nothing. And I hate to be the one to tell you this, my egotistical mannequin-butted actor friend, but there are other factors influencing American meat consumption besides you! You know, little things like the state of the economy, the changing demographics of the American public, especially age, general trends toward healthy eating, et cetera, et cetera." She was rolling her cigarette hand in bored circles, illustrating the et ceteras and making smoke rings.

"What does that matter, really?" asked Chairman Timmy, suddenly seeming a little bored himself. "As long as less animals are slaughtered who cares?!"

"Less animals?!" exclaimed Madeleine/Ingmar, dribbling beer down her chin, then burning it with her quarter-inch cigarette butt in an attempt to wipe away the drool. "Ow, fuck! Less animals, you moron! First of all, it's not *less* animals, it's *fewer* animals! Second, it's *not* fewer animals. If there are more households than there were five years ago, even 2% more, or if meat consumption is measured by weight and people are eating 100 chickens instead of 25 cows

each year, then there are in fact *more* animals being slaughtered in America than there were five years ago."

It was then that Chairman Timmy started to cry. My heart went *boom* – I've always had a weakness for mannequin-butted actors, especially when they cry. The truth is I was wholly sympathetic to both of these people, so far superior to me yet so much like me, almost human, certainly more so than the backseat driver.

Madeleine/Ingmar seemed less sympathetic to Chairman Timmy than I. "Shut up, Timmy," she said. "Listen, I'm sure you've done lots of good work on the animal rights front you know. Stop blubbering, Timmy – Wipe your nose. Imagine what the press would think if they saw the world's prettiest vegan with snot all down his lips because an old woman yelled at him."

"Press? Are they here?"

"No, stupid! Of course not. You think I'm an idiot? I'm just saying…just wipe your damn nose, Timmy, that's disgusting. Look at us, Timmy. We're the world's leading experts on Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important, and we can't even agree on two percent. The eggheads in there can't even agree that humans have free will, or that you don't need a dick to be human. So how the hell are we supposed to save the world? How in the name of sweet fuck can we even save Indonesia, where they protest against gas prices while forests fall and the concierge can't find the coffee without having a coronary?"

"Well, Madeleine-"

"Ingmar! My name is fucking Ingmar, Timmy!"

"And my name is fucking Chairman, Ingmar! I thought we had an agreement."

"It's just us, Timmy."

"Who are these two?"

"Three, Timmy, these three."

"I only see two."

"Chairman…how does an expert on Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important, have such terrible grammar? You see, only, two. If you only saw two you would be capable of doing nothing else but seeing two."

"Semantics."

"Never underestimate the power of words, Timmy. Perhaps if you had focused a little more on the power of words and a little less on the power of your ass you would have saved a few more animals from slavery."

"Ingmar – fuck! You – you. You, are exactly right. Which is why I need you, you Ingmar, you with your beautiful, sensitive, sensual, sexy words. You who draws them into your layer of knowledge, you who-"

"Can it, Timmy. I'm too old to be sexy and too smart to be turned on by the likes of you."

"Every time you speak I listen all the more carefully because it seems that these could be the last words of a long lived and wise old woman."

"Timmy, shut the fuck up! You tool."

"Ingmar, please! I need you. Indonesia needs you. The world, needs you – in there, with me, talking about Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important. Otherwise, otherwise Ingmar, they will go on talking about free will until the cows come home - the cows come home, Ingmar, only to discover that the rest of the animals have been slaughtered and they're next! And then it will be too late,

because the cows, and the trees, and the oceans, will fight back! And we'll – all – be – Fucked! Ingmar, we, you and me-"

"You and I."

"Right. We, have the power here, with my youthful, perfect ass, and your aged, perfect grammar, we can save this conference! And the world."

I must say I was moved – Chairman Timmy was making incredible sense with those deep penetrating baby blue eyes. I was so moved I almost forgot my role as unconscious conscientious observer. "Can I come too?" I blurted before I could tangle my tongue; how it got free in the first place is a mystery.

Chairman Timmy looked shocked and disgusted, but Ingmar/Madeleine turned to me slowly, chugged the last of her second big *Bintang*, lit another cigarette, and said, "Sure, what the hell? Just make sure you bring your friends."

"Ingmar!" shouted Chairman Timmy. "We can't have outsiders in there!"

"Trust me, Timmy, they're no threat. Let's go."

The drivers were so excited they shouted with double gusto, "Fuck youuuuuu!"

Chapter 3

We were led through the teak panelled door, into the teak panelled room, in which there was an oval teak table surrounded by 10 teak chairs, five of which were empty. The drivers and I took our seats at one end of the table, opposite Chairman Timmy and Ingmar/Madeleine at the other. With our presence, there were seven men and three women, 10 people, of whom six were white; it was the most white people I'd seen in one meeting in some time.

As we sat, a frizzy-haired black Dutch goddess with bright blazing green eyes was spitting this Dutch-accented lightning: "Civilization is marching like a herd of lemmings toward the edge of a cliff from which all its members will plunge! Only some of the lemmings, many of them young ones as is usually the case, are turning around and saying, 'Hey wait a minute, this is madness! There's nothing up ahead but a cliff and a hungry sea, and we can't swim! But the rest of the lemmings say, 'What cliff? I see no cliff. And even if there is a cliff and some sort of sea as you say, our technology will save us – we'll build boats.'

"But the dissidents say, 'Boats won't cut it; we'll die on impact.' And some of these dissidents try to fight the tide of lemmings back, but are swept up in the force of the mob. Others are convinced by the whole technology argument, and march along peacefully. But some, they just can't buy in, and seeing that some minds just won't be changed, they sneak aside with deft manoeuvres through the crowd, and they make their own space. It is these lemmings that are the hope for the future. And maybe when the rest of them see how happily the rogue lemmings set up camp and work and play in their new space, they too will stop their blind march forward. But some will never learn, and they are doomed to disaster."

“But my good woman,” cannoned a portly white-bearded Russian man, this one older than death itself, “you are assuming that these lemmings, which I can only assume represent humanity, are beings of free will. Your analogy is apropos only because mankind-"

“Humanity!” shouted a forever young woman with the feminine face of Munch’s ‘The Scream’, in a smooth high-class English accent.

“Um, yes, Ms. Woolf, these new PC terms, I forgot again - sorry. *Humanity* has about as much free will as lemming-kind. If one carefully examines history, not in the context of a few individuals but in the movements of whole societies of men-"

“And women!”

“Yes, of course, thank you. If we look at the actions of men, and women, of the past, and carefully examine their motivations for action, and the contexts within which these actions occurred, we realize that these men, and women, were dependent upon the laws that always govern human behaviour.

“For example, when a nation is crowded, men, and women, march blindly forward, exiting their natural territory, much like lemmings, often encountering resistance, violence and death, from which they then retreat like wounded animals, run to and fro, mad and scared, before returning from whence they came, fewer than when they left, having inadvertently solved their population problem, much like lemmings.”

“But what of vision?!” sparked the frizzy goddess.

“What of it indeed?” countered the portly Russian. “At any given time there are 6 billion visions fizzling in the impotent minds of men – *and* women – some of whom have more power – that is they are more distant from actually implementing any sort of vision they may have – than others. In fact, each man and each woman may have several visions, all of which are thrust

forward, usually by the powerful, to be implemented by the powerless, who scramble and bump into one another and find themselves out of position at crucial times during the implementation of the multitude of plans, and ultimately something happens, which in retrospect becomes the one true vision, with which some *geee*-nius, usually the leader with the most power, is accredited. That, is vision for you."

"That is where you are decidedly wrong," said the goddess. "Vision isn't just ideas, and it's not a plan or a strategy, or a multitude of such things, and vision is most certainly not created by leaders or people with power. At least not power as you describe it. Vision is a shared ideal of a people. It isn't 6 billion different things; it is 6 billion people thinking the *same* thing. At least, that is what vision has become since the advent of civilization and assimilation of the thousands of human cultures into one.

"Before civilization there *were* many visions, until one culture, somehow or another, got this vision that said: '*This*, is the way to live.' And that way became the new vision, and it was shared, imposed, forced, and it caught on like nothing else ever had before.

"And now we are like lemmings. But of course some of us have different visions of how things should be. We are the rogue lemmings, with rogue ideas, and belief in our own power to create change through our words and actions, by setting a better example!"

The Russian retorted: "Among all species, only humans could be arrogant enough to conceptualise free will."

A cool gentle leek seeped through the room, "ffffffffffffffff." The portly Russian was distracted from his own monologue, and we all searched the wall's panels for the sound's source, which seeped slowly louder: "fffffffffffff," and finally crescendoed into a "fffFUCK!" The source turned out to be Ingmar/Madeleine, and as the expletive rippled around the room, her neck

muscles failed and her face fell into the teak panelled table, where it bounced once and came to rest. We were dumbfounded, staring magnetic toward my magical hostess, who was being softly prodded by her protégé.

"Madeleine," he whispered, gently tugging her head erect.

"I beg your pardon, Madam," said the Russian. "But, what did you say?"

"I said 'fuck,'" she said. "As in, enough fucking discussion of fucking free will for fuck's sake, see? Listen, Tolstoy, I don't mean to seem unappreciative of your meticulous logic, but can we please just assume we have some measure of free will here? I mean, granted we can't control everything; an asteroid could end all this tomorrow and no matter what our will, our power won't stop it. But if we really have no free will, if this is all pre-destined, or if we are acting in an ultimately predictable manner, we may as well all go home right now. We are meeting here to try and change the world, so without an assumption of at least some semblance of free will, what's the point?"

"I'm sorry Madam," answered the Russian, Tolstoy. "I'm sorry if I've wasted your precious time, but I was under the impression that this was a *dialogue*," he told her.

And she answered coolly: "It is a dialogue, Count, a dialogue with a timeline, and a schedule to help us meet said deadline. And at the moment, we have our poor Chairman scheduled to talk on the subject of 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important.' He's sitting beside me sweating like a sumo wrestler; let's put him out of his misery, shall we?"

Chairman Timmy bounced to his feet, looking more like a trampoline artist than a sumo wrestler, saying "Thank you Madeleine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to cut through the shit. That is to say, past the philosophising, onto the real topic at hand: Indonesia. Some may look at this as moving away from the core, if we consider philosophy the core from which springs forth religion and politics and business. Or some might consider culture the core, or environment, meaning where one comes from or lives. However you look at it, the time for philosophising has passed.

"No, wait, here it is. The time is now for practical things. The time is now to talk about policy. The time is now to talk about strategy. The time is now for me to talk about, as Madeleine noted, 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important.' Okay, see, I'll break it down into the sections, but unlike a mad scientist, I'll be sure to put it all together again, so that you understand each component, and you also understand how all these apparently unrelated topics fit together to create what I like to call: the big picture.

"Part 1: Communication. Question: what is communication? Answer: the art of interlocution."

"In her what?!" asked a broad brown man to my right.

"In-*Ter*, with a T. In-ter-low-cyoo-shun."

"In-Ter-low-cyoo-shun. I see. And this is how you will save Indonesia?"

"Well, I've really just begu-"

"I think *Pak* Tommy is right," said a nerdly little balding man to my left as he pushed his black glasses up the bridge of his nose. At the time he struck me as a prototypical absent-minded professor. "How *do* you expect to save Indonesia with a concept called, what was it again, 'Communication, Holism, Pepsi, and the Interconnectedness of Capitalist Globalisation?' How do you expect people to understand that? I don't understand it and I have a Ph. D. How is Joe

Indonesia supposed to understand it? Tommy doesn't get it and he's one of the shrewdest businessmen in the whole archipelago."

"Well, how do you really expect to understand the concept when you haven't even listened yet to what I have to-"

"I've heard enough just by the title," quipped the Dutch goddess. "It's too damn explicit. You say that and I picture Tom Robbins in a rainbow witch's outfit at some night of dread gay pride summer solstice parade, spouting drugstore philosophy from the back of a hatchback. What you need, Chairman, is a crash course in plain language."

Many around the table started chuckling over that one, but only the professor had the absence of mind to deliver a deep guffaw: "HA! There's no such thing as a 'crash course' in plain language. Plain language is an art that takes years to learn; it takes expertise; it takes a high-priced consultant."

