



Eat, Pray, Love



BOOK ONE

ITALY

or

36 Tales about the Pursuit of Pleasure

CHAPTER ONE

I wish Giovanni would kiss me.

Oh, but there are so many reasons why this would be a terrible idea. To begin with, Giovanni is ten years younger than I am, and - like most Italian guys in their twenties - he still lives with his mother. These facts make him an unlikely romantic partner for me, considering that I am an educated American woman in my mid-thirties, who has just come through a failed marriage and an interminable divorce, followed immediately by a passionate love affair that ended in heartbreak. This has left me feeling about seven thousand years old. This is why I have been alone for many months now. This is why, in fact, I have decided to spend this entire year in celibacy.

Giovanni is my Tandem Exchange Partner. He teaches me Italian and I teach him English. I discovered Giovanni a few weeks after I'd arrived in Rome, thanks to a big Internet cafe. He had posted a flier on the bulletin board explaining that a native Italian speaker was seeking a native English speaker for conversational language practice. Right beside his appeal was another flier with the same request, word-for-word identical in every way. The only difference was the contact information. One flier listed an e-mail address for somebody named Giovanni; the other introduced somebody named Dario. But even the home phone number was the same.

Using my keen intuitive powers, I e-mailed both men at the same time, asking in Italian, "Are you perhaps brothers?"

Giovanni wrote back: "Even better. Twins!"

After meeting the boys, I began to wonder if perhaps I should change my rule a bit about remaining celibate this year. For instance, perhaps I could remain totally celibate except for keeping a pair of handsome twenty-five-year-old Italian twin brothers as lovers...

But, no.

No and no.

I look for healing and peace that can only come from solitude.

Anyway, by now, by the middle of November, Giovanni and I have become friends. As for Dario - I have introduced him to my adorable little Swedish friend Sofie, and they've been sharing their evenings in Rome in a different way. But Giovanni and I, we only talk. Well, we eat and we talk. We have been eating and talking for many pleasant weeks now, sharing pizzas and gentle grammatical corrections, and tonight has been no exception.

Now it is midnight and foggy, and Giovanni is walking me home to my apartment through these back streets of Rome. We are at my door. We face each other. He gives me a warm hug.

"Good night, my dear Liz," he says.

"Buona notte, caro mio" I reply.

I walk up the stairs to my fourth-floor apartment, all alone. Another solitary bedtime in Rome. Another long night's sleep ahead of me.

I am alone, I am all alone, I am completely alone.

Grasping this reality, I drop to my knees and press my forehead against the floor. There, I offer up to the universe a prayer of thanks.

First in English.

Then in Italian.

And then in Sanskrit

CHAPTER TWO

And since I am already down there in prayer on the floor, let me hold that position as I reach back in time three years earlier to the moment when this story began - a moment which also found me in this exact same posture: on my knees, on a floor, praying.

Everything else about that scene was different, though. That time, I was not in Rome but in the upstairs bathroom of the big house in the suburbs of New York which I'd recently purchased with my husband. It was in November, at around three o'clock in the morning. My husband was sleeping in our bed. I was hiding in the bathroom sobbing. Sobbing so hard, in fact, that a great lake of tears was spreading before me on the bathroom tiles.

I don't want to be married anymore.

I don't want to live in this big house.

I don't want to have a baby.

But I was supposed to want to have a baby. I was thirty-one years old. My husband and I - who had been together for eight years, married for six - had built our entire life around the common expectation that, after passing the age of thirty, I would want to have children. But I didn't. I kept waiting to want to have a baby, but it didn't happen. And I know what it feels like to want something, believe me. When the magazine I worked for was going to send me to New Zealand, to write an article about the search for giant squid, I felt delight. And I thought, "Until I can feel as ecstatic about having

a baby as I felt about going to New Zealand to search for a giant squid, I cannot have a baby."

I don't want to be married anymore.

In daylight hours, I refused that thought, but at night it came to me again and again. What a catastrophe. I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life - so why did I feel so overwhelmed with duty, tired of being the breadwinner and the housekeeper and the social coordinator and the dog-walker and the wife and the soon-to-be mother, and - somewhere in my stolen moments - a writer...?

I don't want to be married anymore.

My husband was sleeping in the other room, in our bed. I equal parts loved him and could not stand him. I couldn't wake him to share in my distress - what would be the point? We both knew there was something wrong with me, and he'd been losing patience with it. We'd been fighting and crying, and we were tired in that way that only a couple whose marriage is collapsing can be tired.

The many reasons I didn't want to be this man's wife anymore are too personal and too sad to share here. The chronicle of our marriage's failure will remain untold here. I also will not discuss here all the reasons why I did still want to be his wife, or all his wonderfulness, or why I loved him and why I had married him and why I was unable to imagine life without him. I won't open any of that. I can only say that, on this night, he was still my lighthouse and my albatross in equal measure. The only thing more unthinkable than leaving was staying; the only thing more impossible than staying was leaving. I didn't want to destroy anything or anybody. I just wanted to slip quietly out the back door, without causing any consequences, and then not stop running until I reached Greenland.

This part of my story is not a happy one, I know. But I share it here because something occurred on that bathroom floor that changed forever my life. What happened was that I started to pray.

You know - like, to God.

CHAPTER THREE

Now, this was a first for me. And since this is the first time I have introduced that word - GOD - into my book, and since this is a word which will appear many times again throughout these pages, it seems only fair that I pause here for a moment to explain exactly what I mean when I say that word.

Let me first explain why I use the word God, when I could just as easily use the words Jehovah, Allah, Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu or Zeus. Alternatively, I could call God "That," which is how the ancient Sanskrit scriptures say it. But that "That" feels impersonal to me - a thing, not a being - and I myself cannot pray to a That. I need a proper name, in order to fully sense a personal attendance. For this same reason, when I pray, I do not address my prayers to The Universe, The Force, The Supreme Self, The Whole, The Light, or The Higher Power.

I have nothing against any of these terms. I feel they are all equal because they are all equally adequate and inadequate descriptions of the indescribable. But we each do need a functional name for this indescribability, and "God" is the name that feels the warmest to me, so that's what I use.

Culturally, though not theologically, I'm a Christian. I was born a Protestant. And while I really love that great teacher of peace who was called Jesus, I can't swallow that one fixed rule of Christianity insisting that Christ is the only path to God. Strictly speaking, then, I cannot call myself a Christian.

I have always responded with excitement to anyone who has ever said that God does not live in a dogmatic scripture or in a distant throne in the sky, but instead lives very close to us indeed - much closer than we can imagine, breathing right through our own hearts. I respond with gratitude to anyone who has ever voyaged to the center of that heart, and who has then returned to the world with a report for the rest of us that God is an experience of supreme love.

In the end, what I have come to believe about God is simple. When the question is raised, "What kind of God do you believe in?" my answer is easy: "I believe in a magnificent God."

CHAPTER FOUR

So I spoke to God directly for the first time. In the middle of that dark November crisis I was interested only in saving my life. What I said to God through my sobs was something like this: "Hello, God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you."

That's right - I was speaking to the creator of the universe as though we'd just been introduced at a cocktail party. But we work with what we know in this life, and these are the words I always use at the beginning of a relationship.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late at night," I continued. "But I'm in serious trouble. And I'm sorry I haven't ever spoken directly to you before, but I hope I have always expressed my gratitude for all the blessings that you've given me in my life."

This thought caused me to sob even harder. God waited. I pulled myself together enough to go on: "I am not an expert at praying, as you know. But can you please help me? I am in desperate need of help. I don't know what to do. I need an answer. Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do..."

And so the prayer was Please tell me what to do repeated again and again. I don't know how many times I begged. I only know that I begged like someone who was pleading for her life. And the crying went on forever.

Until - quite abruptly - it stopped.

Quite abruptly, I found that I was not crying anymore. I lifted my forehead off the floor and sat up in surprise, wondering if I would see now

some Great Being who had taken my weeping away. But nobody was there. I was just alone. But not really alone, either. I was surrounded by something like a little pocket of silence. I was totally still. I don't know when I'd ever felt such stillness.

Then I heard a voice. This was my voice as I had never heard it before. This was my voice, but perfectly wise, calm and compassionate. How can I describe the warmth of affection in that voice, as it gave me the answer that would forever open my faith in the divine?

The voice said: Go back to bed, Liz.

I exhaled.

It was so immediately clear that this was the only thing to do. Any other answer - You Must Divorce Your Husband! or You Must Not Divorce Your Husband!- would not be true wisdom. True wisdom gives the only possible answer at any given moment, and that night, going back to bed was the only possible answer. Go back to bed, said this interior voice, because you don't need to know the final answer right now, at three o'clock in the morning on a Thursday in November. Go back to bed, because I love you. Go back to bed, because the only thing you need to do for now is get some rest and take good care of yourself until you do know the answer. Go back to bed so that, when the storm comes, you'll be strong enough to deal with it. And the storm is coming, dear one. Very soon. But not tonight. Therefore:

Go back to bed, Liz.

I would call what happened that night the beginning of a religious conversation. The first words of an open dialogue that would, eventually, bring me very close to God, indeed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Seven very difficult months later, I left my husband. When I finally made that decision, I thought the worst of it was over. This only shows how little I knew about divorce.

It was my most sincere belief when I left my husband that we could settle our practical affairs in a few hours with a calculator, some common sense and a bit of goodwill toward the person we'd once loved. My initial suggestion was that we sell the house and divide all the possessions fifty-fifty. He didn't find this suggestion fair. So I changed my offer: What if he took all the possessions and I took all the blame? But not even that offer brought a settlement. Now I was at a loss. I could do nothing now but wait for his counterproposal. My newfound spirituality made it essential to me that we not battle. So this was my position - I would neither defend myself from him, nor would I fight him.

Months passed. My life got stuck at the midpoint as I waited to be released, waited to see what the terms would be. We were living separately (he had moved into our Manhattan apartment), but nothing was resolved.

And then there was David.

All the complications and traumas of those ugly divorce years were multiplied by the drama of David - the guy I fell in love with as I was taking leave of my marriage. I clung to David for escape from marriage. I inflicted upon him my every hope for my salvation and happiness.

I moved right in with David after I left my husband. He was - and he is - a gorgeous young man. A born New Yorker, an actor and writer. Independent, vegetarian, spiritual, seductive. Bigger than life. Bigger than big. Or at least he was to me.

David and I met because he was performing in a play based on short stories I'd written. He was playing a character I had invented. In desperate love, it's always like this, isn't it? In desperate love, we always invent the characters of our partners, demanding that they be what we need of them, and then feeling shocked when they refuse to perform the role we created in the first place.

But, oh, we had such a great time together during those early months when he was still my romantic hero and I was still his living dream. It was excitement and compatibility like I'd never imagined. We invented our own language. We made goals, vows, promises and dinner together.

The first summer of Liz and David looked like any romantic movie you've ever seen. At this time I was still thinking my divorce might proceed gracefully, though I was giving my husband the summer off from talking about it so we could both cool down. Anyway, it was so easy not to think about all that loss in the midst of such happiness. Then that summer ended.

On September 9, 2001, I met with my husband face-to-face for the last time, not realizing that every future meeting would need lawyers between us, to mediate. We had dinner in a restaurant. I tried to talk about our separation, but all we did was fight. He let me know that I was a liar and a traitor and that he hated me and would never speak to me again. Two mornings later I woke up to find that airplanes were crashing into the two tallest buildings of my city. I called my husband to make sure he was safe and we wept together over this disaster, but I did not go to him. Which is how we both knew it was over.

It's not much of an exaggeration to say that I did not sleep again for the next four months.