There were agreeing nods all around; I found my head imitation bobbing and I was certain this brilliant professor was correct – you don't send a layman to speak plainly to the masses, you send a high-priced consultant. Only Chairman Timmy resisted the current, saying, "That makes no sense at all! Why would you pay a high-priced, highly educated consultant good money to explain things to people who *aren't* educated at all?"

"So you don't end up with concepts called 'Interlocution, Mammal Tort, and the Synchronistic Evolution of Diet Doctor Pepper in Aluminium Cans,' and expect it to help you teach Indonesian commuters to check their engines regularly," explained the professor to more gentle laughter.

"Check their engines for what?" asked Tommy.

"Emissions," said the professor. "To make sure that the emissions aren't too high."

"What the hell for?" asked Tommy.

"Well, haven't you noticed the air quality in Jakarta?"

"Sure, it stinks. Haven't you noticed the air quality in New York?"

"Well, yeah, okay, so, but it's even worse in Jakarta. I mean those little 2-stroke engine motorbikes are just awful for emissions, Tommy."

"Yeah, those damn poor people and their little motorbikes. My Harley's a lot more efficient. That's why we need more development here, more business from you guys in the West, so people can afford efficient engines. It's not about communication, it's about cold hard cash, what makes the world go round, you know?"

There were more nods of agreement, and my head again fell into that sleepy haze of bobbing for acceptance from the slippery slivers of intellect greater than my own. As my eyes scanned the room I noticed an empty chair where Tolstoy had been; I hadn't even noticed him leave.

Virginia Woolf voiced her agreement with Tommy: "It is true that money makes a difference, no matter how much we may try to deny it. Observe the great accomplishments of our times: the great novels, the most stunning architectural design, the world changing ideas, the technological breakthroughs, the development of laws and enactment of policies; who achieved these things? Was it the poor? Sadly, no. Economic stability is a key factor in the success of any woman or man in achieving her or his full potential."

"But if you would all let the Chairman *finish*," snapped Ingmar/Madeleine as she awoke from a meditative hypnosis, "I think you might find another perspective on this concept…you-"

"And even if you come up with a great communication strategy," interrupted the professor, "as the Chairman is suggesting, it takes money to implement it. One requires the resources to hire the consultants, such as the plain language expert. The whole thing must be delivered consistently, with proper branding, in a 'Just Do It' sort of manner, so that the blissfully ignorant masses will understand, and learn to get their Toyotas checked for emissions levels."

"That's not what I'm saying!" shouted Chairman Timmy with his angry office boy demeanour; it appeared he had had enough interruptions. "I mean, come on, do you all really think that money will solve environmental problems? Do you think having Indonesians upgrade from motor scooters to Harleys, or to Toyota Four-Runners, is going to put an end to air pollution?"

"Well, why not? The engines burn cleaner with fewer emissions."

"But they use more fuel! Look, it doesn't matter; I mean: that's not the point here. We can't have this many cars on the road anyway, and expect to go on breathing, right?"

"That's true," agreed *Pak* Tommy, "there are just too many people in the world; they can't all have cars. In fact, they can't all have air, if we expect to keep breathing. The population is just too high."

"Jesus, Tommy," said the Dutch goddess, "What are you gonna do? Hire a plain language consultant to convince all the people who can't afford cars to kill themselves?"

"Not a bad idea, Hanna. Not bad at all."

"The thing is, Tommy, if we could restore some semblance of living in accordance with the laws of nature among our species, instead of trying to control everything all the time, we wouldn't need people killing themselves to keep the population at a sustainable level. It would just naturally go down on its own, over the course of several generations, once we developed a

system of food production that didn't totally manipulate natural systems, creating an excess of food-"

"Excess!" Tommy was on his feet now, brown face reddening and eyes approaching Bhopal levels of radiation. "Have you looked at the reality on the streets outside your hotel room, bitch?"

There had been a frost forming slowly over that room and Tommy had just shattered it. The goddess just smiled at his insult, but Virginia Woolf climbed over the table to reach his red face, and only the professor managed to deflect the first famous feminist. My hapless passive nature has always somehow drawn strong women like pit bulls to smiling children, so naturally she landed in my lap, bowling me over with her breast in my face, the professor slamming face-first against the teak wall, and Tommy laughing like a steroid loon.

Chapter 4

In the hotel bar with the drivers, who were splitting a Coke, Ingmar and I took advantage of the two for one special on giant *Bintang*, after having snuck to the ladies room for a quick joint. We had tried to order some pints but our waitress, who had pretty good English, didn't understand the question 'what's on tap?' She didn't understand that phrase one single bit, even though she knew the meaning of each word on its own. I even tried to sign it by making an up and down motion with my hand, like pushing down on a beer tap, and she told me with an irritatingly infectious giggle that if I wanted a hand-job I'd have to get it from the girls outside on the street. She made a point of pulling down the hemline of her super-short skirt as she went to get our bottled beers.

"So why didn't you say anything in there?" Ingmar asked me.

"What would I say?"

"Anything. You afraid to voice your opinion? Have you got one?"

"No, I guess I don't."

"Not a single opinion in your head?"

"Not about that stuff."

"So what *do* you have opinions about?"

"Skin."

"What?"

"Love."

“Leave it to a man named Koko Valentine to have opinions on love and love only,” she quipped, before polishing off the first of her two-for-ones, leaving froth around the edges of her world-weary mouth.

“You didn’t say much either,” I pointed out.

“Timmy’s my spokesperson.”

“He’s not very good.”

“He’s good enough.”

“Looks like he got run over in there.”

“He’s good enough.”

“Why do they call you Madeleine in there?”

“Why do they call you Koko out here?”

“Because it’s my name.”

It was then that one of the drivers said something I’ll never forget. “Last night,” he told us, “I was supposed to meet my friend for dinner. But, he got a job instead. It was weird.”

The four words I’d taught him had created several generations of progeny, but he still couldn’t tell a story worth a damn. I sat stone focused on his thin lips for some time after they had returned to rest, before pivoting slowly to meet Ingmar’s eyes to say, “My name is Koko; they call me that everywhere. Your name is Ingmar, but in there they call you Madeleine. What’s the deal?”

I was utterly lost in the red lines circumventing her eyeballs, little tributaries into a brain beyond my own eyes’ vision and beyond my own vision’s comprehension. “Koko,” she said, “the deal is this: I have bestowed upon you the chance to witness, and even to partake in, the meeting that will be the defining moment of a century of meetings, the turning point in the history of

meetings: the one that accomplishes something. That is the deal. You may state your meagre opinion, you may even cop a cheap feel of what is beyond most mortal men with inconsequential consequences, and you may suck the marrow of the meat that wanders by you, but you may not ask for more than what you have been offered, for you have already been offered too much. And you may not query me with your inept questions of inane curiosities. My name games should be of little importance to you, given the situation you're in. Unless you'd prefer to go outside again and take a side in the gas standoff."

It might have been better if I'd taken that proffered escape window, but you can surely understand why I didn't, given what I didn't know at the time, which was enough to fill history's underground papers with conspiracy theories and interviews with Allah.

It's especially understandable given the guns scoped at the heads of orange blazers in the real estate gas price brigade. We watched it unfold from the bar, which was on the third floor and had Plexiglas windows for a far wall. In my stoned state, the crowd of brigadiers looked like boiling orange juice as members jumped and bobbed like it was a rock concert, chanting relentlessly, though we couldn't hear it. We could only see their lips move: "*Menurun harganya bensin*! *Menurun harganya bensin*!" Again and again.

As I danced with Ingmar, right after her fifth big *Bintang* of the morning, it seemed I could hear the protestors' chants in the jazz that backbeated our movements, melodic poetry:

Menurun harganya bensin

Menu run
Har Ganya
Bensin

Men
U Run
Harg!

An' Ya Ben
Sin

Men, You run!
Harg!
An' ya bin sinnin'

Man, you can run, but, harg! Don't change the fact you been sinnin'. I sang it into Ingmar's ear as she kissed mine, and I could feel the Dutch goddess's jealousy cascading in gradually stronger waves across the room as she nursed a scotch neat; the jealous objectification went great with the other drugs. Eventually she broke over and asked to cut in. Ingmar spit out my ear and gracefully granted the goddess' wish.

"What's your name, kid?" she asked me as her hand slid to the small of my back and she led me in a tango. I was so stoned at this point I had to carefully consider the question while I watched the W*ayung* puppets painted on the wall glide by one way, then that bubbling sea of orange blazers glide by the other way, until our lips kissed in that moment of bliss, lifetime on the hips, but the moment seemed long until I could finally say, "Koko, what's yours?"

"Hanna."

I told her: "You're very attractive, Hanna." I like to keep my lines mundane, or that is to say, mundane is something I've learned to use as an effective manipulation tool.

"So are you," Hanna told me, evidently a master of the mundane herself.

More kisses followed, and fleeting images of others equally sensual: Chairman Timmy holding the professor from behind, Tommy with a waitress on each knee and delicately spanking them while throat laughing as they themselves giggled, Ingmar the consummate voyeur, and we all played that way until the shots were fired, audible even through Plexiglas, and the crowd

dispersed except for the two who crumpled with red stains clashing with their orange uniforms, not dead, but broken. That's when the violence really began.

No, I guess that's wrong. That was just my first actual *exposure* to the violence.

"So, when did the violence *actually* begin?"

When they killed Tolstoy and Virginia Woolf.

"When was that?"

I'm not sure exactly, but it was before the protestors got shot. Maybe a couple hours before.

"Who killed Tolstoy and Woolfe?"

Don't know.

"Why not?"

Wasn't there.

"What's your best guess?"

Can't say.

"You said you would give us your opinions."

Yeah, but like I told Ingmar that first day, there are only two things I have opinions about: skin and love.

Chapter 5

Ingmar told me that the drivers and I were still welcome to come to the meeting, even though the protestors were gone. The ones they shot, we were told, would be fine. One had got it in the leg and the other in the arm.

On our way back down from lunch I asked her where Tolstoy and Virginia Woolf had gone, because neither had joined us at the bar, and she answered: "They're dead."

"Dead?" I asked, shocked. "How did that happen?"

"Well," she explained, "Tolstoy died of a heart attack in 1910, and Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941."

I was flabbergasted because I had just seen them both that morning. But I knew she was right; I had studied my literature and knew both those authors to be long dead. But before I had a chance to clarify things with Ingmar, she was through the teak door to Room # 7.

"It's a problem of distribution," said Hanna, the incandescence of her pale green eyes convincing me of the truth of the fact, the truth of everything she could say, and everything her eyes could imply. She was suddenly the only truth I knew.

"To many people, hearing that there is an excess of food is shocking because they have learned to live on so little, or else they are dying on just-not-enough. But the fact is, there is more than enough food produced to feed all six billion humans on this planet. And that is in fact the simple reason that the population continues to grow – we have more than enough food for our current population. That is a biologically proven fact: give any species more food than it needs, and its population will grow until the amount of food available is in balance with the

population. But in our species, we don't distribute the food even remotely equally. So, some people starve, while others get fat, but the overall population keeps growing. You don't need people to kill themselves to create a healthy population level."

"You just need to cut off their food supplies," interjected Tommy.

"You need to stop trying to control the world and start acting like a part of nature, rather than as though nature is a part of you."

"Is that what I need to do, Hanna?"

"Yes, Tommy, that is what we all need to do."

"Okay, okay," said Chairman Timmy, adjusting his blouse so the buttons down the middle were in perfect alignment with the zipper of his pants, "this is great. This is what I was going to explain, with what I call 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important.' I've thought about the comments about plain language, but I don't think any of those words are that inaccessible, except maybe holistic, so I decided to just drop the word 'holistic.' I also decided to drop the word 'free', which is so relative, you know. And also, the word 'important', well, it's really subjective what is or isn't important - everything is important to somebody, so I dropped the word 'important.' That leaves us with 'Communication, Animal Rights, Trade, Coca-Cola, and the (Dis)Connection of All Things,' or CART CAT DOAT, for short. It's a catchy and memorable phrase, don'tcha think?"

"What's this got to do with population control, Chairman?" asked Tommy.

"Everything! I mean: everything has something to do with everything, that's the point, Tommy. I agree totally with Hanna; we are living out of accord with the laws of nature, trying to control everything from animals to vehicle emissions to human population. But there are many things that would function just fine if we just let them take care of themselves."