I shudder now to think of what I imposed on David during those months we lived together, right after 9/11 and my separation from my husband. Imagine his surprise to discover that the happiest, most confident woman he'd ever met was actually a dark hole of bottomless grief. Once again, I could not stop crying. This is when he started to move away, and that's when I saw the other side of my passionate romantic hero - the David who was cool to the touch, in need of more personal space than a herd of American bison.

To be losing David right after the failure of my marriage, and right after the terrorizing of my city, and right during the worst ugliness of divorce... well, this was simply too much.

David and I continued to have fun and compatibility during the days, but at night he visibly moved away from me, more every day, as though I were infectious. I came to fear nighttime. Most mornings, David woke to find me sleeping restlessly on the floor beside his bed, on a pile of bathroom towels, like a dog.

"What happened now?" he asked - another man thoroughly exhausted by me.

I think I lost something like fifteen kilos during that time.

CHAPTER SIX

Oh, but it wasn't all bad, those few years...

Because God never slams a door in your face without opening a window, some wonderful things happened to me in the shadow of all that sorrow. For one thing, I finally started learning Italian. Also, I found an Indian Guru. Lastly, I was invited by an elderly medicine man to come and live with him in Indonesia.

I'll explain in sequence.

To begin with, things started to look better when I moved out of David's place in early 2002 and found an apartment of my own for the first time in my life. I saw the apartment almost as a sanatorium for my own recovery. I painted the walls in the warmest colours I could find and bought myself flowers every week, as if I were visiting myself in the hospital. My sister gave me a hotwater bottle as a housewarming gift and I slept with the thing laid against my heart every night.

David and I had broken up for good. Or maybe we hadn't. It's hard to remember now how many times we broke up and joined up over those months.

But during those periods when we were separated, I was practicing living alone. And this experience was bringing a hopeful interior change. When I wasn't feeling suicidal about my divorce, or suicidal about my drama with David, I was actually feeling delighted about my free time, during which I could ask myself the radical new question: "What do you want to do, Liz?"

And when I finally started to answer, I did so cautiously. I would only allow myself to express little baby-step wants. Like:

I want to go to a Yoga class.

I want to leave this party early, so I can go home and read a novel.

I want to buy myself a new pencil box.

Then there was always one strange answer, the same every time:

I want to learn how to speak Italian.

For years, I'd wished I could speak Italian - a language I find more beautiful than roses - but I could never make the practical justification for studying it. What was I going to do with Italian? I wasn't going to move there. It would be more practical to learn how to play the accordion.

But why must everything always have a practical application? In this dark period of loss, did I need any justification for learning Italian other than that it was the only thing I could imagine bringing me any pleasure right now?

And I loved it. Every word was a singing bird, a magic trick for me. I came home through the rain after class, filled a bath with hot water, and lay there in the bubbles reading the Italian dictionary aloud to myself, taking my mind off my divorce pressures and my heartache. The words made me laugh in delight.

Maybe I would move to Italy, after all...

CHAPTER SEVEN

The other important thing that was happening during that time was the newfound adventure of spiritual discipline. An actual living Indian Guru came into my life. I'd been introduced to my Guru the first night I went to David's apartment. I fell in love with them both at the same time. I walked into David's apartment and saw this picture on his dresser of a radiantly beautiful Indian woman and I asked, "Who's that?"

He said, "That is my spiritual teacher."

My heart took a deep breath and announced: "I want a spiritual teacher." I literally mean that it was my heart who said this, speaking through my mouth. I felt this weird division in myself, and my mind stepped out of my body for a moment, turned to face my heart in astonishment and silently asked, "You DO?"

"Yes," replied my heart. "I do."

Then my mind asked my heart, a bit sarcastically: "Since WHEN?"

But I already knew the answer: Since that night on the bathroom floor.

David told me about the international status of this woman, about her tens of thousands of students - many of whom have never met her face-to-face. Still, he said, there was a gathering here in New York City every Tuesday night of the Guru's devotees who came together as a group to meditate and chant.

I joined David the following Tuesday night. I felt my soul rise almost transparent in the wake of the chanting. I walked home that night feeling like the air could move through me. I started going to the chants every Tuesday. Then I started meditating every morning on the ancient Sanskrit mantra the Guru gives to all her students (Om Namah Shivaya, meaning, "I honor the divinity that resides within me"). Then I listened to the Guru speak in person for the first time, and her words gave me chill bumps over

my whole body, even across the skin of my face. And when I heard she had an Ashram in India, I knew I must take myself there as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the meantime, though, I had to go on a business trip to Indonesia.

An editor from a women's magazine asked if I could go to Bali to write a story about Yoga vacations. When I got to Bali (which is, to be brief, a very nice place) our Yoga teacher asked us, "While you're all here, is there anybody who would like to go visit a ninth-generation Balinese medicine man?" So we all went over to his house one night.

The medicine man was a small, merry-eyed old guy with a mostly toothless mouth. His name was Ketut Liyer. He spoke a thoroughly entertaining kind of English, but there was a translator available for when he got stuck on a word.

Our Yoga teacher had told us in advance that we could each bring one question or problem to the medicine man, and he would try to help us with our troubles.

So when the old man asked me in person what I really wanted, I found true words.

"I want to have a lasting experience of God," I told him. "Sometimes I feel like I understand the divinity of this world, but then I lose it because I get distracted by my petty desires and fears. I want to be with God all the time. But I don't want to be a monk, or totally give up worldly pleasures. I guess what I want to learn is how to live in this world and enjoy its delights, but also devote myself to God."

Ketut said he could answer my question with a picture. He showed me a sketch he'd drawn once during meditation. It was a human figure, standing up, with the hands clasped in prayer. But this figure had four legs,

and instead of the head, there was only a bouquet of flowers. There was a small, smiling face drawn over the heart.

"To find the balance you want," Ketut spoke through his translator, "this is what you must become. You must keep your feet grounded so firmly on the earth that it's like you have four legs, instead of two. That way, you can stay in the world. But you must stop looking at the world through your head. You must look through your heart, instead. That way, you will know God."

Then he asked if he could read my palm. I gave him my left hand.

"You have more good luck than anyone I've ever met," he said. "You will live a long time, have many friends, many experiences. You will see the whole world. You only have one problem in your life. You worry too much. Always you get too emotional, too nervous. If I promise you that you will never have any reason in your life to ever worry about anything, will you believe me?"

Nervously I nodded, not believing him.

"For work, you do something creative, and you get paid good money for it. Always you will get paid good money for this thing you do. You are generous with money, maybe too generous. Also one problem. You will lose all your money once in your life. I think maybe it will happen soon."

"I think maybe it will happen in the next six to ten months," I said, thinking about my divorce.

Ketut nodded. "But don't worry," he said. "After you lose all your money, you will get it all right back again. Right away you'll be fine. You will have two marriages in your life. One short, one long. And you will have one child. Late in life, a daughter. Maybe. If you decide... but there is something else." He frowned, then looked up, suddenly absolutely confident: "Someday soon you will come back here to Bali. You must. You will stay here in Bali for three, maybe four months. You will be my friend. Maybe you will live here with my family. I can practice English with you. I

never had anybody to practice English with. I think you are good with words. I think this creative work you do is something about words, yes?"

"Yes!" I said. "I'm a writer. I'm a book writer!"

"You are a book writer from New York," he said, in confirmation. "So you will come back here to Bali and live here and teach me English. And I will teach you everything I know."

Then he stood up.

I said, "If you're serious, mister, I'm serious."

He beamed at me toothlessly and said, "See you later, alligator."

CHAPTER NINE

Now, I'm the kind of person who, when a ninth-generation Indonesian medicine man tells you that you're destined to move to Bali and live with him for four months, thinks you should make every effort to do that. And this, finally, was how my whole idea about this year of traveling was born. I absolutely needed to get myself back to Indonesia. Problem was, I also wanted to go to India, to visit my Guru's Ashram. To make matters even more confusing, I'd also been dying lately to get over to Italy, so I could practice speaking Italian, but also because I was drawn to the idea of living for a while in a culture where pleasure and beauty are valued.

I wanted worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence - the dual glories of a human life. I wanted what the Greeks called kalos kai agathos, the unique balance of the good and the beautiful. As for how to balance the urge for pleasure against the longing for devotion... well, surely there was a way to learn that trick. And it seemed to me that I maybe could learn this from the Balinese. Maybe even from the medicine man himself.

Four feet on the ground, a head full of flowers, looking at the world through the heart...

So I stopped trying to choose - Italy? India? or Indonesia? - and eventually just admitted that I wanted to travel to all of them. Four months in each place. A year in total. Of course this was a slightly more ambitious dream than "I want to buy myself a new pencil box." But this is what I wanted. And I knew that I wanted to write about it. I wanted to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two. It was only later, after admitting this dream, that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries begin with the letter I. A fairly fortunate sign, it seemed, on a voyage of self-discovery.

The spring of 2003 brought things to a boiling point. A year and a half after I'd left, my husband was finally ready to discuss terms of a settlement. He wanted everything I'd been offering all the time. But he was also asking for things I'd never even considered (a stake in the royalties of books I'd written during the marriage, a cut of possible future movie rights to my work, a share of my retirement accounts, etc.) I protested. Finally, our lawyers came to a compromise and it was starting to look like my husband might actually accept a modified deal. It would cost me dearly, but a fight in the courts would be infinitely more expensive and time-consuming. If he signed the agreement, all I had to do was pay and walk away. Which would be fine with me at this point.

The question was - would he sign? More weeks passed as he contested more details. If he didn't agree to this settlement, we'd have to go to trial. A trial would mean another year - at least - of all this mess. So whatever my husband decided (and he still was my husband, after all), it was going to determine yet another year of my life. The nervousness I felt during this time was something like anticipating the results of a biopsy.

Meanwhile, David and I had broken up again.

And in the middle of all that, I had to go on a small publicity tour connected with publishing one of my books. I took my friend Iva with me for company. Iva is my age but grew up in Beirut, Lebanon. Which means that, while I was playing sports, she was hiding in a bomb shelter five nights out of seven, trying not to die. And I don't know why, but Iva is one of the calmest souls I know. Moreover, she's got what I call "The Phone to

the Universe," some kind of Iva-only, open-round-the-clock special channel to the divine.

So we were driving across Kansas, and I was in my normal state of hysteria over this divorce deal - will he sign, will he not sign? - and I said to Iva, "I don't think I can endure another year in court. I wish I could get some divine intervention here. I wish I could write a petition to God, asking for this thing to end."

"So why don't you?"

I explained to Iva my personal opinions about prayer. Namely, that I don't feel comfortable petitioning for specific things from God, because that feels to me like a kind of weakness of faith. Instead, I feel more comfortable praying for the courage to face whatever occurs in my life with calmness, no matter how things turn out.

Iva listened politely, then asked, "Where'd you get that stupid idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where did you get the idea you aren't allowed to petition the universe with prayer? You are part of this universe, Liz. You have every right to participate in the actions of the universe, and to let your feelings be known. So put your opinion out there. Believe me - it will at least be taken into consideration."

"Really?" All this was news to me.

"Really! Listen - if you wrote a petition to God right now, what would it say?"

I thought for a while, then pulled out a notebook and wrote this petition:

Dear God.

Please intervene and help end this divorce. My husband and I have failed at our marriage and now we are failing at our divorce. This poisonous process is bringing suffering to us and to everyone who cares about us.

I recognize that you are busy with wars and tragedies and much larger conflicts than the ongoing dispute of one dysfunctional couple. But it is my understanding that the health of the planet is affected by the health of every individual on it. As long as even two souls are locked in conflict, the whole of the world is contaminated by it. Similarly, if even one or two souls can be free from discord, this will increase the general health of the whole world, the way a few healthy cells in a body can increase the general health of that body.