"I'm not a Taoist," retorted Tommy, "I'm a Muslim. Discipline is part of being a good Muslim, and part of being a good person. To let things take care of themselves would be irresponsible, lazy, and undisciplined."

"I'm not asking you to give up discipline, Tommy, I'm asking you, and others, to consider the connections between the actions that we think will help the world, and the damage actually being done to the world. We try so hard to make more and more food with new technologies, and we end up with more and more people and we do more and more damage to the environment and the average person consumes more and more resources. We try to build safer vehicles and we end up with SUVs emitting 40% more than hatchbacks, which would be perfectly safe if it weren't for all the big SUVs on the road. This is a complicated message, Tommy, hence the importance of communication, of sharing the message with people so they understand it."

"By making up words like Cat Cart Doan, or whatever it was?" Again that slow cyanide laughter rippled round the room, Chairman Timmy was losing again to lower intellects powered by greater wills.

"I don't know, Tommy," Chairman Timmy retorted softly, toying with his handbag, "the phrase isn't important. I mean it is important, but, my point is there is a lack of understanding, and a lack of communication, about these connections between things that are assumed to be unrelated, and so we keep making the same mistakes over and over again."

"So, what we need," noted the professor, "is good consultants, to explore these connections, develop a communications strategy, write the key messages in plain language with marketable slogans, and implement the strategy effectively."

"Well…," said Chairman Timmy.

"And that takes money!" said Tommy.

"Well," said the professor, "you have money, Tommy."

"Typical of a white man," retorted Tommy. "First he criticizes the way the world works, then he turns around and creates his own version of how things should be, *then* he asks an Asian man from the poor South to foot the bill. The whole idea is a wasteful concept coming from a disgusting excuse for a man, in the clothing of a woman, and a trollop woman at that. It's a waste of money. Killing people is much cheaper."

"You are right of course," interjected Madeleine. "It is always cheaper to kill people, because it is so easy. We don't even need a marketing strategy or plain language expert to convince people to kill themselves. They are doing it anyway, every day, by the millions, in wars, and via pollution, and the droughts that result from our experiment addiction and the unequal food distribution Hanna speaks of.

"Besides that, we could easily step up the efforts to reduce the population, pump up the poison production, send out more chem. trails from the backs of big jet planes. Send out some more secret special forces and kill us some more 'terrorists'. It's easy. But, Tommy, the point of this assembly is more to determine alternatives to killing people, to find ways for people to actually *live*, rather than die. And to live in peace, achieving some sort of fulfilling life without constant frustration and torment."

And Tommy asked us: "What's the point? Why fix what ain't broken? Killing people is the solution that's always been used because it is the most efficient and effective, no complicated communication plans required, only a will to kill, connections, and cash. It's easy."

I noticed then that the professor was enraptured by him, nodding his head like listening to the prophet, the wise man, and the plain language consultant all rolled into one fearless individual. And strangely Hanna, Madeleine, and Chairman Timmy were all silent.

It was the professor who stopped the silence, saying: "What we need is a needs assessment, and perhaps a cost-benefit analysis. We can compare the potential costs involved with stepping up the death rate versus a full frontal communications campaign."

It seemed like the only reasonable way to settle the standstill, so Chairman Timmy motioned for a vote on the professor's motion for a needs assessment and cost-benefit analysis, which resulted in five in favour, no objections, and three abstentions. "Great," beamed the professor. "I'll call my friend in New York, he's a plain language consultant. He'll give us a quote on the communications campaign."

"I'll call my people," said Tommy, "and we'll see about the other way."

Chapter 6

And so we adjourned for the day, my head reeling with those inane curiosities I was not allowed to express, yet devoid of the conclusions I had been encouraged to give voice to. Ingmar was swiftly swept aside by a morose Chairman Timmy; it seemed to me, at the risk of venturing a political opinion, that his message had been treated like a racoon on a superhighway: turned inside out, molecularly annihilated, and left where it fell. Ingmar had done little to save it, and I could actually feel my heart pound when I considered the implications of men like Tommy in positions of respectable power. I hadn't felt my heart race like that since Sadie's first kiss, and I was only seven years old then. Since that time all else in love, and therefore everything I thought about, was a pale fluoride flavoured disappointment. I was beginning to suspect something serious was happening.

I wandered zigzag through the lobby, trying to look busy, taking vague interest in the masks on the west wall, trying to look as inconspicuous as I logically knew I was without trying. It's unusual to be white and inconspicuous in Indonesia, unless you find a really nice hotel such as the one in which we were meeting. I suppose in all likelihood, the more I pontificated on tourist art-forms, the more obvious I became, and it was the truth of Hanna's baby green eyes that saved me from making an outright ass of myself by commenting to the concierge on the beauty of sculpted veneer faces. Her eyes caught me from behind; when I turned to see them staring at me they told me I should look in a mirror if I wanted to see something really pretty.

Within ten minutes I had her ankles at my ears and was losing my last illusions of control, and still her eyes spoke to me, telling me things I knew were true, if only I could understand

them. We were in her room on the seventh floor, and I had no choice but to taste her thick quivering lips. Her hands explored the theory of my backside; she was more satisfied than I.

"What happened to Tolstoy and Woolf?" I asked her. It was the first thing I said to her since I told her she was very attractive as we tangoed round the bar at lunch.

"When?"

"This morning. They were in the meeting and then they were gone."

"Woolf? And Tolstoy? I don't know any Woolf or Tolstoy, unless you mean Leo Tolstoy, the writer. And if you do, well, he died. Long time ago."

"I know it. But, yet, I saw him this morning. People called him Tolstoy. Ing- Madeleine, called him Tolstoy. And the English woman, her name was Woolf." She didn't answer, so I tried to light my eyes a blue that would match the intensity of her greens, but an inquisition rather than a statement. She replied with kisses, starting at my eyes and making their way down my face, to the chin, down my throat, over my hard beating heart, my cyclical stomach, and finally over my flaccid penis, which was quickly enveloped by her mouth, in which her tongue peppered it's sub-erogenous points until it was ready to serve her further.

This time the anti-control freak controlled me the way she claimed humanity can't successfully control nature, exploited my weaknesses and played my strengths for her own climactic achievement, an exhausting, repetitive, rewarding fuck, with all the peaks and valleys of a California landscape.

Hanna had a gift for pushing me toward the edge, and catching me on my way down, giving me seemingly endless tornado head rushes, followed by an incapacity to think, let alone talk. I passed out with her still on top of me, and when I woke in the morning she was gone.

I think it was about mid-morning then, and I was sure the morning's meeting would be underway already. I felt ill with wonder about what would happen, and what might have already happened to the drivers, whom had wandered off to take a leak before Hanna dis-covered me. My head started to hurt, and upon a tongue's touch to the roof of my mouth, the pain travelled through my frontal passage and infested my gut, which was turning on me – giving me morning sickness. Despite acute anxiety I opted for a hot shower, the first after five months of cleaning with cold water ladling.

The steam further lightened my whirling dervish head and loosened my skin, to the point I thought I might manage to slip outside of it, and be someone else until it grew back, maybe one of this classless crew of upper echelons, planning a better new world. I suppose that my skin somehow stayed on me, but impersonation was my state of mind as I wandered naked to the elevator, where I encountered Ingmar and Chairman Timmy.

"I was terrible," he told her. "I failed you."

"You were fine," she said flatly.

"They bowled me over. Now we have a choice between a communications strategy and a death campaign. Far cry from the original 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important' plan that we devised. Well, mostly you devised."

"Timmy, dear Timmy, you were good."

"I wasn't good."

"You were as good as you needed to be."

"How can you say that?" The elevator opened at the lobby and they exited, me close behind them.

"Easily," answered Ingmar.

"*Easily*? I didn't even get to talk about animal rights, or the dangers of free trade and globalisation, or the cultural damage done by Coca-Cola in Indonesia. All I could do was allude to the concept of making obscure connections and getting to the source of societal problems rather than knee-jerk reactions like killing people, and the need for inspiring a new cultural vision in people. But I didn't really get to explain it."

"That's fine, Timmy." She sat on the same couch in the centre of the lobby where I'd first seen her, and I sat down on the couch across from her.

As Timmy took a seat next to me, he told her: "It's not fine. A lot of people could die, now, if Tommy's plan goes through. And otherwise, we've just got another damn communications strategy, and wasted millions on Ben's consultant friends."

"That's fine, Timmy."

"How can you *say* that?!"

"Timmy, you've done your part. It's time for you to trust the old girl now, huh? Can you do that for me? Have I ever led you astray before?"

"No, but Madeleine-"

"It's Ingmar, Timmy. My name is Ingmar. Now, did I not revitalize your career?"

"Well, yeah, of course you did."

"Did I not help you stop repressing your feminine side, and in fact show you how being open about who you are could make you a bigger star?"

"Yes, Ingmar, you know you did. You saved my career, and my life. I know I'd have killed myself if I hadn't met you."

"And, sweetie, did you not think I was crazy when I bought you your first sequin dress for the Oscars?"

"You know I freaked. And yes, I already know what you're going to say." He seemed fully exasperated, pretty head slumped down, sighing every statement. "And yes, I went from presenting best sound editing award one year to winning best actor the next. And again I thank you for that."

And I swear to Allah, and to you, that it was only then that I realized who he was. I know there are only so many cross-dressing beautiful male Hollywood stars, but I just never made the connection, never connected Tim Dancer with Indonesia. It was unfathomable enough as it was to see a cross-dressing white guy in the closest thing to a Muslim Mecca outside of Mecca. But the thought of Tim Dancer at a conference in Indonesia presenting on 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important,' well, it was one of the few things that didn't cross my mind that first incongruous day. I had heard that Tim Dancer was a big animal rights enthusiast, but this was too much for my unconscious mind.

But once I identified his identity it was all I could do to keep myself from asking him to autograph my body; the irony of his Oscar winning performance as Henrietta, the man raised to become a woman who just wanted to be a boy, is the one piece of beauty still sacred in my muddled mind. Well, that and Sadie's skin.

As Ingmar continued assuring Mr. Dancer of the event's adequacy in meeting her goals, now that people had moved past questions of free will and gender equality, I watched him bat his pretty blue eyes and wipe away the tears. I almost kissed those tears away for him, but the drivers sat between us on the couch before I could move on the instinct.

"But gender equality is one of the important issues of our times," Mr. Dancer told Ingmar. "If any group is oppressed, we are all still oppressed, am I right?"

"Sure, Timmy, sort of. I mean, yeah, you are. But since we are all oppressed, any act enhancing the freedom of the individual is a victory for all of us. Good things will come of this, trust me."

"But people may die."

"From the worst storm comes the most beautiful dawn. From chaos comes serenity. The trickster rules the world, Timmy. Whatever shit is stirred up, it will settle again. The result could be no worse than our current situation. Besides, Tommy won't win."

"Ingmar, you said yourself that he was right about killing people being cheap and easy."

"Right, the costs are low, but is the benefit great? There are benefits, yes, but if they were that great, we wouldn't have to keep doing it all the time – one big killing spree would suffice. The benefits of death aren't that sustainable, Timmy. The benefits of communications are. You'll see: Ben's consultants will outbid Tommy's." Apparently the absent-minded professor's name was Ben.

"I don't know," I said. "I think Professor Ben has a crush on Tommy."

"He speaks!" cooed Ingmar.

"I told you, I have opinions on love."

"Who's Professor Ben?" asked Timmy.

"The guy who wants to hire communications consultants," I explained.

"Go put some clothes on," Ingmar ordered. "We're about to reconvene."

I found my clothes where Hanna had thrown them: my *batik* t-shirt dangling from a wall-lamp, my Dockers draped over the bureau, underwear in the wastebasket, and sandals on the floor. As I dressed she came out of the shower with a thick cotton towel wrapped around her smooth dark skin. "What are you doing here?" she asked me.

"I came back for my clothes." There was a stranger's pain in my chest as I spoke.

"No, I mean what are you doing in Indonesia, at this conference?" The pain vanished.

"I came here to study – thesis work."

"On what?"

"Communications actually; I was doing a study on information-sharing by universities."

"Fascinating, I guess. So who invited you here?"

"Ing- Madeleine did."

"What were you going to say?" She did the thing with her eyes that I had tried but failed, turning them into inquisitions. At this point I wouldn't have been surprised if she shot lasers from those eyes.

"Nothing," I answered her. "Just a hiccup." I hated lying to her; I really did. Believe it or not it's really not my style to lie, not because I'm opposed to it so much as because it's difficult to do successfully. Like I said, manipulation of the mundane is my specialty, not telling lies. And again that heartburn flare hit me.

"That was no hiccup; you were gonna say something. You did the same thing last night, when you said Madeleine's name. You went, like, 'Ing-Madeleine.' You made that little 'Ing' noise before you said her name. What's the deal with you two? You got a thing for old white women?"

This question put me on the spot because lately I'd found myself with something for everyone. I tried to explain it to her, that generally my attractions exclude no races and include women no younger than 23 years old and no older than 33. But ever since I had stumbled into the Makassar Ambassador Hotel my hormones were spurned into overtime intensity like mad pixies high on their own dust. Everyone was beautiful and sexy and so far superior in every way to myself, but in all honesty, it was her I couldn't have resisted had she shot my best friend before my eyes. I would have cried right through it and come back begging for attention.

I tried to explain my suffering for Sadie, the withdrawal symptoms that only Hanna had managed to fix. I even told her about these strange pains all over my body as my mind woke up for the first time in years.

She listened quietly until her tongue overrode her patience and she asked me specifically: "Why are you studying communications?"

I didn't know; it seemed like something I should be good at.

"And this study you're doing, about information-sharing by universities, what is that all about?"

It was about analysing the media used to share studies by university professors with the general public, and recommending more cost-effective media for reaching specific audiences.

"Jesus Christ! No wonder you're falling in love everywhere – this must be the first time you've ever been exposed to any real ideas in your life. You seem like a smart enough kid, it's time you woke up! These people aren't superior to you – they just have more power. You have the same capacity for ideas, probably more so, than most of those shits in Room # 7. Give yourself some credit."

I wanted to believe her, which was remarkable given the 27 years of solace I'd taken in understanding my own insignificance. To consider myself competent was to tear away a protective layer, leaving myself vulnerable to the frustration of knowing I have important things to say, yet also knowing no one will ever listen to those things or do anything about them. In all my life all my great loves were compatible enough never to break through my low self-esteem cocoon.

But Hanna's eyes were truth. And maybe she was right that hearing the ideas of these political powerhouses was the source of my excitement and my pain. The paradox was, if she was right, and I was capable of generating my own ideas, then maybe I could determine truth on my own, and maybe her eyes were not the only truth I could know. Maybe they were not truth at all, and she was as full of shit as a freshly stuffed turkey, obliterating the reality of her claims about the source of my stirrings.

But it wasn't a true paradox, because I could believe she was right about this, if not about everything. "I guess you're right," I told her, exhaustedly, and sat at the foot of the bed, feeling more spent than I had after a night of concentrated lovemaking.

"Then you guess right. Now, let's talk about you're relationship with Ing-Madeleine. What do you know about her?"

With perfect hindsight I realize now that she had tricked me, taken me smoothly and swiftly through the biggest conversion of my adult life, left me entirely vulnerable, with no one to trust but her. Lying to her then would be harder than ever, and my threshold for pain was minimized by years of pussyfooting. So, I told her: "Not much. I know her real name is Ingmar. I know she called this conference, and she believes it to be the most significant meeting in history; she expects it to be a turning point in history. I know Mr. Dancer is her spokesman."

"Who?"

"Mr. Dancer, that's Chairman Timmy. He's Tim Dancer; he's a movie star in America."

"I know who Tim Dancer is! Are you sure that's him?"

"Positive."

"No!"

"*Yes.* I heard him and Ingmar discussing how she'd turned his career around by encouraging him to get in touch with his desires and his feminine side."

"What is he doing in Indonesia?"

"I'm not sure. I mean I know he's Ingmar's spokesman, and a lousy one at that, although she doesn't seem to mind him flubbing their message about 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, Coca-Cola, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important.' But I don't know why he came; maybe he owed her that favour."

"Maybe. How do you know Ingmar?"

"I met her yesterday. The drivers and I came here to escape the protestors – they were chasing us on their motorscooters. She was in the lobby, and she invited us to join the meeting."

"Drivers? What drivers?"

"The two men who were with me in the meeting – the twins."

"I only saw one."

"No, there were two."

She cocked an eyebrow, shook her head, and asked me, "Do you trust Ingmar?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, I was hoping after my little speech you might figure out how to think for yourself, that's why not. Maybe you should think about it some more, and you can come up with your own reasons. Follow me."

I followed her to the head of the bed and watched her open the night table drawer and remove a shiny silver set of handcuffs. She handcuffed my right wrist to the bedpost, stripped me – slowly, sat me on the bedside, played with my genitals until I had a full erection, and said: "Think about it. Use the big head; this is a test." Then she left me there.

She left me with a free hand; I have no discipline when it comes to sex. I'm not saying I'm a masturbation junkie, but leaving me in a state like that…Well, there was a decision to be made. If it weren't for those last words: "This is a test," there'd be no thought involved. But, it being a test, in which the rules were that I had to use 'the big head,' maybe I'd lose points if I self-indulged first. On the other hand, how is one supposed to use the big head when the little one is staring you in the face demanding attention? I considered my three options: 1. relax and hope it goes down on its own, 2. satiate the little piss-ant and then get to thinking, or 3. try to think through its demands, ignoring it until it went away.

The test wasn't about discipline, so much as it was about creativity, I decided. I had to think for myself, not be Gandhi. But thinking of Gandhi associated Tolstoy into my mind; I know the two men influenced each other in numerous ways. Tolstoy died almost 100 years ago, yet I'd seen him in the flesh the day before. Ingmar acted as though he and Woolf had never been there. Reason number one not to trust her; and my hard-on, ignored, had gone away. Not only that, but she had smoked a joint with me after claiming she used only alcohol and prescription drugs: reason number two. Smoked cigarettes too.

My gut throbbed again, and stirred from the bottom, sucking wind from my chest, compressing it and holding it, then spitting it out like fire, but no, it was only gas, a tremendous belch that knocked over every lamp in the room. It was the first good belch I'd managed since I was a baby, and then it was with the help of my mother patting my back.

But Hanna had also acted like the dead had never visited the conference. Reason number one not to trust Hanna. Reason number two: her eyes knew too much for my own good, her skills still far surpassed mine; though she had freed me, she could easily cut me loose among the heartless intellectual piranhas, and I'd have nothing but Bob Dylan lyrics with which to defend myself. She had too much power over me.

After that initial release of toxic ideas I hit a mind-block and stomach stoppage – Hanna could not be trusted, and there I was handcuffed to her bed with no clothes on and the vague belief in my own ideas, which seemed to be serving only to make me aware of the deep shit I was in.

I lied on my back for a while, betrayal running circles round my brain, staring at the ceiling and playing with myself with my free hand, hoping for distraction now, resigning myself to test failure. 'Escape is so simple,' I thought. It wasn't my idea though; it's the name of a Cowboy Junkies song. 'It's in you I will find the key.' A line from another Cowboy Junkies song, leaving me far from finding my own answers to anything.

Though it wasn't my idea, I opened the drawer from which Hanna had pulled my confinement steel, looking for a key. What I found was the Holy Koran, a horrifyingly beautiful book about life in a violent world, about the value of identity, pride, boldness, discipline, faith, and loyalty.

Flipping the pages one-handed, I read and I thought about a man I'd met at the university, whose name is *Pak* Dju. He's a Javanese Christian living in Makassar, an outsider in every way. My Canadian friends and I used to call him *Pak* Dju the Javanese Christian, which was about the funniest moniker we could think of. During the Indonesian riots of 1998, when Suharto was finally forced to end his dictatorship, *Pak* Dju had been made to carry a Christian identity card. The 1998 situation wasn't as volatile in Makassar as it was in many other parts of the country, perhaps because it is a fairly heterogeneous area, but carrying such a card would have made it difficult for *Pak* Dju to get a bus or taxi, or interact with those he might normally call friends.

During the period of reformation, or *reformasi,* the tension was such that the 300 Indonesian ethnic groups and five official religious groups weren't supposed to get along – bad news for non-Muslims because Muslims comprise almost 90% of the population.

Thought association brought my mind further down a haphazard path to Los Angeles, where I'd met a black man who explained to me that the United States enslavement of Africans was the fulfilment of Isiah's prophesy that retribution would befall the Egyptians for enslaving the Jews – Christian karma. For this reason, he felt that his race was owed nothing from his nation besides what it already claimed to offer: an equal opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He displayed the proof of his hypothesis on a US dollar bill: an incongruous picture of an Egyptian pyramid. "Why else would it be there?" he queried. I told him I didn't know.

From there I freestyled to the fattest friend of my early youth, who used to quip every time another kid caused him trouble: "What goes around comes around." He was never a fighter, but he grew out of the fat into a tall, powerfully built man, the kind who inspires fear when he

dances. His cousin on the other hand handled his fear differently, shaved his head, bought a gun and mowed down six of his classmates.

These were violent thoughts, catalysed by a violent book, in turn catalysed by a violent world. What goes around comes around: violence begets violence, fire fought with fire engulfs the world in flames; hate begets hate. Thoughts of Hanna's theory of control over nature being at the heart of humanity's quagmire. Nature includes humans, I thought, and control over other humans is perhaps part of the problem. An idea, catalysed by thoughts of Hanna, catalysed by a chain of thoughts, forced upon me by Hanna's act of control over me. Paradoxes. Was she *forcing* me to be free?

But the thing was, when I thought of it, which was just before she returned to the room: she had never called the old white-bearded Russian guy 'Tolstoy,' or the tragically pretty English woman 'Virginia Woolf,' only Ingmar had. So, perhaps her denials of Tolstoy and Woolf's presence were genuine; perhaps she was trustworthy after all.

Such was my furore upon this realization that when she entered the room just then and asked about my reasons for not trusting Ingmar, I spewed: "Get these fucking cuffs off me you control freak bitch!"

She did as I told her, and was so impressed at my boldness that she fucked all ideas far from my mind, easing the angst she had sparked in me. It was as intense as before, but she let me climax sooner, saving me the pain of being over-energized. I was falling in love with her.

Afterward, she rolled off of me and onto the Koran. "What's this," she asked me, pulling it out from under her ass.

"The Holy Koran, the book of my new religion," I told her.

"Your what?"

"My new religion. Not as in a religion I just started, but as in the religion I have just decided to adopt as the source of my spiritual beliefs. I've never had a religion before."

"Why Islam?"

"It seems the be the religion that most closely approximates its literature. Christians kill in the name of God and preach how Jesus says to turn the other cheek."

"And Muslims don't kill falsely in name of Allah?"

"Sure they do, sometimes. But if you read this thing it actually describes the circumstances in which men feel the need to kill. And it describes a very vengeful, yet loving God. It doesn't automatically condemn killing, which seems to make more sense in this world."

"So are you siding with Tommy now?"

"I haven't decided yet. But if I do, it won't be just because he's a Muslim." As I spoke nausea welled up in my gut, so I excused myself and went to the bathroom to puke, purging false innocence, fear, and also my protective shell.

Chapter 7

"I thought you had no opinions on anything but love and skin."

I didn't.

"But now you do."

Yes.

"So, as I asked you before, what is your opinion about who killed Tolstoy and Woolf?"

I still have no opinion about that; I haven't figured it out yet. Can I finish now? Thank you.

"So, do you trust Ingmar?" she wondered.

"No," I told her.

"Do you trust *me*?"

"I don't know – I guess not. What happened to Tolstoy and Woolf?"

"This again? Who are Tolstoy and Woolf?"

"The frightening intellectual English woman from this morning; she tried to attack Tommy after he called you a bitch – Ingmar called her Virginia Woolf, who, as you know, is long dead. And the Russian guy, with the beard, Ingmar called him Tolstoy, who is also long dead. Yet they were here; now they're gone.

"They weren't really Virginia Woolf or Leo Tolstoy, were they?" I asked her.