It is my most humble request, then, that you help us end this conflict, so that two more people can have the chance to become free and healthy, and so there will be just a little bit less bitterness in a world that is already far too troubled by suffering.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Respectfully,

Elizabeth M. Gilbert

I read it to Iva, and she nodded her approval.

"I would sign that," she said.

I handed the petition over to her with a pen, but she was too busy driving, so she said, "No, let's say that I did just sign it. I signed it in my heart."

"Thank you, Iva. I appreciate your support."

"Now, who else would sign it?" she asked.

"My family. My mother and father. My sister."

"OK," she said. "They just did. Consider their names added. I actually felt them sign it. They're on the list now. OK - who else would sign it? Start naming names."

So I started naming names of all the people who I thought would sign this petition. I named all my close friends, then some family members and some people I worked with. After each name, Iva would say with assurance, "Yep. He just signed it," or "She just signed it." Sometimes Iva added something like: "My parents just signed it. They raised their children during a war. They hate useless conflict. They'd be happy to see your divorce end."

I closed my eyes and waited for more names to come to me.

"I think Bill and Hillary Clinton just signed it," I said.

"I don't doubt it," she said. "Listen, Liz - anybody can sign this petition. Do you understand that? Call on anyone, living or dead, and start collecting signatures."

"Saint Francis of Assisi just signed it!"

"Of course he did!" Iva smacked her hand against the steering wheel with certainty.

Now I was adding names:

"Abraham Lincoln just signed it! And Gandhi, and Mandela and all the peacemakers. Eleanor Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, Jimmy Carter, Muhammad Ali and the Dalai Lama... and my grandmother who died in 1984 and my grandmother who's still alive... and my Italian teacher, and my therapist, and my agent... and Martin Luther King Jr.... and Martin Scorsese (which you wouldn't necessarily expect, but it's still nice of him)... and my Guru, of course... and Ms. Carpenter, my fourth-grade teacher - "

The names spilled from me. They didn't stop spilling for almost an hour, as we drove across Kansas and my petition for peace stretched into page after invisible page of supporters. Iva kept confirming - yes, he signed

it, yes, she signed it - and I became filled with a grand sense of protection, surrounded by the collective goodwill of so many mighty souls.

The list finally wound down, and my anxiety wound down with it. I was sleepy. Iva said, "Take a nap. I'll drive." I closed my eyes. One last name appeared. "Michael J. Fox just signed it," I murmured, then drifted into sleep. I don't know how long I slept, maybe only for ten minutes, but it was deep. When I woke up, Iva was still driving. She was singing a little song to herself. I yawned.

My cell phone rang.

I picked up the phone, whispered hello.

"Great news!" my lawyer announced from distant New York City. "He just signed it!"

CHAPTER TEN

A few weeks later, I am living in Italy.

I have quit my job, paid off my divorce settlement and legal bills, given up my house, given up my apartment, put my belongings into storage in my sister's place and packed up two suitcases. My year of traveling has started. And I can actually afford to do this because of a miracle: in advance, my publisher has purchased the book I should write about my travels. It all turned out, in other words, just as the Indonesian medicine man had predicted. I would lose all my money and it would be replaced immediately - or at least enough of it to buy me a year of life.

So now I am a resident of Rome. The apartment I've found is a quiet studio in a historic building, located near the Piazza del Popolo, where the ancient Romans used to race their chariots.

That's good.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The first meal I ate in Rome was nothing much. Just some homemade pasta (spaghetti carbonara) with spinach and garlic. Also, I had one artichoke, just to try it; the Romans are awfully proud of their artichokes. After the spaghetti, I tried the veal. Oh, and also I drank a bottle of house red wine, just for me. And ate some warm bread, with olive oil and salt. Tiramisu for dessert.

I came home after that meal at around 11:00 PM. I climbed the stairs to my apartment, lay down in my new bed and turned off the light. I waited to start crying or worrying, since that's what usually happened to me with the lights off, but I actually felt OK. I felt fine. I felt the early symptoms of contentment.

My weary body asked my weary mind: "Was this all you needed, then?"

There was no response. I was already fast asleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It is early September, 2003. The weather is warm and lazy. By this, my fourth day in Rome, I have still not been to a museum, nor have I even looked at a guidebook. But I have been walking endlessly and aimlessly, and I finally found a little place that a friendly bus driver informed me sells The Best Gelato in Rome. I tried a combination of the honey and the hazelnut ice cream. I came back later that same day for the grapefruit and the melon. Then, after dinner that same night, I walked all the way back over there one last time, just to sample a cup of the cinnamon-ginger.

I've been trying to read through one newspaper article every day, no matter how long it takes. I look up approximately every third word in my dictionary. It's also important to read the newspaper every day to see how the pope is doing. Here in Rome, the pope's health is recorded daily in the newspaper, very much like weather, or the TV schedule. Today the pope is

tired. Yesterday, the pope was less tired than he is today. Tomorrow, we expect that the pope will not be quite as tired as he was today.

It's kind of a fairyland of language for me here. I went to a bookstore yesterday morning and felt I'd entered an enchanted palace. Everything was in Italian. I found some works by American poets in that bookstore, with the original English version printed on one side of the page and the Italian translation on the other. I bought a volume by Robert Lowell, another by Louise Gluck.

Today I found a library. This library is a beautiful old thing, and within it there is a courtyard garden. The garden is a perfect square, dotted with orange trees and, in the center, a fountain. I sat down on a bench under an orange tree and opened one of the poetry books I'd purchased yesterday. Louise Gluck. I read the first poem in Italian, then in English, and stopped suddenly at this line:

Dal centro della mia vita venne una grande fontana...

"From the center of my life, there came a great fountain..."

I set the book down in my lap, shaking with relief.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Traveling is the great true love of my life. I have always felt, ever since I was sixteen years old and first went to Russia with my saved-up babysitting money, that to travel is worth any cost or sacrifice. I am loyal and constant in my love for travel, as I have not always been loyal and constant in my other loves. I feel about travel the way a happy new mother feels about her impossible, restless newborn baby - I just don't care what it puts me through. Because I adore it. Because it's mine.

I have my own set of survival techniques. I am patient. I know how to pack light. I'm a fearless eater. But my one mighty travel talent is that I can

make friends with anybody. People asked me before I left for Italy, "Do you have friends in Rome?" and I said, "No," thinking to myself, "But I will."

There is the grand old system of the "letter of introduction" (today more likely to be an e-mail), presenting you formally to the acquaintance of an acquaintance. This is a great way to meet people. So before I left for Italy, I asked everyone I knew in America if they had any friends in Rome, and I'm happy to report that I have been sent abroad with a substantial list of Italian contacts.

Among all the nominees on my Potential New Italian Friends List, I am most intrigued to meet a fellow named... Luca Spaghetti. Luca Spaghetti is a good friend of my college friend. And that is honestly his name, I'm not making it up. It's too crazy.

Anyhow, I plan to get in touch with Luca Spaghetti just as soon as possible.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

First, though, I must get settled into school. My classes begin today at the Leonardo da Vinci Academy of Language Studies, where I will be studying Italian five days a week, four hours a day. I'm so excited about school.

We all have to take a test on the first day, in order to be placed in the proper level of Italian class for our abilities. When I hear this, I immediately start hoping I don't place into a Level One class, because that would be shameful, considering that I already took a whole entire semester of Italian in New York, and that I spent the summer memorizing words, and that I've already been in Rome a week. The thing is, I don't even know how many levels this school has, but as soon as I heard the word level, I decided that I must test into Level Two - at least.

So I come to school early and I take the test. It's such a hard test! I know so much Italian, I know dozens of words in Italian, but they don't ask

me anything that I know. Then there's an oral exam, which is even worse. There's this skinny Italian teacher interviewing me and speaking too fast, in my opinion, and I'm nervous and making mistakes with stuff I already know.

In the end, it's OK, though. The skinny Italian teacher looks over my exam and selects my class level: Level TWO!

Classes begin in the afternoon. So after lunch I walk proudly past all those Level One students and enter my first class. It turns out, though, that Level Two is really impossibly hard. I feel like I'm swimming, but barely. The teacher is speaking too fast, skipping over whole chapters of the textbook, saying, "You already know this, you already know that..." and keeping up a rapid conversation with my apparently fluent classmates. Just as soon as the break comes, I run out of that classroom and hurry to the administrative office almost in tears, where I beg in very clear English if they could please move me down to a Level One class. And so they do. And now I am here.

This teacher speaks slowly. This is much better.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The interesting thing about my Italian class is that nobody really needs to be there. There are twelve of us studying together, of all ages, from all over the world, and everybody has come to Rome for the same reason - to study Italian just because they feel like it. Not one of us can identify a single practical reason for being here. Everybody, even the anxious German engineer, shares what I thought was my own personal motive: we all want to speak Italian because we love the way it makes us feel. A sad-faced Russian woman tells us she's treating herself to Italian lessons because "I think I deserve something beautiful." The German engineer says, "I want Italian because I love the dolce vita" - the sweet life.

As I will find out over the next few months, there are actually some good reasons that Italian is the most seductively beautiful language in the

world, and why I'm not the only person who thinks so.

In the sixteenth century, some Italian intellectuals got together, chose the most beautiful of all the local dialects and crowned it Italian.

In order to find the most beautiful dialect ever spoken in Italy, they had to reach back in time two hundred years to fourteenth-century Florence. They decided that the proper Italian was the personal language of the great Florentine poet Dante Alighieri.

The Italian we speak today is Dantean. No other European language has such an artistic history. And perhaps no language was ever more perfectly designed to express human emotions than this fourteenth-century Florentine Italian.

The last line of the Divine Comedy, in which Dante is faced with the vision of God Himself, is a sentiment that is still easily understandable by anyone familiar with so-called modern Italian. Dante writes that God is not merely a blinding vision of glorious light, but that He is, most of all, *l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle...*

"The love that moves the sun and the other stars."

So it's really no wonder that I want so desperately to learn this language.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Depression and Loneliness track me down after about ten days in Italy. I am walking through the Villa Borghese one evening after a happy day spent in school, and the sun is setting gold over St. Peter's Basilica. I am feeling contented in this romantic scene, even if I am all by myself, while everyone else in the park is either kissing a lover or playing with a laughing child. But I stop to watch the sunset, and I get to thinking a little too much, and then my thinking turns to brooding, and that's when they catch up with me.

They come upon me all silent and threatening like Pinkerton Detectives, and they flank me - Depression on my left, Loneliness on my right.

I say to them, "How did you find me here? Who told you I had come to Rome?"

Depression, always the wise guy, says, "What - you're not happy to see us?"

"Go away," I tell him.

Loneliness, the more sensitive cop, says, "I'm sorry, ma'am. But I have to accompany you the whole time you're traveling. It's my assignment." I walk back home, hoping to shake them, but they keep following me, these two goons. I don't want to let them up the stairs to my apartment, but I know Depression, and he's got a stick, so there's no stopping him from coming in if he decides that he wants to.

"It's not fair for you to come here," I tell Depression.

But he just gives me that dark smile, settles into my favorite chair, puts his feet on my table and lights a cigar, filling the place with his awful smoke. Loneliness watches and sighs, then climbs into my bed, fully dressed. He's going to make me sleep with him again tonight, I just know it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I'd stopped taking my medication only a few days earlier. It had just seemed crazy to be taking antidepressants in Italy. How could I be depressed here?

I'd never wanted to be on the medication in the first place. I'd fought taking it for so long, mainly because of a long list of personal objections (e.g.: Americans are overmedicated; we don't know the long-term effects of this stuff yet on the human brain; it's a crime that even American children

are on antidepressants these days; we are treating the symptoms and not the causes of a national mental health emergency...). Still, during the last few years of my life, it was clear that I was in trouble. As my marriage dissolved and my drama with David evolved, I'd come to have all the symptoms of a major depression - loss of sleep and appetite, uncontrollable weeping, chronic backaches and stomachaches, despair, inability to concentrate on work... it went on and on.