Her eyes drew me in a little further, into that big research brain, knowledge saturated and idea generating. Her name wasn't even Hanna. "None of the people in that room are using their real names, are they?"

They weren't. "Is Ingmar's real name Ingmar?"

That she didn't know, nor did she understand Tim Dancer's involvement.

"Who are you?" I asked her, but her eyes closed to me then, so I laid my head at her breast, her nipple in my mouth, and drifted to sleep. I dreamt of Tolstoy, renouncing all material things until his wife all but renounced *him*, in the name of his own brand of Christianity. I dreamt of Virginia Woolf, who knew that intellectual success depends upon a certain amount privacy – space and time alone - a room of one's own. She with her supportive token husband and beautiful lesbian lover, he alone in the world with no room of his own yet all the beauteous space of Russia's wilderness. His heart ultimately failed nature's test, as they all do eventually, and she decided to put an end to the voices in her head and the burden her husband cared to bear, drowning herself in a deep, swift river.

I guess I slept about an hour, and I woke up wondering about those impostor authors, who they were and where they went. I suppose I must have been wondering aloud, because Hanna answered me: "Tommy killed them. They pissed him off – I'm lucky he didn't take me out too."

"Is his name really Tommy?" I asked her.

"No."

"What's your real name?"

"Hanna."

"I could have sworn you weren't really Hanna. I thought no one in Room 7 used their real name."

"I do. Koko, Tommy's death consultants won the bid; the shit's gonna hit the fan."

"What will happen?"

"More of the same. Chem. trails for one."

"What's that?"

"Planes dumping chemicals over major population centres so people get sick and die young. Also there will be more cars, so more highways will result from that, taking out more trees."

"More cars? I thought that was seen as a good thing."

"Sure it's *seen* that way. But cars are the biggest killing machines out there. More people die in car accidents than wars you know. But there will be more guns too; Tommy secured a very large contract with an American supplier – angry young men everywhere will be equipped."

"He can do that?"

"He can."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know – I just know him as Tommy. Listen, Koko, time for you to fly. I advise you to go back to Canada. They're gonna get the population down one way or another, and there's no where gonna be safe. But least of all Indonesia. Besides, better to die on your home turf, don'tcha think?"

I thought on the prospect of dying then, when I'd just come back to life, and I decided it didn't matter where I was or who I was with, that I didn't want to be ended just yet. So, that's when I called my friend Lodowne, and she recommended I call Ahmed.

"So Tommy killed the Tolstoy and Woolf impersonators."

I don't know.

"But Hanna thought so."

Well, she told me so.

"But didn't you trust her?"

I guess I didn't, not at that moment – or I would have taken her advice and left.

"Do you think you should have trusted her now?"

I don't know.

"What is your relationship with this…Ahmed?"

I met him on a bus, actually. He struck up a conversation with me. It happens all the time there – like I told you, the buses are usually very crowded, and people tend to be quite social, not like in Toronto, and they especially want to talk to foreigners, practice their English. Sometimes it's a bit irritating, when you're wrapped in your own world's thoughts, and someone wants to practice English with you and be your best friend because you're a foreigner. But Ahmed's English was perfect, and he didn't particularly need a friend.

He was already on the bus, chain-smoking, when I got on, and he asked me where I was from. I told him Canada, and he said, "Oh, Canada, I spent five years there, learned a lot. My name is Ahmed." He extended his hand and squeezed my limp hand hard – I was doing it the Indonesian way for him, limply, and he did it the Canadian way. It was a funny little moment we shared.

He asked me, between cigarette sucks: "How long you here?"

I told him six months.

"Long time. What you here for?"

I told him, and he reciprocated by describing his work over the past five years, since he returned from Canada, to protect Indonesia's environment. He was direct like a Westerner, maybe more so.

There was this pubescent awkward silence, which I filled with inanity, asking him what he had just told me. "So, you're an environmentalist?"

"Ya," he reconfirmed, "with *Keolang*: Livelihood by People."

"Livelihood by People?"

"Ya."

"Like those guys?" I asked him, pointing to five men standing knee-deep in a black shit-ditch, shovelling it onto the street to prevent clogging. They were covered in black flecks of it.

"Those guys, and other guys like them, and women too, but most of all communities who live in and around the forests – what's left of them, in the mountains, by the streams: the people who depend on natural resources for livelihood.

"Right now the environment is managed by the central government, people who have never even been there, who don't see the forest as important – it's just a bunch of timber and wood to them.

"They have all these separate government departments to deal with resources, and they never even talk to each other. They all have their big plans and policies, then each Department sends workers into the field with big machines, all in the same place but they don't know each other. They cut down all the trees and then they send in the miners after that, till there's nothing left. Nothing left except polluted water flooding down hills with no roots to reabsorb it into the earth. Sometimes in the mountains it floods without even rain. It's just groundwater

with nowhere to go. And there's no forest left in Sulawesi now, except in a couple of areas. They're cutting those now too.

"So, tell me about your study at the university. How will it help solve these problems?" He lit another cigarette, watching the driver throw his empty water bottle out the window, then gazed back at me in subterranean silence. I was unmoved.

I told him I didn't know, but offered a half-assed explanation of the potential value of my study. I said: "You say there's a lack of coordination among government departments. But maybe that's due to a lack of communication. Everybody's got ideas about how things should work, and they're all different, but no one ever talks to each other about how things should be done. They all have their own plan, just like government departments, and they all just do it, and then there's chaos, and disaster, like floods. So, I don't know, maybe my communication strategy will help people make more informed decisions."

Ahmed countered: "Interesting theory," he told me. "Unfortunately everyone has their own interests to protect. The resource companies come to the table with dirty hands. And the discussion table can never be level.

"The ones focused on money have more power, and they get to say more. And, also, the *white* people have more say, even when it isn't their country. The *outsiders* have more say than the locals. And the government has more say than the villagers. The ones who always lose are farmers, factory workers, housewives and mothers, children, students, people like that, like those guys shovelling shit.

"And it's not just corporations that are in it for the money; it's government too. And as much as I'd like to make friends with the government and corporations, how can I be a friend of someone who would take a whole community's trees and in exchange tell them how to *manage* a

forest that no longer exists? The government and corporations split the money: 40% for the government and 60% for the companies, some bad advice for the forest-dwelling communities. Meanwhile, they waste trees to make brochures saying how good they are for the people and for the forest, and how good they are to their employees. The brochures have pictures of beautiful landscapes and happy smiling employees – but when I visit the company to see for myself they're crouched down with their faces covered by cloth to protect their lungs from the smoke of burning coal. But I can see their eyes, and those eyes don't smile.

"That's a war my friend, and I have to take a side."

He paused a moment, then shouted at the driver to pull over. He told me to come with him, and I did.

"So, do you always do exactly what people tell you to do?"

Well, I used to, until very recently. And look at the trouble not doing what I was told got me into. Tolstoy was right: free will is overrated.

Anyway, I was a bit nervous about the situation – trusting as I tended to be, I didn't know this guy, who seemed just a little too intense for my own good. But, yeah, mindless obedience had always got me through so far.

"I have something important to show you," said Ahmed. "Trust me, it will blow your mind. No charge for the most amazing sites in South Sulawesi."

With cryptic brochure language like that I expected to be introduced to a prostitute or offered drugs, the way I often was when I spent a few months working on contract in the

Caribbean, back when I worked for the bank. Admittedly I was a bit disappointed when Ahmed's friend Tani drove us so far to arrive at a tiny home on stilts.

The next hour was whirlwind fast. Ahmed took my hand and led me to a *becek*. We squeezed in as he lit another cigarette, offering me one, which I accepted without enthusiasm; I only smoke when it's offered. The *becek* driver took us to a nearby phone, using which Ahmed called Tani, who picked us up in her van 15 minutes later.

The city and its crowded houses faded quickly, as a river appeared then unfolded among rice patty fields and rickety USAID-made bridges. Above us there were actual stars struggling through the smog for visibility, their shine eventually triumphant and glorious, outperformed only by a low orange moon.

We drove far into the country, where it was all wooden houses on stilts with big exaggerated roofs hanging over the entrances. Other houses weren't so fancy, made of what looked like discarded sheet metal.

The road wound up and around and up again, over and over deep into the mountains. The houses were arranged in occasional little clusters of 15 or 20 in a bunch, with dirt abounding in between. After another hour of villages and dirt we stopped in a village where all except one of the houses were of the sheet metal variety. The other was the little wooden one that proved to be our destination.

Ahmed led me up the stairs, at the top of which he was greeted pleasantly by a big-smiled toothless old man whose face was handsomely lined with a graceful age, wearing a white sleeveless undershirt and sarong. The man pulled on a pair of black dress pants, a fancy *Buginese* shirt, white with a green dragon wrapping itself around, and a pillbox black formal hat.

"My father, Rafi," said Ahmed. We shook hands and touched hearts, as is the Indonesian custom, and I was given the usual super-sweet tea, which we all drank while Ahmed and his father talked in the local *Buginese* dialect, which I didn't understand. Twenty minutes and two cups of tea later, Ahmed brought me back to the deck at the top of the stairs and pointed at the vast moonlit emptiness before us, miles of dirt and clustered houses below and below. "That's the forest," he told me.

He led me back down the stairs, took me behind the house and through the small village, to a row of four outhouses that smelled like a swim in shit and piss. Ahmed opened one and showed me the smell's source: an overflowing flush toilet inside.

"These were donated by the government," he told me. "They all broke last year. Now people go in the river, which also happens to supply the city with water. They know it's bad, but where else can they go?"

He walked me down to the river 500 metres away, where he explained that during the rainy season the river floods weekly. He told me: "There used to be trees here of course, but the forestry company cut right up to the bank. Now there's nothing to stop the water flowing. Right now there's no good drinking water; in one month this whole thing will be underwater. We have a well but the water stinks."

I stupidly suggested maybe he could ask the government for help.

"You still don't get it," his voice cursed me. "The government *did* this! They are still *doing* this. It's not too hot here in the mountains, so now they are building big, expensive houses so that the richest city-dwellers can escape the heat on weekends. Soon they will begin. They want my father, a War Veteran and Village Head, to move his people out so they can destroy our

homes and build big fancy expensive homes for rich people from the city. But they offer us a pittance for our home! Not enough to buy a new house or land. When they built that dam they made hundreds of people move, and paid them one big lump sum. Those people didn't know about money; they were farmers. They knew about food. They spent all the money at the disco."

"The disco?"

"The disco!"

"How do Muslims spend all their money at the disco? They don't even drink."

We laughed for a few seconds to ease the tension before he postulated: "Must have been on silver shiny John Travolta suits and Coca-Cola." He paused and smiled slyly. "Anyway, I wish I could work with the government but they don't want to work with me. They want to push me out of their way. They are my enemy. To restore this land, I must destroy the greedy government and the greedy corporations."

That was his opinion; I didn't have one myself.

"Do you have one now?"

I have several now.

"Do you want to destroy the greedy government and the greedy corporations?"

I want to be with Sadie.

"You love Sadie."

I must.

"Does she love you?"

Allah knows.

"Do you want to destroy Christians for their hypocrisy?"

I want to touch Sadie's skin.

"Do you want world peace?"

I want to inhale the smell of her sweat, which I myself have induced.

"Do you want us all to kill our TVs and our cars?"

I want my best friend to sleep in my arms. I want to hold her hand in mine.

So, Ahmed became my friend, though I'm not sure what he saw in me exactly, maybe receptive ears and an inactive mouth. He had a lot to say, and I guess that's what I liked about him, is that my speech responsibilities were minimal compared with other Indonesian friends, who were wholly open to my English wizardry. I never had to be sharp or energetic with Ahmed, I just listened, and he didn't care whether or not I agreed, as long as I withheld my obtuse suggestions of how to go about solving the problems civilization had thrust upon him and his people.

We were opposites. He never stopped his serious talking, I just smiled and hardly said a word. I used to drop by the office of his little radical environmental organization and listen to him talk, take him out to dinner, where he managed to do three things with his mouth in non-stop motion for at least an hour: eating, talking, and smoking. Occasionally he would offer me a cigarette, which I always accepted serenely.

That was the nature of my relationship to *Pak* Ahmed; I was compensatorily drawn to his intensity and perpetual prophesising. So you can understand why it was him I called in when the shifty situation left no one to be trusted and a great need for ideas and opinions. My own mind was freed but had long ago atrophied – it would take intensive intellectual therapy to nurse that tired pink organ back to wit. All I could do by myself was draw upon all the trivialities

accumulated in my head over a short lifetime of experience and education – an impressive lot of them too – and screen for inspiration, as I had when I was chained to Hanna's bed.

Ahmed compensated for my shortage of creativity – I'd always heard his friends and co-workers describe him as an inspiration in and of himself, and had nodded agreeably even though I didn't understand what inspiration was, or what its use was – until faced with my own death.

"But, wait a minute, back on up a second, cowboy. You said you called your friend, Lodowne? Yeah, you said you called Lodowne first – not Ahmed."

Oh yeah, that's right. Well, I guess I was in a confused state of mind, so, naturally, I called my closest friend first – that is, my closest friend in Indonesia at the time.

"So what is the nature of your relationship with Lodowne?"

She's my sister; it's a sister-brother dynamic. There's a platonic attraction there. We flirt, she's gorgeous, she sits on my lap, invites me to bed when she's drunk, we cuddle – I couldn't get it up for her if I tried. We drink a lot, smoke up sometimes, talk about sex, love and relationships, about home – she's Canadian too, though we met here. We talk about our Indonesian culture shock – she claims I'm a philosopher; I claim she's a scientist; neither claim is true. It's truest love.

"And it was her idea to call Ahmed?"

Yeah, that's right. Ahmed's assistant, and good friend, Tani, drove the three of them to the hotel. Lodowne paid for the room, #776, right next to Hanna's room. When I introduced Lodowne to Hanna she gave me the singular lifted eyebrow, like Spock – that was the kind of link we had, where she sensed some sort of sensual energy emanating from Hanna and me. Her look told me of intrigued jealousy and mild concern; she was asking me who was this woman who

might steal from her my attention and affection, who might meld my heart to her own only to later release it, once I'd become dependent upon her half of the bonded contract? Lodowne had never known me in love; in six months she'd come to understand my numbness, and was clearly confused.

"But you called her in, right? You called Lodowne."

Yeah.

"And on her suggestion, *you* called the terrorist in."

What terrorist?

"Ahmed!"

I called Ahmed, yes.

"I thought you were just a 'conscientious observer, barely conscious at that.'"

Yes, that's right.

"Yet, you called the terrorist in."

What terrorist?

"Ahmed – the one who blew the building."

Hold on now - you're getting ahead of me. But yes, I called Ahmed and Tani in, and yes, I was a conscientious observer, becoming more conscious by the hour, okay?

So, after the hugs wore off we agreed to meet for lunch at the bar. Hanna told us that by mid-afternoon Tommy, Professor Ben, Ingmar, and Tim Dancer would be in the midst of preparations with the Death Consultant, for whom we did not yet have a name, phoney or otherwise. I scoured the dregs of my brain using the free association technique I'd developed while in bedroom bondage, but couldn't come up with any reason not to trust Tim Dancer, who I was

pretty sure was the real Tim Dancer, other than the fact that he was so closely associated with the devious Ingmar. Clearly he was her lackey, but good-hearted and weak-willed as he was, I couldn't fathom him going along with planning mass murder through further automobile advent and weapons distribution.

I convinced Hanna to take me to his room for some joint mundane manipulation. Dancer answered door # 778 blushing in a silk kimono. "I figured, when in Rome…" he explained.

"We're not in Rome," answered Hanna, "or Japan."

"To each is own," I clichéd, trying to keep things agreeable and happy.

Mr. Dancer smiled at me gratefully, and invited us in for a quick snort. Once I was hovered over the perfect white powdery line, Hanna's disdainful eye caught me again and motherly steered me like a toddler in a safer direction. Cooperative a fellow as I tend to be, no woman had ever steered me in a *safer* direction before.

"Uh, no thanks, actually," I told Dancer. "But I appreciate the offer."

He shrugged a 'to each is own' shoulder and inhaled it himself, presumably to keep the first line company in the recesses of his brain. He sat down twitching and pulled a joint from the pocket of his kimono, lit it deftly and sucked smoke. This offer I declined too.

Hanna and I pulled up chairs, and I tried hard to harvest Hanna's mystical eye powers, and imbibe Dancer with trust in my own pale blues. The red lines on *his* eyes clashed with that beautiful baby blue that had earlier enraptured me. Red is too agressive a colour to match its more passive counterparts.

"Mr. Dancer," I addressed him, "Do you know what's going on here?"

He seemed stunned by my address; his head, previously drooped over his joint, snapped at rapt attention. "What did you call me?" he asked.

"Mr. Dancer," I said. "That is your name, is it not?"

His head drooped again. "Yeah, that's my name," he said. "My good name."

"So, good, that's settled. And, you know what's going on here, don't you?"

"Sure," said his voice deep from its own malaise. "You've come to take my kimono, because it is culturally inappropriate. Here, take it." He stood and shook it off into my lap, exposing his sinew physique.

I refused the garment, telling him: "No, you can keep the kimono – it's your brain we're after."

"Fine," he agreed, putting his kimono back on, then resting his head on the night table and handing me a copy of the Koran from the top drawer. "Go ahead, smash me open."

I reverently set aside the holy book, lifted his head so our eyes could meet, and suggested: "First, maybe you can try to explain to me what you're doing at this conference."

"I'm the looks," he told me.

"The looks?"

"Yeah."

Hanna jumped into the interrogation, saying: "Are you really *the* Tim Dancer, the Oscar-winning star of 'My Life as a Girl?'

"Yeah, that's me. I'm Ingmar's good looks, the ones she used to have. But I failed her. Sure, I looked good, but did I get her brilliant points across to the group? No, of course not, I'm as weak as I ever was, and every accomplishment of mine is really an accomplishment of hers – she got me that role. She got me that Oscar. She got me off Coke, once. I owe her my life – and

it's a good life, too. I'll miss it when they kill me." His head was so heavy in my hand I thought I'd drop it, and his words so slow I wanted to punch him on the back so he'd spit them out quickly, but he was more focused than Hanna, who was six-year-old smiling at him, ready to sit on his lap with arms around his neck, reddening his cheeks with Momma's playfully stolen lipstick.

"Who's going to kill you?" I asked him.

"Somebody, soon, in the world around the corner. Transvestite animal-loving fags are always among the first to go, you know, no matter how great their asses are. It's my own fault, for letting them dominate me in the meeting. Can I help it if I'm a masochist? Well, yeah, I guess I can – although Ingmar says I can't. She says I should take pride in what I am, but how can I take pride in being a pussy? I mean I could, if it hadn't cost the lives of billions of people just now. She says it isn't my fault, but I don't know if I can believe her, even though she's never let me down. She says she has it under control, but she's only human – how much control can she really have? I don't know; I'm a little confused. I need more coke, this stuff isn't helping me much; I must need more."

"Do you feel you can still trust her, after all that's happened?" I asked him, glancing sidelong to Hanna for help, but she was gone – her infallible all-knowing wise eyes were vacant and lost in Tim Dancer's drug-addled skeleton, seeing only his beautiful celebrity skin.

"I don't know; she's only human – not perfect."

"Right, imperfect, but do you believe in her *integrity*? Is she *honest*?"

"Sure, of course."

"But on what basis did she bring you here?"

"The looks. She needed someone sexy."

"Why?"

"People listen to sexy people."

"They didn't listen to you."

"I know!" he cried, burrowing his watery head into my shoulder. Hanna popped from her seat and into his lap without her feet ever touching the floor, arms around him and stroking his hair. That was when my eyes finally figured out how to speak, when I shot her an atom-splitting look that snapped her half back to *my* world, where she was sitting in the lap of a man wearing a kimono because he had thought it was an Indonesian thing to do. And her eyes told me she too was only human, and what did I expect from her. Was *I* not placing *her* on a celebrity pedestal too? Penetrating un-requested and unwanted hero worship on her? I bowed in deference, and she sighed, more frustrated than before for my redundant lack of self-assuredness.

"Mr. Dancer, you did your best," Hanna assured him, eyes still big and admiring. "Our point is not to rub in that you failed to convince the consultants – after all, so did I. Our point is, in fact, that maybe you did exactly what you were supposed to do."

"How can you say that?" he asked. "I had a 55-page speech about 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, and the Holistic (Dis)Connection of All Things Important' memorized and ready to be delivered. It would have brought them to their knees. Of course Ingmar had written it – she's so good with words. But she felt that with my good looks, proportionate build, smooth white skin, and great ass, not to mention my acting talent, I should be the one to deliver it. But once people started interrupting I couldn't handle it! I've never been good at improv – I need a script. It was not at all what I was *supposed* to do! It was the opposite! It was horrible!"

"But maybe," I suggested, "it was actually what Ingmar had wanted you to do all along."

"What?!" he screamed and went white, like he was absolutely horrified, as if I'd shown him a picture of Death.

"What he means," soothed Hanna, "is that, well, we're just a little curious about why Ingmar would invite an actor with no political experience beyond lending his face to the animal rights movement, no academic experience, and little previous exposure to the ideas being discussed, to deliver her vision of a better world?"

"My looks!" he repeated.

I asked him: "But couldn't she have found another beautiful actor, with a little more political or debating experience? Maybe Robert Redford."

"*He's* old and wrinkled."

"You aren't just Ingmar's looks," I told him, "you're also her pawn." Naturally, he cried, and Hanna punched my shoulder four times, each blow successively harder. I didn't mind though, pain was becoming my proof of consciousness.

"We just wonder," she told him, "if maybe, she might have, maybe, intentionally picked someone who is, um, very sensitive, and sweet, but not very…forceful. Someone who might have trouble getting his point across against more aggressive debaters, with more experience with behind-the-scenes politics."

"She wouldn't do that!" said Dancer, more forcefully and convincingly than he had argued any of his 'CART CAT DOAT' points.

"Well, maybe not," agreed Hanna. "But there are just some questions on my mind about this whole conference. Like, if Ingmar believed in 'CART CAT DOAT,' why didn't she participate more in the debate, once she realized you were beyond your depths?"

"She felt it would be more convincing coming from me because of my looks."

"Yes, Mr. Dancer," continued Hanna, unmoved, "but surely there came point when she realized that you had lost control, and she hardly said a word, except to try to get us to pay attention to you again. It seems to me she made little more than a token argument on behalf of 'CART CAT DOAT.' And there's one other thing I've been wondering, which is this: we voted on the two proposals with a secret ballot, and the Death proposal won by a vote of 3-2. *I* voted for the Communications proposal, and I assume you did too. So, the three votes for the Death proposal must have come from Tommy, Ben-"

"You think Ben voted against his own proposal?" Dancer asked her, apparently not ready to leap forth toward Hanna's logical conclusion.

"I told you before, Mr. Dancer," I answered for Hanna, "Ben was enraptured by Tommy. Men will do anything for love, especially when it isn't reciprocated."

We waited a moment for Mr. Dancer to follow Hanna's logical stream, but it appeared he was floating off on a cocaine tributary, so I told Hanna with my eyes to bring him back. "Mr. Dancer," she cooed, "who do you think made the third vote for the Death plan?"

He answered slowly, "Tommy, Ben, and…Ingmar…Why would she do that? The idea was to make life better for *every* living thing."

"A beautiful idea," said Hanna.

"Maybe her definition of 'living' is whatever is alive after the population reducers work their magic," I suggested, then failed to fight off Hanna's adoring kiss, which when tasted was so fulfilling as to make me need more, and I put my mind to work contriving other original ideas, most of which were forced and inane, like most pop music ever since the industry assimilated the artists. I decided my forced ideas weren't worth speaking, a decision I thought worthy of more

lip-expressed affection – but selling that paradox to Hanna seemed too complex, so my desires kept her out of reach for the moment, and I focused back on Mr. Dancer, who was bawling uncontrollably, puffing a new joint between sobs.

Logic failed Hanna and I both, so I practiced an older skill, took Dancer in my arms, kissed his teary eyes, stroked his hair, and told him everything would be all right. It's only life after all.

Chapter 8

Looking across the small circular table I assessed Lodowne assessing me with a shaking head. I asked her, "What?"

"What have you gotten yourself into now?" she counter-questioned. This was one of our favourite games.