I took on my depression like it was the fight of my life, which, of course, it was. I became a student of my own depressed experience, trying to find its causes. What was the root of all this despair? Was it psychological? Was it just temporal, a "bad time" in my life? (When the divorce ends, will the depression end with it?) Was it genetic? Was it cultural? Was it astrological? Was it karmic? Was it hormonal? Dietary? Philosophical? Seasonal? Environmental? Did I have a chemical imbalance?

What a large number of factors constitute a single human being! How very many layers we operate on, and how very many influences we receive from our minds, our bodies, our histories, our families, our cities, our souls and our lunches! So I faced the fight at every level. I bought all those self-help books. I prayed like a novice nun. I stopped eating meat (for a short time, anyway) after someone told me that I was "eating the fear of the animal at the moment of its death." I exercised. I carefully protected myself from sad movies, books and songs. I tried so hard to fight the endless sobbing.

The last thing I tried, after about two years of fighting this sorrow, was medication. If I may impose my opinions here, I think it should always be the last thing you try. For me, the decision happened after a night when I'd sat on the floor of my bedroom for many hours, trying very hard to talk myself out of cutting into my arm with a kitchen knife. I had some other good ideas around that time - about how jumping off a building or blowing my brains out with a gun might stop the suffering. But something about spending a night with a knife in my hand did it.

The next morning I called my friend Susan, begged her to help me. Susan made the phone calls and found me a psychiatrist who would give me

a consultation that very day, to discuss the possibility of prescribing antidepressants. I listened to Susan's conversation with the doctor, listened to her say, "I'm afraid my friend is going to seriously hurt herself." I was afraid, too.

When I went to see the psychiatrist that afternoon, he asked me what had taken me so long to get help. I told him my objections and reservations about antidepressants. I laid copies of the three books I'd already published on his desk, and I said, "I'm a writer. Please don't do anything to harm my brain." He said, "If you had a kidney disease, you wouldn't hesitate to take medication for it - why are you hesitating with this?" But, see, that only shows how ignorant he was about my family; we're a family who regard any sickness as a sign of personal, ethical, moral failure.

He put me on a few different drugs until we found the best combination. Quickly, in less than a week, I could feel an extra inch of daylight opening in my mind. Also, I could finally sleep. And this was the real gift, because when you cannot sleep, you cannot get yourself out of the ditch - there's not a chance. The pills gave me those recovery night hours back, and also stopped my hands from shaking and released the panic alert button from inside my heart.

Still, I never relaxed into taking those drugs, though they helped immediately. I always felt conflicted about it. Those drugs were part of my bridge to the other side, there's no question about it, but I wanted to be off them as soon as possible. I'd started taking the medication in January of 2003. By May, I was already diminishing my dosage significantly. Those had been the toughest months, anyhow - the last months of the divorce, the last months with David.

I know these drugs made my misery feel less catastrophic. So I'm grateful for that. But I'm still deeply ambivalent about mood-altering medications. Medicating the symptom of any illness without exploring its root cause is just a classically crazy Western way to think that anyone could ever get truly better. Though one doctor suggested that I might have to go on and off antidepressants many times in my life because of my "tendency toward melancholy," I hope he's wrong. I intend to do everything I can to prove him wrong, or at least to fight that melancholic tendency. Whether

this makes me self-defeatingly stubborn, or self-preservingly stubborn, I cannot say.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I am in Rome, and I am in trouble. The goons of Depression and Loneliness have come into my life again. There are more pills in my bottom drawer, but I don't want them. I want to be free of them forever. But I don't want Depression or Loneliness around, either, so I don't know what to do, and I'm spiraling in panic, like I always spiral when I don't know what to do. So what I do for tonight is reach for my most private notebook, which I keep next to my bed in case I'm ever in emergency trouble. I open it up. I find the first blank page. I write:

"I need your help."

Then I wait. After a little while, a response comes, in my own handwriting:

"I'm right here. What can I do for you?"

Here, in this most private notebook, is where I talk to myself. I talk to that same voice I met that night on my bathroom floor when I first prayed to God in tears for help, when something (or somebody) had said, "Go back to bed, Liz." In the years since then, I've found that voice again in times of distress, and have learned that the best way for me to reach it is written conversation. I've been surprised to find that I can almost always access that voice. Even during the worst of suffering, that calm, compassionate, affectionate and infinitely wise voice (who is maybe me, or maybe not exactly me) is always available for a conversation on paper at any time of day or night.

So tonight I reach for that voice again. This is the first time I've done this since I came to Italy. What I write in my journal tonight is that I am weak and full of fear. I explain that Depression and Loneliness have shown up, and I'm scared they will never leave. I say that I don't want to take the

drugs anymore, but I'm frightened I will have to. I'm terrified that I will never really pull my life together.

In response, somewhere from within me, rises a now-familiar presence. This is what I find myself writing to myself on the page:

I'm here. I love you. I don't care if you need to stay up crying all night long, I will stay with you. If you need the medication again, go ahead and take it - I will love you through that, as well. If you don't need the medication, I will love you, too. There's nothing you can ever do to lose my love. I will protect you until you die, and after your death I will still protect you. I am stronger than Depression and I am braver than Loneliness and nothing will ever exhaust me.

I fall asleep holding my notebook pressed against my chest, open to this most recent assurance. In the morning when I wake up, I can still smell a faint trace of Depression's lingering smoke, but he himself is nowhere to be seen. Somewhere during the night, he got up and left. And his buddy Loneliness, too.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Here's what's strange, though. I haven't been able to do any Yoga since getting to Rome. For years I've had a steady and serious practice, and I even brought my Yoga mat with me. But it just isn't happening here. I mean, when am I going to do my Yoga stretches? Before my Italian breakfast of chocolate pastries and double cappuccino? Or after? The first few days I was here, I readily rolled out my Yoga mat every morning, but found I could only look at it and laugh.

The culture of Rome just doesn't match the culture of Yoga, not as far as I can see. In fact, I've decided that Rome and Yoga don't have anything in

common at all. Except for the way they both kind of remind you of the word toga.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I needed to make some friends. So I got busy with it, and now it is October and I have a nice assortment of them. I know two Elizabeths in Rome now, besides myself. Both are American, both are writers. The first Elizabeth is a novelist and the second Elizabeth is a food writer. With an apartment in Rome, a house in Umbria, an Italian husband and a job that requires her to travel around Italy eating food and writing about it for Gourmet, it appears that the second Elizabeth saved a lot of orphans from drowning during a previous lifetime. Unsurprisingly, she knows all the best places to eat in Rome, including a gelateria that serves a frozen rice pudding (and if they don't serve this kind of thing in heaven, then I really don't want to go there). Of course, by now I've also made friends with Giovanni and Dario, my Tandem Language Exchange fantasy twins. I don't very often see Dario, though he spends a lot of his time with Sofie. Sofie is my best friend from my language class, and she's definitely somebody you'd want to spend your time with, too, if you were Dario. Sofie is Swedish and in her late twenties and so cute you could put her on a hook and use her as bait to catch men of all different nationalities and ages. Sofie has just taken a four-month leave of absence from her good job in a Swedish bank only because she wanted to come to Rome and learn how to speak beautiful Italian. Every day after class, Sofie and I go sit by the Tiber, eating our gelato and studying with each other.

I've also become friends with a cool couple named Maria and Giulio, introduced to me by my friend Ann - an American painter who lived in Rome a few years back. Maria is from America, Giulio's from the south of Italy. He's a filmmaker, she works for an international agricultural policy organization. He doesn't speak great English, but she speaks fluent Italian (and also fluent French and Chinese, so that's not intimidating). Giulio wants to learn English, and asked if he could practice conversing with me in another Tandem Exchange. In case you're wondering why he couldn't just study English with his American-born wife, it's because they're married and

they fight too much whenever one tries to teach anything to the other one. So Giulio and I now meet for lunch twice a week to practice our Italian and English; a good task for two people who don't have any history of irritating each other.

But my newest best friend in Italy is, of course, Luca Spaghetti. Even in Italy, by the way, it's considered a very funny thing to have a last name like Spaghetti. Luca speaks perfect English and is a good eater, so he's terrific company for me. He often calls in the middle of the day to say, "Hey, I'm in your neighborhood - want to meet up for a quick cup of coffee?"

Luca is a tax accountant. An Italian tax accountant, which means that he is, in his own description, "an artist," because there are several hundred tax laws in Italy and all of them contradict each other.

Luca has traveled a lot, though he claims he could never live anywhere but in Rome, near his mother, since he is an Italian man, after all - what can he say? But it's not just his mamma who keeps him around. He's in his early thirties, and has had the same girlfriend since he was a teenager. All his friends are the same friends he's had since childhood, and all from the same neighborhood. They watch the soccer matches together every Sunday - either at the stadium or in a bar (if the Roman teams are playing away) - and then they all return separately to the homes where they grew up, in order to eat the big Sunday afternoon meals cooked by their mothers and grandmothers.

I wouldn't move from Rome, either, if I were Luca Spaghetti.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here, I admit it.

While I have come to Italy in order to experience pleasure, during the first few weeks I was here, I felt a bit of panic as to how I should do that. Frankly, pure pleasure is not my cultural model. I come from a long line of

super hard-working people. My mother's family were Swedish immigrant farmers. My father's side of the family were English Puritans.

Generally speaking, though, Americans have an inability to relax into sheer pleasure. Ours is an entertainment-seeking nation, but not necessarily a pleasure-seeking one. Americans work harder and longer and more stressful hours than anyone in the world today. But as Luca Spaghetti pointed out, we seem to like it. Many Americans feel happier and more fulfilled in their offices than they do in their own homes. Americans don't really know how to do nothing. This is the cause of that great sad American stereotype - the overstressed executive who goes on vacation, but who cannot relax.

I once asked Luca Spaghetti if Italians on vacation have that same problem. He laughed so hard he almost drove his motorbike into a fountain.

"Oh, no!" he said. "We are the masters of *il bel far niente*."

This is a sweet expression. *Il bel far niente* means "the beauty of doing nothing." Now listen - Italians have traditionally always been hard workers. But even against that hard work, *il bel far niente* has always been a cherished Italian ideal. The beauty of doing nothing is the goal of all your work, the final accomplishment for which you are most highly congratulated. The more exquisitely and delightfully you can do nothing, the higher your life's achievement. You don't necessarily need to be rich in order to experience this, either. Anyone with a talent for happiness can do this, not only the rich.

For me, though, a major obstacle in my pursuit of pleasure was my ingrained sense of Puritan guilt. Do I really deserve this pleasure? This is very American, too - the insecurity about whether we have earned our happiness. Planet Advertising in America orbits completely around the need to convince the uncertain consumer that yes, you have actually warranted a special treat. You Deserve a Break Today! Because You're Worth It! You've Come a Long Way, Baby! And the insecure consumer thinks, Yeah! Thanks! Such advertising campaigns would probably not be as effective in the Italian culture, where people already know that they are entitled to enjoyment in this life.

Which is probably why, when I told my Italian friends that I'd come to their country in order to experience four months of pure pleasure, they didn't reproach me. Nobody once said, "How completely irresponsible of you." But while the Italians have given me full permission to enjoy myself, I still can't quite let go. During my first few weeks in Italy, I was looking for a task. I wanted to take on pleasure like a homework assignment, or a giant science fair project.