"What does it look like?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Do you have eyes?"

"Are you stupid?"

"Are you serious?"

"Do you know a joke when you hear one?"

"Do you – ah, fuck it. What's your problem, Lodowne? There, there's a question for you."

"I don't want any more questions, Koko, I want an answer."

"To what?"

"To the question, what is this mess you've gotten yourself into? And also the question, who is this woman you've gotten yourself into?"

"What woman?"

"Stop asking questions! The Dutch woman, with the dreads and the accent, and the fucked up eyes."

"Fucked up?! I love her eyes! What are you jealous?"

"Ask me one more question and you'll be blind, because you'll be wearing my *fork* in *your* eyes! Who is she?"

"She's Hanna, I told you that. She's an expert on…life."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, it's so. I think I'm falling in love with her; do you know how long it's been since I've been in love?"

"Since Sadie?"

"Yeah, I think so; but this is better – I mean bigger, it's more intense – she's taught me a lot, inspired me…inspired me to think, and to have opinions."

"You already have opinions – you're a philosopher."

"I have only ever had other people's opinions. She's teaching me to think for myself."

"*She* is teaching *you* to think for your*self*. Does that make sense?"

"Well, it's a bit of a paradox."

"I don't like her."

"You haven't even spoken to her."

"I don't trust her."

"You don't trust anybody, Lodowne."

"And you trust everybody, Koko."

"That's why we're a good team, you and I."

The drivers joined us then, one on either side of me; I couldn't tell them apart.

"Who are *they*?" asked Lodowne.

I told her the story of how the drivers and I had stumbled upon the conference after being deflected from the road by gas protestors and how I had taught the drivers a couple of English

words that had since multiplied. She laughed as I described the drivers' accented shouts at potential passengers of 'Take the bus, stupidhead!'

"That could only happen to you," she said, laughing, but I detected mistrust in her admission of my exceptionality, which was offensive because I had never lied to her, or even tried to manipulate the mundane with her.

"My friend," said the driver on my left, "wanted to get his girlfriend pregnant, so he poked holes in all his condoms. She got pregnant and he confessed. She said it was womb rape."

A wave of recognition traversed Lodowne's round broad face, erasing all traces of doubt – and a redemptive smile crept cross my face – she knew I was being honest.

Next to join us were Tani and Ahmed, who sat across from one another, between Lodowne and the drivers. Ahmed lit a cigarette as he sat, and launched into a rant about the fires that were burning in the forests of Java, explaining how they had been started by government workers using fire to scare wild animals away from the encroaching urban expansion, even though the papers claimed it was peasants who had started the fires. We all listened as he chain-smoked and talked about fire until Hanna and Tim Dancer showed up, taking their seats across from one another, Hanna beside Tani and Dancer beside Ahmed.

Hanna told us that in Holland she was a well-known and respected writer of children's stories carrying morals of how to live as an equal member of a complex web of life, rather than as the top of the food chain – she claimed her books were subtle enough that most parents thought they were just fun little stories, rather than morality tales.

She described her invitation from Madeleine, which said that as one of the world's leading inspirational holistic thinkers and people of influence, Hanna's presence was requested at an exclusive meeting of minds and bodies, the results of which would be action – not resolutions,

not treatises or protocols, not agreements in principle, not theorems or even new paradigms, but action. The invitees were all either people who had contributed significantly to the world's body of knowledge, or who were *capable* of contributing significantly to its financial aquifers, and thus actually get things done. Hanna fell into the first category.

Hanna considered herself a philosopher – her impact was on young minds, on their visions of the world and of humanity's place upon it, before they could become brainwashed with mainstream messages of dominion. She resolutely sermonized the importance of this role over that of politics, for as a rational species, humanity's actions stemmed from the root of their consciousness and their beliefs.

But, like everybody else, she had her hidden doubts, hidden very well in her case. She wondered if her great oratory skills, so rarely used as a writer, would have served the world better, and had more of a tangible impact on the present tense, had she gone into politics, or become a lawyer – one of the good ones. And then, there was her chance, to influence not only the future world leaders, but also current ones – ones who could absorb her words and her vision, and actually do something with them – it was the chance of a lifetime. She concluded her depiction of intellectual seduction, fighting back tears I thought, by saying that she should have known something was amiss, and she should have remembered Orwell's warnings about powerful people.

Ahmed tried to reassure her by saying: "Words have never changed the world," he told us, "only certain circumstances have. Why would humans hunt and gather and only farm a little for millions of years, then suddenly decide in one certain place to start farming for a living? Some environmental change must have happened that drove people to that – it must have been a fluke. People do what works for them in a given situation.

"Feudalism fell because it didn't work for most people, and when the French lower classes finally got a hold of enough fancy weapons, thanks to the new technology from industrialization, there was a successful revolution. Action was taken, and succeeded after centuries of talking failed. Within another hundred years, Feudalism had fallen all over Europe. But it took a while for capitalism to replace it – it didn't happen right away. People didn't just have an idea of what should be done next – they had to figure out another way to survive, and to organize themselves, without people being born to a certain class."

"But is capitalism really much different than Feudalism?" asked Hanna.

"Yes and no. It's a different system, but it's still a great big society with winners and losers, mostly losers, who don't have enough power to change things. You can give them ideas, but until they have the tools to put them in practice, they're useless. Tommy and Ingmar know that. They also know that there's a problem with the way things are now, that they won't work much longer – that the lower classes are getting mad enough in the third world to do something, like they did in Zimbabwe when they took over the farms of white people."

"But that's just infighting within the same class, based on race."

"Maybe so, for now. But white people are still symbolic of the haves. If it's possible for a black man like Robert Mugabe to impose power and make the lives of that many white men a living hell, it may be possible for people from other oppressed groups to fight back. The point is there's a lot of unhappy pissed off people in the world, more every day.

"And not just the lower classes. The air is getting stinky, and no one is immune to environmental illness. The higher-ups know that cancer will get them if the poor man don't get them first – they're smart enough to know this won't last much longer; if they don't get sick, their kids will. If they didn't know this, there wouldn't be people like Tommy and Ingmar, trying to

maintain power by scaling down the population by killing poor people – and it will be almost all poor people who die from this. From their perspective, it is dangerous to have more peasants than you need to do the grunt work."

Lodowne jumped in, asking Ahmed: "Why do you think it'll be just poor people who get killed? If they're using cars as instruments of death, that will only effect people who can afford cars."

"Or people who take buses. Or walk or bike near a road. But even people with cars aren't all rich. And the ones who are have the biggest strongest vehicles. They have limos and trucks and SUVs. It's always poor people who die first."

"Even if rich people die," I told them, "that's just less competition for resources for Tommy and Ingmar, assuming they survive." An opinion, an idea – it felt good now to say such things, right or wrong.

Ahmed said: "They'll live. The people who start these things always live. Like drug lords and presidents who start wars. It's only their lackeys who die, while they sit back and watch. Those two, and Ben, they'll live a long long life, and die of cancer at an old age – and if they succeed, maybe their kids won't even get cancer."

"Ingmar's already old," said Dancer morosely.

"They won't succeed," Hanna told us. "They can kill all they want, as long as we keep producing food at this rate, as long as we keep trying to control nature, and as long as we keep organizing the world centrally instead of in small scale autonomous communities, the population will keep bouncing back no matter how many people they kill, success will continue to be based on material consumption instead of how you benefit your own community, pollution will get

worse, and people will keep getting sick and dying in droughts. So even if they succeed, they can't succeed, ultimately, unless the survivors learn new ways of living."

"Ultimately, no," agreed Ahmed, "but they *can* succeed in their plans of increasing the death rate using guns, automobiles, probably drugs too, whatever the Death Consultant comes up with. Unless we stop them."

"But how?" Hanna asked.

"Words won't stop them," Ahmed answered. "Only actions will."

"What actions?" Lodowne asked.

"We blow the building," Ahmed answered.

There was a settled silence as we pondered, as if this was a rational suggestion, for just a moment, before Dancer stirred angrily and shouted "No! We can't do that! We'd be as bad as they are; there are innocent people in the building."

"All rich," Ahmed countered.

"Are we at war with the rich?" Dancer asked him, and he answered yes.

"Then you're at war with me," he told Ahmed, "and Hanna too I bet."

"Why does it have to be a war, Ahmed?" I asked him. "Everything with you is always a war. And what good has come of it? What has your war with the government and corporations done? What did the French revolution accomplish, really, but replace one hierarchy with another, less officious one? What has any war or revolution left us with, ultimately, but, at best, an upgraded model of the same product, built on blood's slippery foundation?"

"Okay," he conceded, slightly, "so how to you propose we stop these murderers peacefully?"

Lodowne answered: “I say we do a media expose. It’s not like what they’re doing is legal. Well, maybe the part with the cars is – but selling arms to civilians around the world, that’s not legal. And drugs? *Not* legal! Hanna, Koko and the drivers could join the meeting with the Death Consultant, as scheduled this afternoon, and we’d have enough details on them to put them all in jail.”

The driver on my right raised his right index finger and announced, “My name is Budi.”

I had never asked their names, so I greeted him officially then: “Hi *Pak* Budi. Who is your twin?”

The driver on my right announced: “I am Pramana.”

And I greeted him too, calling him *Pak* Pram, out of deference and respect.

Hanna asked a strange question: “He has two names?”

“Which one?” The question game transferred.

“The driver.”

“Which driver?”

“The one next to you!”

“Which side?”

“Left, damn it! Right there!”

I told her: “His name is Budi; it means the wise one.”

“And what does Pramana mean?”

Ahmed answered: “Wisdom.”

Hanna cocked an eyebrow, a re-visitation of an earlier expression: confusion. “So, he has two names of the same meaning.”

For an inspiration enlightener she was acting pretty stupid, but patience is my virtue, and I explained to her again: “No, this one is Budi, this one is Pram.”

“There’s no one there,” she told me, pointing to Pram. “There is no Wisdom there.”

We all stared at her, looking back and forth from her to each other – thus explaining to one another that, yes, we could all see Pram plain as day – only Hanna could not see him.

“We are brothers,” said the drivers together.

“Who are brothers?” asked Hanna.

“Pram and Budi,” I told her. “You hear them? *Two* voices.”

She paused, looked around the room, smiled and said: “Naw…you’re all fucking with me.”

So then I reached across the table, grabbed her by the back of the head, and smashed her head against the table.

“You what?!”

I knocked her out.

“I thought you loved her.”

I did; she was a beautiful person, and brilliant, and strong, and she freed me. I couldn’t have done it if it hadn’t been for her.

“Done what?”

Knocked her out.

“You’re telling us you couldn’t have knocked her out if it wasn’t for her?”

Yep.

"If it weren't for Hanna, you couldn't have smashed Hanna's head against the table, thus knocking her out."

Correct.

"Why'd you do it?"

Reason number three not to trust Hanna: she couldn't see Pram; she couldn't see wisdom. She failed the same test as had Ingmar, though when Ingmar failed it I didn't yet know it was a test.

Ahmed lit a cigarette from the butt of the one dying in his hand, and sucked on the new one. My movement had been so swift and deft that no one at any of the other tables in the bar had noticed it. Hanna looked like a drunken European passed out from overindulgence of cheap Indonesian drink, nothing out of the ordinary. We listened wordlessly to the dull waves of conversation rolling around us, for a long slow minute. Tani finally asked me: "What have you done that for?"

Ahmed explained: "She couldn't see wisdom."

And Lowdowne asked: "Is wisdom the need to kill people – is that what she couldn't see?"

I explained that it was Pram she couldn't see, a sure sign of treachery. It seemed clear enough, but for some reason only Ahmed and I understood it.

"Was she dead?"

Not yet.

"Bleeding?"

Not visibly.

"You didn't see any blood?"

No. There might have been some under her face that we couldn't see – I can't remember.

"You don't remember blood."

No, I don't. Look, it wasn't easy. It had to be done.

"Like the building had to be blown?"

No, the building didn't have to be blown.

Ahmed felt that: "The problem with a media expose, or even calling the cops, is that they won't believe us. Who would? Who would believe that an American woman like Ingmar, whoever she is, would be plotting evil deeds in Makassar?"

I asked Dancer: "Who is Ingmar, Mr. Dancer? What's her story?"