When I realized that the only question was, "How do I define pleasure?" and that I was truly in a country where people would permit me to explore that question freely, everything changed. Everything became... delicious. All I had to do was ask myself every day, for the first time in my life, "What would you enjoy doing today, Liz? What would bring you pleasure right now?" With no obligations to worry about, this question finally became distilled and absolutely self-specific.

It was interesting for me to discover what I did not want to do in Italy. There are so many manifestations of pleasure in Italy, and I didn't have time to sample them all. I was not interested in fashion, or opera, or cinema, or skiing in the Alps. I didn't even want to look at that much art. I am a bit ashamed to admit this, but I did not visit a single museum during my entire four months in Italy. I found that all I really wanted was to eat beautiful food and to speak as much beautiful Italian as possible. Happiness inhabited my every molecule.

Until - as often happened during those first months of travel, whenever I felt such happiness - my guilt alarm went off. I heard my ex-husband's voice speaking in my ear: So this is what you gave up everything for? This is why you threw away our entire life together? For that ice cream and an Italian newspaper?

I replied aloud to him. "First of all," I said, "I'm very sorry, but this isn't your business anymore. And secondly, to answer your question... yes."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

One obvious topic still needs to be addressed concerning my whole pursuit of pleasure thing in Italy: What about sex?

To answer that question simply: I don't want to have any while I'm here.

To answer it more thoroughly and honestly - of course, sometimes I desperately want to have some, but I've decided to sit this particular game out for a while. I don't want to get involved with anybody. When I get lonely these days, I think: So be lonely, Liz. Learn your way around loneliness. Make a map of it. Sit with it, for once in your life. Welcome to the human experience. But never again use another person's body or emotions as a scratching post for your own unfulfilled yearnings.

It's a kind of emergency life-saving policy, more than anything else. I got started early in life with the pursuit of sexual and romantic pleasure. I have consistently had a boy or a man (or sometimes both) in my life ever since I was fifteen years old. That's almost two decades I have been entwined in some kind of drama with some kind of guy.

Moreover, I disappear into the person I love. If I love you, you can have everything. You can have my time, my devotion, my body, my money, my family, my dog, my dog's money, my dog's time - everything. If I love you, I will carry for you all your pain, I will assume for you all your debts, I will protect you from your own insecurity, I will project upon you all sorts of good qualities that you have never actually cultivated in yourself and I will buy Christmas presents for your entire family. I will give you all this and more, until I get so exhausted that the only way I can recover my energy is by becoming infatuated with someone else.

I do not speak about these facts about myself with pride, but this is how it's always been.

And there's a final reason I'm hesitant to get involved with someone else. I still happen to be in love with David, and I don't think that's fair to the next guy. I don't even know if David and I are totally broken up yet. I don't know.

So I'm exhausted by the cumulative consequences of a lifetime of hasty choices and chaotic passions. By the time I left for Italy, my body and my spirit were tired. And that's why I've quit.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Yesterday afternoon I went to the soccer game with Luca Spaghetti and his friends. We were there to watch Lazio play. There are two soccer teams in Rome - Lazio and Roma. The rivalry between the teams and their fans is immense, and can divide happy families and peaceful neighborhoods into civil war zones. It's important that you choose early in life whether you are a Lazio fan or a Roma fan, because this will determine, to a large part, who you keep out with every Sunday afternoon for the rest of time. Luca has a group of about ten close friends who all love each other like brothers. Except that half of them are Lazio fans and half of them are Roma fans. They can't really help it; they were all born into families where the loyalty was already established.

"We can change our wives," he said. "We can change our jobs, our nationalities and even our religions, but we can never change our team."

By the way, the word for "fan" in Italian is tifoso. Derived from the word for typhus. In other words - one who is mightily fevered.

The Lazio players were no less dramatic than their fans, rolling on the ground in pain, then jumping up on their feet two seconds later to lead another attack on the goal.

Lazio lost, though.

Needing to be cheered up after the game, Luca Spaghetti asked his friends, "Should we go out?"

I assumed this meant, "Should we go out to a bar?" That's what sports fans in America would do if their team had just lost. They'd go to a bar and get drunk. And not just Americans would do this - so would the English, the

Australians, the Germans... everyone, right? But Luca and his friends didn't go out to a bar to cheer themselves up. They went to a bakery. The place was crowded that Sunday night. But it is always crowded after the games. The Lazio fans always stop here on their way home from the stadium to stand in the street for hours, leaning up against their motorcycles, talking about the game, looking macho as anything, and eating cream puffs.

I love Italy.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

I am learning about twenty new Italian words a day. I'm always studying, flipping through my index cards while I walk around the city. Where am I getting the brain space to store these words? I'm hoping that maybe my mind has decided to clear out some old negative thoughts and sad memories and replace them with these shiny new words.

My favorite thing to say in all of Italian is a simple, common word:

Attraversiamo.

It means, "Let's cross over." Friends say it to each other constantly when they're walking down the sidewalk and have decided it's time to switch to the other side of the street. The first time Giovanni said it to me, we were walking near the Colosseum. I suddenly heard him speak that beautiful word, and I stopped dead, demanding, "What does that mean? What did you just say?"

"Attraversiamo. "

He couldn't understand why I liked it so much. Let's cross the street? But to my ear, it's the perfect combination of Italian sounds. I love this word. I say it all the time now.

Giovanni's favorite word in English is half-assed.

Luca Spaghetti's is surrender.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

I take myself on a six-hour walk through town today. This is easy to do, especially if you stop frequently to have espresso and pastries. I start at my apartment door, then wander through the cosmopolitan shopping center that is my neighborhood.

I pass the Palazzo Borghese, a building that has known many famous tenants. Then I stroll along the banks of the great, swampy Tiber, all the way down to the Tiber Island, which is one of my favorite quiet places in Rome.

I cross over the river to Trastevere - the neighborhood that claims to be inhabited by the truest Romans, the workers, the guys who have, over the centuries, built all the monuments on the other side of the Tiber. I have lunch in a quiet trattoria here, and I eat my food and drink wine slowly and with great pleasure.

Then I go have a look at the Pantheon. I try to look at the Pantheon every chance I get, since I am here in Rome after all, and an old proverb says that anyone who goes to Rome without seeing the Pantheon "goes and comes back an ass."

On my way back home I stop at the address in Rome I find most strangely affecting - the Augusteum.

Augustus's mausoleum fell to ruins and thieves during the Dark Ages. By the twelfth century, though, the monument had been renovated into a fortress for the powerful Colonna family, to protect them from various warring princes. Then the Augusteum was transformed somehow into a vineyard, then a Renaissance garden, then a bullring, then a fireworks depository, then a concert hall. In the 1930s, Mussolini seized the property and restored it, so that it could someday be the final resting place for his remains. But it never happened. Today the Augusteum is one of the quietest and loneliest places in Rome, buried deep in the ground. The city has grown up around it over the centuries.

I find the endurance of the Augusteum so reassuring, that this structure has had such an unpredictable career, yet always adjusted to the particular wildness of the times. To me, the Augusteum is like a person who's led a totally crazy life.

I look at the Augusteum, and I think that perhaps my life has not actually been so chaotic, after all. It is merely this world that is chaotic, bringing changes to us all that nobody could have anticipated. The Augusteum warns me not to get attached to any ideas about who I am, what I represent, whom I belong to, or what function I may once have intended to serve. Yesterday I might have been a glorious monument to somebody, true enough - but tomorrow I could be a fireworks depository. Even in the Eternal City, says the silent Augusteum, one must always be prepared for endless waves of transformation.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

I had shipped ahead a box of books to myself, right before I left New York to move to Italy. The box was guaranteed to arrive at my Roman apartment within four to six days, but two months have passed now, and I have seen no sign of my box. My Italian friends tell me to put the box out of my mind completely. They say that the box may arrive or it may not arrive, but such things are out of our hands.

The mystery of my missing box started a long discussion one night between me, my American friend Maria and her husband, Giulio. Maria thinks that in a civilized society one should be able to rely on such things as the post office delivering one's mail at the appointed time, but Giulio argues. He submits that the post office belongs not to man, but to the fates, and that delivery of mail is not something anybody can guarantee. Maria, annoyed, says this is only further evidence of the Protestant-Catholic divide. This divide is best proven, she says, by the fact that Italians - including her own husband - can never make plans for the future, not even a week in advance. If you ask a Protestant from the American Midwest to commit to a dinner date next week, that Protestant, believing that she is the captain of her own destiny, will say, "Thursday night is fine for me." But if

you ask a Catholic from Calabria to make the same commitment, he will only shrug, turn his eyes to God, and ask, "How can any of us know whether we will be free for dinner next Thursday night, given that everything is in God's hands and none of us can know our fate?"

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

I called my friend Sofie and said, "Let's go down to Naples for the day and eat some pizza!"

Immediately, just a few hours later, we are on the train, and then - like magic - we are there. I instantly love Naples. Wild, noisy, dirty Naples. The city is all decorated with the laundry that hangs from every window and dangles across every street; everybody's fresh-washed undershirts and brassieres flapping in the wind like flags.

The people here are so insanely proud to be from Naples, and why shouldn't they be? This is a city that gave the world pizza and ice cream. They still have their own dialect here, and an ever-changing local slang, but somehow I find that the Neapolitans are the easiest people for me to understand in Italy. Why? Because they want you to understand. They talk loud and emphatically, and if you can't understand what they're actually saying out of their mouths, you can usually pick up the meaning from the gesture.

Giovanni and Dario, my Tandem Exchange twins, are originally from Naples. Before I left Rome Giovanni gave me the name of a pizzeria in Naples that I had to try, because, Giovanni informed me, it sold the best pizza in Naples. I found this a wildly exciting prospect, considering that the best pizza in Italy is from Naples, and the best pizza in the world is from Italy, which means that this pizzeria must offer... the best pizza in the world?

So Sofie and I have come to Pizzeria da Michele, and these pies we have just ordered - one for each of us - are making us lose our minds.

Then Sofie and I order another pie - another whole pizza each.

A word about my body. I am gaining weight every day, of course. I am doing rude things to my body here in Italy, taking in such terrible amounts of cheese and pasta and bread and wine and chocolate. But my body is so patient. It says, "OK, kid, live it up, I recognize that this is just temporary. Let me know when your little experiment with pure pleasure is over, and I'll see what I can do about damage control."

Still, when I look at myself in the mirror of the best pizzeria in Naples, I see a bright-eyed, clear-skinned, happy and healthy face. I haven't seen a face like that on me for a long time.

"Thank you," I whisper. Then Sofie and I run out in the rain to look for pastries.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

It is this happiness, I suppose (which is really a few months old by now), that gets me to thinking upon my return to Rome that I need to do something about David. That maybe it's time for us to end our story forever. We were already separated, that was official, but there was still a window of hope left open that perhaps someday we could give things another try. We loved each other. That was never the question. It's just that we couldn't figure out how to stop making each other desperately miserable.

So many times I had wished with David that I could behave more like my mother does in her marriage - independent, strong, self-sufficient. What I grew up watching in my household was a mother who would receive her husband's love and affection whenever he thought to offer it, but would then step aside and take care of herself whenever he drifted off into his own peculiar universe. This is how it looked to me.

But then I'd had a conversation with my mother, not long before I'd left for Rome. She'd come into New York to have one last lunch with me, and she'd asked me frankly what had happened between me and David. I

told her. I told her everything. I told her how much I loved David, but how lonely and heartsick it made me to be with this person who was always disappearing from the room, from the bed, from the planet.

"He sounds like your father," she said. A brave and generous admission.

"The problem is," I said, "I'm not like my mother. I'm not as tough as you, Mom. There's a constant level of closeness that I really need from the person I love. I wish I could be more like you, then I could have this love story with David. But it just destroys me to not be able to count on that affection when I need it."

Then my mother shocked me. She said, "All those things that you want from your relationship, Liz? I have always wanted those things, too."

In that moment, it was as if my strong mother reached across the table, opened her fist and finally showed me the handful of bullets she'd had to bite over the decades in order to stay happily married (and she is happily married) to my father. I had never seen this side of her before, not ever. Seeing all this, I could feel my worldview start to make a radical shift.

If even she wants what I want, then...?

Then my mother said, "You have to understand how little I was raised to expect that I deserved in life, honey. Remember - I come from a different time and place than you do."

I closed my eyes and saw my mother, ten years old on the family farm in Minnesota, working like a hired hand, raising her younger brothers, wearing the clothes of her older sister, wishing to get herself out of there...

"And you have to understand how much I love your father," she concluded.

My mother has made choices in her life, as we all must, and she is at peace with them. I can see her peace. Maybe some things were sacrificed,

and my dad made his sacrifices, too - but who amongst us lives without sacrifice?

And the question now for me is, What are my choices to be? What do I believe that I deserve in this life? Where can I accept sacrifice, and where can I not? It has been so hard for me to imagine living a life without David in it. Even just to imagine that there will never be another road trip with my favorite traveling companion. But how can I accept that bliss when it comes with this dark isolation, corrosive insecurity, sinister resentment? I can't do it anymore. Something about my recent joy in Naples has made me certain that I not only can find happiness without David, but must. No matter how much I love him, I have to say goodbye to this person now.

So I write him an e-mail.

I tell him that I hope he's well, and I report that I am well. I make a few jokes. We always were good with the jokes. Then I explain that I think we need to put an end to this relationship for good. That maybe it's time to admit that it will never happen. The note isn't too dramatic. Lord knows we've had enough drama together already. I keep it short and simple. But there's one more thing I need to add. Holding my breath, I type, "If you want to look for another partner in your life, of course you have nothing but my blessings." My hands are shaking. I sign off with love, trying to keep a cheerful tone.

I feel like I just got hit in the chest with a stick.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

My sister's arrival in Rome a few days later helped push my attention away from sadness over David and bring me back up to speed. My sister does everything fast. She's three years older than me and three inches taller than me. She's an athlete and a scholar and a mother and a writer. The whole time she was in Rome, she was training for a marathon, which means she woke up at dawn and ran eighteen miles in the time it generally takes me to read one article in the newspaper and drink two cappuccinos.

My sister's name is Catherine. She's my one and only sibling. When we were growing up in rural Connecticut, it was just the two of us, living in a farmhouse with our parents. No other kids nearby. She was mighty and domineering, the commander of my whole life. I lived in awe and fear of her; nobody else's opinion mattered but hers. We were not always friends. She was annoyed by me, and I was scared of her, I believe, until I was twenty-eight years old and got tired of it. That was the year I finally contradicted her, and her reaction was something like, "Why did you wait so long?"

We were just beginning to have the new terms of our relationship when my marriage went into a skid. Catherine held me up like a champion. She answered the phone in the middle of the night whenever I was in distress and made comforting noises. And she came along with me when I went searching for answers as to why I was so sad.

Now we speak to each other on the phone almost every day - or at least we did, before I moved to Rome. Before either of us gets on an airplane now, the one always calls the other and says, "I know this is gloomy, but I just wanted to tell you that I love you. You know... just in case..." And the other one always says, "I know... just in case."

She arrives in Rome prepared, as ever. She brings five guidebooks, all of which she has read already, and she has the city pre-mapped in her head. She was completely oriented before she even left Philadelphia.

So my sister comes to visit me in Rome - in my new city - and then shows it to me. This is Rome, Catherine-style. Full of facts and dates and architecture that I do not see because my mind does not work in that way. The only thing I ever want to know about any place or any person is the story, this is the only thing I watch for - never for aesthetic details.

Catherine takes me into dozens of churches in Rome, and I confuse them - St. This and St. That... but I love to be inside these places with my sister, whose cobalt eyes miss nothing.

My sister's faith is in learning. Her sacred text is the Oxford English Dictionary. As she bows her head in study, she is with her God. I see my

sister in prayer again later that same day - when she drops to her knees in the middle of the Roman Forum, clears away some litter off the soil, then takes up a small stone and draws for me in the dirt a plan of a classic Romanesque basilica. She points from her drawing to the ruin before her, leading me to understand what that building looked like eighteen centuries earlier.

In Italian there is a seldom-used tense called the *passato remoto*, the remote past. You use this tense when you are discussing things in the far, far distant past, for example, ancient history. But my sister, if she spoke Italian, would not use this tense to discuss ancient history. In her world, the Roman Forum is not remote, it is not past. It is exactly as present and close to her as I am.

She leaves the next day.

"Listen," I say, "be sure to call me when your plane lands safely, OK? Not to be gloomy, but..."

"I know, sweetie," she says. "I love you, too."

CHAPTER THIRTY

I am so surprised sometimes to notice that my sister is a wife and a mother, and I am not. Somehow I always thought it would be the opposite. I thought it would be me who would end up with a houseful of muddy boots and crying kids, while Catherine would be living by herself, reading alone at night in her bed. We grew up into different adults. It's better this way, though, I think. Against all predictions, we've each created lives that agree with us. Her solitary nature means she needs a family to keep her from loneliness; my gregarious nature means I will never have to worry about being alone, even when I am single. I'm happy that she's going back home to her family and also happy that I have another nine months of traveling ahead of me, where all I have to do is eat and read and pray and write.

I still can't say whether I will ever want children. I was so astonished to find that I did not want them at thirty. I can only say how I feel now - grateful to be on my own. I also know that I won't have children just in case I might regret missing it later in life; I don't think this is a strong enough motivation to bring more babies onto the earth. Though I suppose people reproduce sometimes for that reason - for insurance against later regret.

I'm lucky that at least I have my writing. This is something people can understand. Ah, she left her marriage in order to preserve her art. That's sort of true, though not completely so. A lot of writers have families. Toni Morrison, just to name an example, didn't let the raising of her son stop her from winning the Nobel Prize. But Toni Morrison made her own path, and I must make mine. The Bhagavad Gita - that ancient Indian Yogic text - says that it is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else's life with perfection. So now I have started living my own life.

Anyway, I say that only to admit - in comparison to my sister's existence, to her home and to her good marriage and to her children - I'm looking pretty unstable these days. I don't even have an address, and that's kind of a crime against normality at this old age of thirty-four.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Over the next six weeks, I travel to Bologna, to Florence, to Venice, to Sicily, to Sardinia, once more down to Naples, then over to Calabria. These are short trips, mostly - a week here, a weekend there - just the right amount of time to get the feel for a place, to look around, to ask people on the street where the good food is and then to go eat it. I drop out of my Italian language school, because I felt that it was interfering with my efforts to learn Italian, since it was keeping me stuck in the classroom instead of wandering around Italy, where I could practice the language with people in the street.

These weeks of spontaneous travel are a fantastic time, running to the train station and buying tickets left and right, finally beginning to really

enjoy my freedom because it has finally come to me that I can go wherever I want.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

I've already got a date in Venice. I'm meeting my friend Linda there.

Linda is coming to Venice from Seattle. She wanted to come see me in Italy, so I invited her to Venice.

I first met Linda in Bali almost two years ago, when I went for that Yoga retreat. Since then, we've done a trip to Costa Rica together, too. She's one of my favorite traveling companions, entertaining and surprisingly organized.

So we find each other there in Venice. Her cheer, her optimism - they in no way match this stinky, slow, sinking, mysterious, silent, weird city. Venice seems like a wonderful city in which to die a slow and alcoholic death, or to lose a loved one. Seeing Venice, I'm grateful that I chose to live in Rome instead. Venice is beautiful, but like a Bergman movie is beautiful; you can admire it, but you don't really want to live in it.

Venice is spooky under its rough November skies. The city creaks and sways like a fishing pier. Despite Linda's initial confidence, we get lost every day, and most especially at night, taking wrong turns toward dark corners that dead-end dangerously and directly into canal water.

Yet I don't get depressed here. I can cope with, and even somehow enjoy, the sinking melancholy of Venice, just for a few days. Somewhere in me I am able to recognize that this is not my melancholy; this is the city's own indigenous melancholy, and I am healthy enough these days to be able to feel the difference between me and it.

Anyhow, it's hard to be depressed with Linda babbling beside me, trying to get me to buy a giant purple fur hat. She is a firefly, this Linda. In Venice in the Middle Ages there was once a profession for a man called a

codega - a fellow you hired to walk in front of you at night with a lit lantern, showing you the way, scaring off thieves and demons, bringing you confidence and protection through the dark streets. This is Linda - my temporary Venetian codega.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

It's nice to be back. Rome is so awake and alive, so sexy in the sunshine.

I remember something that my friend Maria's husband, Giulio, said to me once. We were sitting in an outdoor cafe, having our conversation practice, and he asked me what I thought of Rome. I told him I really loved the place, of course, but somehow knew it was not my city. There was something about Rome that didn't belong to me, and I couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Giulio said, "Maybe you and Rome just have different words."

"What do you mean?"

He said, "Don't you know that the secret to understanding a city and its people is to learn - what is the word of the street?"

Then he went on to explain, in a mixture of English, Italian and hand gestures, that every city has a single word that defines it, that identifies most people who live there. If you could read people's thoughts as they were passing you on the streets of any given place, you would discover that most of them are thinking the same thought. Whatever that majority thought might be - that is the word of the city. And if your personal word does not match the word of the city, then you don't really belong there.

"What's Rome's word?" I asked.

"SEX," he announced.

"But isn't that a stereotype about Rome?"

"No."

"But surely there are some people in Rome thinking about other things than sex?"

Giulio insisted: "No. All of them, all day, all they are thinking about is SEX."

"Even over at the Vatican?"

"That's different. The Vatican isn't part of Rome. They have a different word over there. Their word is POWER."

"You'd think it would be FAITH."

"It's POWER," he repeated. "Trust me. But the word in Rome - it's SEX." It's a strange theory, impossible to prove, but I like it.

Giulio asked, "What's the word in New York City?"

I thought about this for a moment, then decided. "It's a verb, of course. I think it's ACHIEVE."

"What's the word in Naples?" I asked Giulio. He knows the south of Italy well.

"FIGHT," he decides.

"What's your word?" Giulio asks me then.

Now that, I definitely could not answer.

I don't know the answer, and I suppose that's what this year of journeying is about. Finding my word.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Luca Spaghetti's birthday falls this year on America's Thanksgiving Day, so he wants to do a turkey for his birthday party. He's never eaten a big, fat, roasted American Thanksgiving turkey, though he's seen them in pictures. He says we can use the kitchen of his friends Mario and Simona, who have a nice big house in the mountains outside Rome, and who always host Luca's birthday parties.

So here was Luca's plan for the festivities - he would pick me up at around seven o'clock at night, after he'd finished work, and then we would drive north out of Rome for an hour or so to his friends' house and we'd drink some wine and all get to know each other, and then, probably around 9:00 PM, we would start roasting a twenty-pound turkey...

I had to do some explaining to Luca about how much time it takes to roast a twenty-pound turkey. I told him his birthday feast would probably be ready to eat around dawn the next day. He was destroyed.

My friend Deborah has come to Rome from Philadelphia for the weekend, to celebrate the holiday with me. Deborah's an internationally respected psychologist, a writer and a feminist theorist, but I still think of her as my favorite regular customer, back from the days when I was a diner waitress and she came in for lunch and said clever things to me over the counter. Sofie will be coming to Luca's party, too. Sofie and I have been friends for about fifteen weeks. Everybody is always welcome on Thanksgiving. Especially when it also happens to be Luca Spaghetti's birthday.