"I met her on the street," he told us. "That was when my career was pretty much bust. You know, the drug problems, legal problems – no one would hire me at that point. I was broke and none of my old friends even wanted to talk to me. She was begging on the street, so I gave her my car keys and told her if she could find my car, she could keep it; I had no idea where the thing was anyway so it was doing *me* no good. I was pretty despondent.

"She recognized me right away – she knew all the Hollywood stars. This was in LA; she was a stargazer. She recognized me even though I wouldn't have recognized myself in that state. She took me to a shelter she knew, which was full but they let me sleep on the sidewalk – I needed that because I hadn't slept in about 80 hours. She woke me up the next day and told me she'd found my car. I don't know how she did it, but she did.

"I honestly know very little about her – just that she is *very* very smart. And she liberated me, made me feel it was okay to be what I had always wanted to be: a pretty man in pretty

clothes. She introduced me to my first boyfriend, a street guy named Larry. Her and I hitched to New York and I ended up in an off-Broadway production – they hired me just for my celebrity, but that's when I really started to learn to act, to be a drama queen basically. Theatre is so much more blatantly dramatic than movies. Anyway, that was the start of my comeback, and my coming out party.

"She was my best friend by that time, but she never talked about herself. I guess I never asked – too narcissistic *I* am. *Me*, me, *me*! Anyway, it wasn't until about a year later that she started talking to me about politics and philosophy. I just ate it all up – believed everything she told me. She'd never let me down before. She had this theory she called 'Communication, Animal Rights, Free Trade, and the Holistic (Dis) Connection of All Things Important.' It was like she took every vague disconnected belief that was ever in my head, mixed them all together in a pot, and came up with a revolutionary theory. I still don't know what her bigger genius is: problem-solving or manipulation. Either way, it's a damn good theory. I wish she was here to help us overthrow her."

It was a shocking story; she'd come from the street, or perhaps planted herself there and encountered Mr. Dancer just when he was most vulnerable, as Hanna had enveloped me when I was most vulnerable. I still wondered: "So who is this Tommy guy?"

But of course none of us knew, with the possible exception of Hanna, who wasn't talking.

Ahmed asked us: "You see? The story is too unbelievable, and too incomplete."

Lodowne disagreed: "But if Koko and the drivers go to the meeting, they can fill in the holes, or at least some of them. They could take my Dictaphone and record it, as evidence. What do you think, Koko?"

I couldn't decide; my expansion brain had reached a limit; it needed to colonize. Mr. Dancer's desire was my own: I longed for Ingmar's big brain, and Hanna's too. What would she have said? The only direct advice she'd ever given me was: "Go back to Canada. They're gonna get the population down one way or another, and there's no where gonna be safe. But least of all Indonesia."

I told them: "Maybe we should just get the hell out of here."

"And let them kill all those people?"

I told them: "Maybe it's not really anything different after all. All they're really doing is stepping up the marketing for a few key products, right? This is what certain people in every country in the world have been up to for generations now, right? Selling murder. Equipping killers, some of them intentional and others accidental, but all killers, with the tools to execute. Is this really new? And has any media expose ever solved the problem? Any more than any revolution?"

Ahmed told me: "Nothing has ever solved the problem; that doesn't mean we should stop working on it."

I answered him: "Maybe though, it's time to try a new angle."

He asked me: "What angle?"

And Tani answered him: "How about a protest?" Further transferral of the question game. She continued: "We can call in our networks, get lots of people to protest the meeting."

"That's been done, too," I told her.

Ahmed still wanted to know: "So what do you suggest?"

"Start over," I told him. "Find an island, or just some land, somewhere, and start our own little society, no cars, no guns, no drugs, no dictators, no plebiscites, votes, or referenda. Just good leadership by people who understand the people they are leading, and vice versa."

"And still die of cancer when their pollutants reach us too," said Tani. "That's no solution."

"But we could lead by example," I insisted. "The rest of the world would take notice of how effective we were, and copy our system-"

"Like they do Cuba?"

"Cuba sucks! We'd have no dictator, we'd be small, local, autonomous, self-reliant."

Tani wasn't impressed with my creative thinking at all, and told me so: "What would we eat? Do you know how to hunt, fish, or farm?"

I had to admit that my theory of self-reliant subsistence was impracticable.

"Let's level the joint," said Ahmed.

Lodowne suggested: "We could do a combination strategy – do a media blitz and protest, which would be a good spectacle for the press to cover."

"Then level the joint."

Tani pointed out: "Protests are no longer news in Indonesia. News is not something that happens every day."

Lodowne noted: "Tim Dancer's here – that's news. He's a celebrity, you know, that's news in any country."

"No press," decided Dancer. "This could kill my career."

I reminded him: "This could kill *you* if we don't stop Ingmar and Tommy."

Budi stood up, cleared his throat, and pointed at Pram, who said: “Take out Tommy, Ingmar, the Death Consultant, and just to be cautious, Professor Ben too. Leave the building standing. *Then* get the hell out.”

Chapter 9

"So, was that the plan?"

Well, yeah. Wisdom had spoken – what would you do?

"Well, personally, I would have called the cops."

You *are* the cops.

"I mean if I was *you* I would have called the cops."

If you were me you would have done exactly what I did, because you would have been *me.*

"So, what exactly *did* you do?"

Well, first, he announced: "I am the Death Consultant; you can call me DC," and I drew and aimed, directly across the teak oval table, and shot her.

"Shot who?"

Ingmar.

"Just Ingmar?"

She was my designated target.

"What happened to being a 'conscientious observer?'"

I was – mostly. I took out Ingmar, no one else. Dancer took out DC, Pram took down Tommy, and Budi shot Ben the professor. It was an almost perfect hit.

"What went wrong?"

DC hit the Button.

"What button?"

The Death Button.

"What the hell's that?"

Well, apparently this Death Consultant always packed himself with enough explosives that if anything were to ever go wrong, he could touch a button and take out everything around him within a 200-metre radius, just to make identifying the body difficult. Apparently that was his last living act.

"So, according to you, the building was blown by a 'Death Consultant,' in order to prevent his body from being identified, right before he was about to advise an Indonesian man named Tommy, an American *woman* named Ingmar Bergman, and an American professor named Ben, on how to kill more people with automobiles and guns. Is that right?"

And also with drugs, and other weapons besides guns, possibly weapons of any kind – it's difficult to say because I shot DC before he could reveal the tactics of his strategy. I just wanted to get it over with. Maybe part of me didn't wanna know those details, you know?

"So, *you* didn't blow the building, and neither did Ahmed Guntur, a known eco-terrorist, but you do admit to shooting an unarmed woman, yet you claim to be incapable of killing. You do admit to conspiring to kill three others, killings that were carried out by Tim Dancer the Hollywood actor, an Indonesian bus driver, and his alter ego. You also admit to knocking the prominent Dutch children's author Hanna van Voom unconscious, about an hour before her death, because she failed to see the bus driver's alter ego. Is that correct?"

Mostly, but when I said I couldn't kill anything, I was referring to the time before I was conscious. I mean I was an unconscious observer, but I guess I woke up. A lot of this is just starting to make sense to me as I explain it to you – I was in a state of confusion through much of this. And, also, Ahmed was never a terrorist – he never took his war that literally until he saw how many lives were on the line in the long run.

"Well, according to our records he was responsible for coordinating numerous previous suicide-bombings of various resource-based companies that he felt were responsible for excessive environmental damage."

I don't believe it.

"Here: read his file then. Not now, after. Just to clarify: how did you survive the blast of the Death Consultant's Death Button?"

Which brings us back to the bliss of my ignorance. I can't remember.

"So, how do you know about the Death Button?"

Ahmed told me, in the hospital.

"Ahmed told you about the Death Button? How did Ahmed know about the Death Button?"

Once more – the ignorance of my bliss.

"You mean the bliss of your ignorance."

Right. Ignorance. I don't know how he knew.

"You just trusted him."

He was all I had left.

"Maybe he tricked you too, like you said Hanna tricked you. Brought you where you were vulnerable, then left you to face the intellectual piranhas with nothing but Bob Dylan lyrics with which to defend yourself."

No. Not Ahmed.

"Read the file."

August 7, 2002; Somewhere in America, I think:

It's gotta be America, where else would they have facilities like this?

My only regret is Hanna.

I mean I regret that everything else happened, but not my observance of it. Well, okay, I guess I did participate somewhat. What I mean is, Hanna was my major mistake.

This file on Ahmed tells terrible tales of power struggles, explosions, and falling structures. Some of Indonesia's biggest, most connected companies, under attack.

April 16, 1997: 13 dead after a car bomb explodes outside of *Pertamina* Oil's corporate head office in Jakarta. Ahmed's itinerary had him in the city the day before until the day after. Seventeen dead on February 19, 1998, on a forestry project in the South Sulawesi mountains, from an explosion caused by a gas leak in the main generator. Ahmed's close friend had just started working as a swingman with the operation, and was eventually jailed for sabotage. Ahmed was suspected of being the mastermind, but never charged with anything. December 30, 1998, suicide bomb at a cement-making factory near Djogdja, Ahmed was in town visiting his sister. And so on – a slipperier charge sheet than Teflon Don's. They're both dead now.

I first fell into myself because passion spawned pain. After nineteen years of self-righteous angry explosions all over the world's misfortune, I found my soul's Death Button, and levelled my intellect and my ardour, flat-lining at the age of 20 years, and set to cruise-control ever since, because it uses less fuel that way, ensures a long smooth journey through monotony.

Hanna was wise without recognizing wisdom in the violence of our world; such was the last of her innocence, abandoned by intellect's disciplinary march through the rational landscape.

For that, I knocked her unconscious, dragged her to her hotel room, handcuffed her to the bed, and left her there to die in an unpredicted massive explosion. But I now believe what my instincts first told me were true: her eyes told me truth, and even her lips never lied.

Lying in a white rumpus room equipped with safety pads on all sides so I can bounce around like my inner child exfoliated, I can close my eyes and hear her advice: "if we could restore some semblance of living in accordance with the laws of nature among our species, instead of trying to control everything all the time, we wouldn't need people killing themselves to keep the population at a sustainable level."

Because other animals, food shortages, and other people would do it for them?

Well, every life must die, and every living thing must kill for its own survival. Yet there is always cooperation, among people, among plants, animals and the billions of millions of miniscule in-betweens. It was this that Ingmar seemed after, that cooperation, and she even invited my input.

Hanna held me back from participating in that fateful vote, and the drivers by extension didn't seem to make it. Ingmar wanted my input at least, if not my vote. Input is ultimately more important than a vote anyway; even Thomas Jefferson knew that. He said that people would "let the hearts be torn out of them sooner than their power be wrested from them." Yet everyday we let the ones we think are smarter trick us out of our power, spinning decision-making capabilities ever higher and ever further out of our reach, then aligning and competing amongst themselves, just as nature would allow, until a coalition of those hungriest for power can make the decisions that sentence the rest of us to this reality, these padded safety walls that protect us from ourselves but not from the 100-mile-an-hour maniacs hoarding the technology.

And I, I listened to that fool Ahmed over the woman who woke me! She took the time to wake me rather than send me to the autobahn asleep at the wheel: where I would have only quietly absorbed the comments of the ones trying to remake the world. She gave me the power to stop them, but not the power to trust her, or to be quite alert enough to resist the violent temptations of revenge.

So typical of me – it's just so much easier to be unconscious, and pretend you've found a reality where only cynicism makes sense. It's so easy to quench the thirst of vengeance and join the opposition, and it's so easy to find something to oppose, as if Ahmed, the drivers and I could do a better job of running the world than DC and the businessmen.

The unconscious ones are almost on to something, in letting their power go. But as long as control-freak Death Consultants are lurking through the teak panelled meeting rooms of the world, the power we relinquish is acquired by those with the desire to control everything.

It's not enough to oppose them; that is only half of nature's survival strategy. The other half is cooperation with the ones who have new visions of how to live in accordance with the laws of nature, now that most of our hunting skills are gone. If only I'd figured all this out before I bashed poor Hanna's head against the teak table. After all, as I told Lodowne, sweet Lodowne, Hanna was the expert on life.

And it occurs to me now that the name Hanna means Goddess of Life.