We drive out of tired Rome late in the evening, up into the mountains. We arrive at the house of Luca's old friends Mario and Simona, parents of the twin twelve-year-old girls Giulia and Sara. Paolo - a friend of Luca's whom I'd met before at soccer games - is there, too, along with his girlfriend. Of course, Luca's own girlfriend, Giuliana, is there, as well. The fireplace is lit. The olive oil is homemade.

No time to roast a twenty-pound turkey, obviously, so Luca cooks some lovely cuts of turkey breast. Somehow it comes out great. Luca had been worried about how the conversation would proceed tonight, considering that half the guests can't speak English and the other half can't

speak Italian (and only Sofie can speak Swedish), but it seems to be one of those miracle evenings where everyone can understand each other perfectly, or at least your neighbor can help translate when the odd word gets lost.

I lose count of how many bottles of Sardinian wine we drink before Deborah introduces to the table the suggestion that we follow a nice American custom here tonight by joining hands and - each in turn - saying what we are most grateful for. In three languages, then, this montage of gratitude comes forth, one testimony at a time. When it comes my turn to speak, I begin "Sono grata..." but then find I cannot say my real thoughts. Namely, that I am so grateful to be free tonight from the depression that had been eating me for a long time. I don't mention any of this because I don't want to alarm the children. Instead, I say a simpler truth - that I am grateful for old and new friends. That I am grateful, most especially tonight, for Luca Spaghetti. That I hope he has a happy thirty-third birthday, and I hope he lives a long life, in order to stand as an example to other men of how to be a generous, loyal and loving human being. While I am saying all this I am crying and each one is crying, too.

Our party doesn't end until almost dawn. Luca Spaghetti drives me and Deborah and Sofie all the way back home. We try to help him stay awake as the sun comes up by singing. Silent night, sainted night, holy night, we sing over and over in every language we know, as we all head back into Rome together.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

None of my pants, after almost four months in Italy, fit me anymore. Not even the new clothes I just bought last month (when I'd already outgrown my "Second Month in Italy" pants) fit me anymore. I can't afford to buy a new wardrobe every few weeks, and I am aware that soon I will be in India, where the pounds will just melt away, but still - I cannot walk in these pants anymore. I can't stand it.

I recently stepped on a scale in an Italian hotel and learned that I have gained twenty-three pounds in my four months of Italy. About fifteen

pounds of that I actually needed to gain because I had become so skeletal during these last hard years of divorce and depression. The next five pounds, I just gained for fun. As for the final three? Just to prove a point, I suppose.

But so it is that I find myself shopping for an item of clothing I will always keep in my life as a cherished souvenir: "My Last Month in Italy Jeans." The young lady in the shop is nice enough to keep bringing me bigger and bigger sizes, handing them through the curtain one after another without commentary, only asking with concern each time if this is closer to a fit. Several times, I have needed to poke my head out of this curtain and ask, "Excuse me - do you have a pair that is slightly bigger?" Until the nice young lady finally gives me a pair of jeans with a waist measurement that really hurts my eyes to witness. I step out of the dressing room, presenting myself to the salesgirl.

She doesn't blink. She looks at me like an art curator trying to assess the value of a vase. A rather large vase.

"Carina," she decides finally. Cute.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

I have only a week left here. I'm planning to go back to America for Christmas before flying to India, not only because I can't stand the thought of spending Christmas without my family but also because the next eight months of my journey - India and Indonesia - require a complete repacking of things. Very little of the stuff you need when you are living in Rome is the same stuff you need when you are wandering around India. And maybe it's in preparation for my trip to India that I decide to spend this last week traveling through Sicily. Or maybe I only want to go to Sicily because of what Goethe said: "Without seeing Sicily one cannot get a clear idea of what Italy is."

When I got to Taormina, I had to find the right person of whom to ask my favorite question in Italian: "Where is the best food in this town?" In

Taormina, that person turns out to be a sleepy policeman. He gives me one of the greatest things anyone can ever give me in life - a tiny piece of paper with the name of a restaurant written on it, a hand-drawn map of how to find the place.

There I say that I don't need to see the menu but want to taste the best food possible because this is my first night in Sicily. Within the space of twenty minutes I am busily eating the most amazing meal I've eaten yet in all of Italy. It's pasta, but stuffed with a hot, aromatic puree of seafood, served with vegetables. Followed by the rabbit, stewed in thyme.

But Syracuse, the next day, is even better. I ask a fisherman where I should eat tonight, and I leave our conversation clutching yet another little piece of paper, directing me to a little restaurant with no name, where - as soon as I sit down that night - the waiter brings me airy clouds of ricotta sprinkled with pistachio. This is before I even hear about the house specialty.

"No town can live peacefully, whatever its laws," Plato wrote, "when its citizens... do nothing but feast and drink and tire themselves out in the cares of love."

But is it such a bad thing to live like this for just a little while? Just for a few months of one's life, is it so awful to travel through time with no greater ambition than to find the next lovely meal? Or to learn how to speak a language for no higher purpose than that it pleases your ear to hear it? Or to nap in a garden, in a patch of sunlight, in the middle of the day, right next to your favorite fountain? And then to do it again the next day?

I came to Italy exhausted and thin. I did not know yet what I deserved. I still maybe don't fully know what I deserve. But I know that I have collected myself - through the enjoyment of harmless pleasures - into somebody much more intact. The easiest, most fundamentally human way to say it is that I have put on weight. I exist more now than I did four months ago. I will leave Italy noticeably bigger than when I arrived here. And I will leave with the hope that the expansion of one person - the magnification of one life - is indeed an act of worth in this world. Even if that life, just this one time, happens to be nobody's but my own.

BOOK TWO

INDIA

or

36 Tales about the Pursuit of Devotion

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

My plane lands in Mumbai around 1:30 AM. It is December 30. I find my luggage, then find the taxi that will take me hours and hours out of the city to the Ashram, located in a remote rural village. I doze on the drive through nighttime India.

We pull up to the front gate of the Ashram at 3:30 AM, right in front of the temple. As I'm getting out of the taxi, a young man in Western clothes and a wool hat steps out of the shadows and introduces himself - he is Arturo, a twenty-four-year-old journalist from Mexico and a devotee of my Guru, and he's here to welcome me. As we're exchanging introductions, I can hear the first familiar sounds of my favorite Sanskrit hymn coming from inside. It's the morning Aarati, the first morning prayer, sung every day at 3:30 AM as the Ashram wakes. I point to the temple, asking Arturo, "May I.?" and he nods. So I pay my taxi driver, leave my backpack behind a tree, slip off my shoes, kneel and touch my forehead to the temple step and then walk inside, joining the small gathering of mostly Indian women who are singing this beautiful hymn.

This is the hymn I call "The Amazing Grace of Sanskrit," filled with devotional longing. I begin to sing the familiar words in Sanskrit, from the simple introduction about the sacred teachings of Yoga to the rising tones of worship ("I adore the cause of the universe... I adore the one whose eyes are the sun, the moon and fire... you are everything to me, O god of gods...") to

the last summation of all faith ("This is perfect, that is perfect, if you take the perfect from the perfect, the perfect remains").

The women finish singing. They bow in silence, then move out a side door across a dark courtyard and into a smaller temple, barely lit by one oil lamp and perfumed with incense. I follow them. The room is filled with devotees - Indian and Western - wrapped in woolen shawls against the predawn cold. Everyone is seated in meditation, and I slip in beside them. I sit cross-legged, place my hands on my knees, close my eyes.

I have not meditated in four months. I have not even thought about meditating in four months. I sit there. My breath quiets. I say the mantra to myself once very slowly and deliberately, syllable by syllable.

Om.

Na.

Mah.

Shi.

Va.

Ya.

Om Namah Shivaya.

I honor the divinity that resides within me.

Then I repeat it again. Again. And again. I don't know if I fall asleep or if I drop into some kind of spell or even how much time passes. But when the sun finally comes up that morning in India and everyone opens their eyes and looks around, Italy feels ten thousand miles away from me now.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

"Why do we practice Yoga?"

I had a teacher once ask that question during a Yoga class, back in New York.

Yoga, in Sanskrit, can be translated as "union." It originally comes from the root word yuj, which means "to yoke," to attach yourself to a task with a strict discipline. And the task in Yoga is to find union - between mind and body, between the individual and her God, between our thoughts and the source of our thoughts, between teacher and student. The ancients developed physical stretches to loosen up their muscles and minds in order to prepare them for meditation. It is difficult to sit in stillness for many hours, after all, if your hip is aching, keeping you from contemplating your divinity because you are too busy contemplating, "Wow... my hip really aches."

True Yoga doesn't compete with any other religion. You may use your Yoga - your disciplined practices of sacred union - to get closer to Krishna, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha or Yahweh. During my time at the Ashram, I met devotees who identified themselves as practicing Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and even Muslims.

The Yogic path is about removing the built-in glitches of the human condition, which I'm going to define here as the heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment. The Yogis say that human discontentment is a simple case of mistaken identity. We're unhappy because we think that we are mere individuals, alone with our fears and flaws and resentments and mortality. We wrongly believe that our limited little egos constitute our whole entire nature. We have failed to recognize our deeper divine character. We don't realize that, somewhere within us all, there does exist a supreme Self who is eternally at peace. That supreme Self is our true identity, universal and divine. Before you realize this truth, say the Yogis, you will always be in despair.

Yoga is the effort to experience one's divinity personally and then to hold on to that experience forever. Yoga is about the dedicated effort to pull your attention away from your endless brooding over the past and your nonstop worrying about the future so that you can seek, instead, a place of

eternal presence from which you may regard yourself and your surroundings with poise. Only from that point of even-mindedness will the true nature of the world (and yourself) be revealed to you.

In India it is considered that you need a teacher for your Yoga. The word Guru is composed of two Sanskrit syllables. The first means "darkness," the second means "light." Out of the darkness and into the light. What passes from the master into the disciple is something called mantravirya: "The potency of the enlightened consciousness." You come to your Guru, then, not only to receive lessons, as from any teacher, but to actually receive the Guru's state of grace.

There is a theory that if you yearn sincerely enough for a Guru, you will find one. It was only one month after my first night of desperate prayer on my bathroom floor - a night spent tearfully begging God for answers - that I found mine, when I walked into David's apartment and saw a photograph of this stunning Indian woman. And the first time I saw her, it was as though she looked at me through her photograph and said, "You called for me and now I'm here. So do you want to do this thing, or not?"

Setting aside all nervous jokes, I must always remember what I replied that night: a straightforward and bottomless YES.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

This Ashram is not a place you can casually drop by and visit. First of all, it's not really accessible. It's located far away from Mumbai, on a dirt road in a rural river valley near a pretty little village (composed of one street, one temple, a handful of shops and a population of cows who wander about freely, sometimes walking into the tailor's shop and lying down there). The Ashram essentially creates the local economy, and also stands as the town's pride. Outside the walls of the Ashram, it is all dust and poverty. Inside, it's all irrigated gardens, beds of flowers, mango trees, cashew trees, palm trees, magnolias. The buildings are nice, though not extravagant. There's a simple dining hall, cafeteria-style. There's a good library of spiritual writings from the world's religious traditions. There are a few

temples for different types of gatherings. There are two meditation "caves" - dark and silent basements with comfortable cushions, open all day and night, to be used only for meditation practice. There's a covered outdoor pavilion, where Yoga classes are held in the morning, and there's a kind of a park with an oval walking path around it, where students can jog for exercise. I'm sleeping in a concrete dormitory.

There are some long-term paid staffers at the Ashram, but most of the work here is done by the students themselves. Some of the local villagers also work here on salary. Other locals are devotees of the Guru and live here as students.

There is one temple in the Ashram that is open to the general public, where many Indians come throughout the day to pay tribute to a statue of the Siddha Yogi (or "perfected master") who established this line of teaching back in the 1920s and who is considered a great saint. But the rest of the Ashram is for students only. It's not a hotel or a tourist location. It's more like a university. You must apply to come here, and in order to be accepted for a residency, you must show that you've been studying this Yoga seriously for a long time. A minimum stay of one month is required. (I've decided to stay here for six weeks, and then to travel around India on my own, exploring other temples, Ashrams and devotional sites.)

The students here are about equally divided between Indians and Westerners (and the Westerners are about evenly divided between Americans and Europeans). Courses are taught in both Hindi and English. On your application, you must write an essay, gather references, and answer questions about your mental and physical health and also about your financial stability. The Guru doesn't want people to use her Ashram as an escape from whatever bedlam they have created in their real lives; this will not benefit anyone. She also has a general policy that if your family and loved ones for some reason deeply object to the idea of your following a Guru and living in an Ashram, then you shouldn't do it, it's not worth it. Just stay home in your normal life and be a good person. There's no reason to make a big dramatic production over this.

The level of this woman's practical sensibilities is always comforting to me.

They want you to come here strong because Ashram life is not easy. Not just physically, with days that begin at 3:00 AM and end at 9:00 PM, but also psychologically. You're going to be spending hours and hours a day in silent meditation and contemplation, with little distraction or relief from the apparatus of your own mind. You will be living in close quarters with strangers, in rural India. There are bugs and snakes and rodents. The weather can be extreme - sometimes torrents of rain for weeks, sometimes 100 degrees in the shade before breakfast. Things can get deeply real around here, very fast.

My Guru always says that only one thing will happen when you come to the Ashram - that you will discover who you really are.

CHAPTER FORTY

My arrival coincides nicely with the arrival of a new year. I have barely one day to get myself oriented to the Ashram, and then it is already New Year's Eve. After dinner, the small courtyard starts to fill with people. We all sit on the ground - some of us on the cool marble floor and some on grass mats. The Indian women have all dressed as though for a wedding. Their hair is oiled. They are wearing their finest silk saris and gold bracelets. The plan is to chant outside in this courtyard until midnight, until the year changes over.

I'm so tired, but I don't drop my little blue string of song, and I drift into such a state that I think I might be calling God's name in my sleep, or maybe I am only falling down the well shaft of this universe. By 11:30, though, the orchestra has picked up the tempo of the chant and kicked it up into sheer joy. Beautifully dressed women in jingly bracelets are clapping and dancing. The drums are slamming, rhythmic, exciting. As the minutes pass, it feels to me like we are collectively pulling the year 2004 toward us. Like we have roped it with our music, and now we are hauling it across the night sky like it's a massive fishing net, full of all our unknown destinies. And what a heavy net it is, indeed, carrying as it does all the births, deaths, tragedies, wars, love stories, inventions, transformations and calamities that are destined for all of us this coming year. We keep singing and we keep

hauling, minute-by-minute, voice after voice, closer and closer. The seconds drop down to midnight and we sing with our biggest effort yet and in this last brave exertion we finally pull the net of the New Year over us, covering both the sky and ourselves with it. God only knows what the year might contain, but now it is here, and we are all beneath it.

This is the first New Year's Eve I can ever remember in my life where I haven't known any of the people I was celebrating with. In all this dancing and singing, there is nobody for me to embrace at midnight. But I wouldn't say that anything about this night has been lonely.

No, I would definitely not say that.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

We are all given work here, and it turns out that my work assignment is to scrub the temple floors. So that's where you can find me for several hours a day now - down on my knees on the cold marble with a brush and a bucket.

It's tiring physical labor, but my daily hours of work are considerably easier than my daily hours of meditation. The truth is, I don't think I'm good at meditation. I know I'm out of practice with it, but honestly I was never good at it. I can't seem to get my mind to hold still. I mentioned this once to an Indian monk, and he said, "It's a pity you're the only person in the history of the world who ever had this problem." Then the monk quoted to me from the Bhagavad Gita, the most sacred ancient text of Yoga: "Oh Krishna, the mind is restless, turbulent, strong and unyielding. I consider it as difficult to subdue as the wind."

Meditation is both the anchor and the wings of Yoga. Meditation is the way. There's a difference between meditation and prayer, though both practices seek communion with the divine. I've heard it said that prayer is the act of talking to God, while meditation is the act of listening. When I ask my mind to rest in stillness, it is astonishing how quickly it will turn (1) bored, (2) angry, (3) depressed, (4) anxious or (5) all of the above.

The problem with permanent jumping from one thought to another is that you are never where you are. You are always digging in the past or poking at the future, but you don't rest in this moment. If you're looking for union with the divine, this kind of forward (backward) whirling is a problem. There's a reason they call God a presence - because God is right here, right now. In the present is the only place to find Him, and now is the only time.

But to stay in the present moment requires dedicated one-pointed focus. Different meditation techniques teach one-pointedness in different ways - for instance, by focusing your eyes on a single point of light, or by observing the rise and fall of your breath. My Guru teaches meditation with the help of a mantra, sacred words or syllables to be repeated in a focused manner. Mantra has a dual function. For one thing, it gives the mind something to do. The other purpose of mantra is to transport you to another state, rowboat-like, through the choppy waves of the mind. Whenever your attention gets pulled into a cross-current of thought, just return to the mantra, climb back into the boat and keep going. The great Sanskrit mantras are said to contain unimaginable powers, the ability to row you, if you can stay with one, all the way to the shorelines of divinity.

Among my many, many problems with meditation is that the mantra I have been given - Om Namah Shivaya - doesn't sit comfortably in my head. I love the sound of it and I love the meaning of it, but it does not glide me into meditation. It never has, not in the two years I've been practicing this Yoga. When I try to repeat Om Namah Shivaya in my head, it actually gets stuck in my throat...

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

The following morning, I arrive right on time for the 4:00 AM meditation session which always starts the day here. We are meant to sit for an hour in silence, but I register the minutes as if they are miles - sixty cruel miles that I have to endure. By mile (minute) fourteen, my nerves have started to go, my knees are breaking down and I'm overcome with irritation.

Which is understandable, considering that the conversations between me and my mind during meditation generally go something like this:

Me: OK, we're going to meditate now. Let's draw our attention to our breath and focus on the mantra. Om Namah Shivaya. Om Namah Shiv-

Mind: I can help you out with this, you know!

Me: OK, good, because I need your help. Let's go. Om Namah Shivaya. Om Namah Shi-

Mind: I can help you think of nice meditative images. Like - hey, here's a good one. Imagine you are a temple. A temple on an island! And the island is in the ocean!

Me: Oh, that is a nice image.

Mind: Thanks. I thought of it myself.

Me: But what ocean are we picturing here?

Mind: The Mediterranean. Imagine you're one of those Greek islands, with an old Greek temple on it. No, never mind, that's too touristy. You know what? Forget the ocean. Oceans are too dangerous. Here's a better idea - imagine you're an island in a lake, instead.

Me: Can we meditate now, please? Om Namah Shiv-

Mind: Yes! Definitely! But try not to picture that the lake is covered with... what are those things called -

Me: Jet Skis?

Mind: Yes! Jet Skis! Those things consume so much fuel! They're really bad for the environment.

Me: OK, but let's MEDITATE now, please? Om Namah -

Mind: Right! I definitely want to help you meditate! And that's why we're going to skip the image of an island on a lake or an ocean, because that's obviously not working. So let's imagine that you're an island in... a river! So all the thoughts that float by as you're meditating are just the river's natural currents and you can ignore them because you are an island.

Me: Wait, I thought you said I was a temple.

Mind: That's right, sorry. You're a temple on an island. In fact, you are both the temple and the island.

Me: Am I also the river?

Mind: No, the river is just the thoughts.

Me: Stop! Please stop! YOU'RE MAKING ME CRAZY!!!

Mind (wounded): Sorry. I was only trying to help.

Me: Om Namah Shivaya... Om Namah Shivaya... Om Namah Shivaya...

Here there is a promising eight-second pause in thoughts. But then...

Mind: Are you mad at me now?

...and then with a big gasp, like I am coming up for air, my mind wins, my eyes fly open and I quit. In tears. An Ashram is supposed to be a place where you come to deepen your meditation, but this is a disaster. The pressure is too much for me. I can't do it. But what should I do? Run out of the temple crying after fourteen minutes, every day?

This morning, though, instead of fighting it, I just stopped. I gave up. I let myself lean against the wall behind me. My back hurt, I had no strength, my mind was trembling. And then I said to God, "I'm really sorry, but this is the closest I could get to you today."

My body ached in worthlessness.

"Who is the 'me' when I am conversing with my mind, and who is the 'mind'?" I asked myself. I thought about the persistent thought-processing, soul-devouring machine that is my brain, and wondered how on earth I was ever going to master it.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

Dinnertime. I'm sitting alone, trying to eat slowly. My Guru is always encouraging us to practice discipline when it comes to eating. She encourages us to eat in moderation and without desperate gulps, to not extinguish the sacred fires of our bodies by dumping too much food into our digestive tracts too fast. When students come to her complaining that they're having trouble meditating, she always asks how their digestion has been lately. It only stands to reason that you'll have trouble gliding lightly into transcendence when your guts are struggling with a sausage pizza, a pound of fried chicken wings and half a coconut cream pie. Which is why they don't serve that kind of stuff here. The food at the Ashram is vegetarian, light and healthy. But still delicious. Which is why it's difficult for me not to wolf it down like a starving orphan. Plus, meals are served buffet-style, and I can't resist taking a second or third portion when beautiful food is just lying out there in the open, smelling good and costing nothing.

So I'm sitting at the dinner table all by myself, making an effort to restrain my fork, when I see a man walk over with his dinner tray, looking for an open chair. I nod to him that he is welcome to join me. I haven't seen this guy around here yet. He must be a new arrival. The stranger moves with the authority of a border town sheriff. He looks like he's in his fifties, but walks like he's lived a few centuries longer than that. He's got white hair and a white beard and a checkered flannel shirt. Wide shoulders and giant hands that look like they could do some damage, but a totally relaxed face.

He sits down across from me and says, "They got mosquitoes around this place big enough to rape a chicken."

Ladies and Gentlemen, Richard from Texas has arrived.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

Among the many jobs that Richard from Texas has held in his life are oil-field worker; truck driver; highway construction worker; used-car salesman; soldier in Vietnam; "commodities broker" (that commodity generally being Mexican narcotics); junkie and alcoholic (if you can call this a profession); then former junkie and alcoholic (a much more respectable profession); radio announcer; and, finally, successful dealer in medical equipment (until his marriage fell apart and he gave the whole business to his ex). Now he renovates old houses in Austin.

Richard from Texas is not a guy who worries about a lot of stuff. His presence at this Ashram becomes my great and amusing sense of security.

Groceries.

That's the nickname Richard has given me. He called me so the first night we met, when he noticed how much I could eat. I tried to defend myself ("I was purposefully eating with discipline and intention!") but the name stuck.

Richard came to this Yoga through an ex-girlfriend, who drove him up from Texas to the Ashram in New York to hear the Guru speak. Richard says, "I thought the Ashram was the weirdest thing I ever saw, and I was wondering where the room was where you have to give them all your money, but that never happened..."

After that experience, which was about ten years ago, Richard found himself praying all the time. His prayer was always the same. He kept begging God, "Please, please, please open my heart." That was all he wanted - an open heart. And he would always finish the prayer for an open heart by asking God, "And please send me a sign when the event has occurred." Now he says, recollecting that time, "Be careful what you pray for, Groceries, because you just might get it." After a few months of praying constantly for an open heart, what do you think Richard got? That's right - emergency open-heart surgery. His chest was literally cracked open, as

though God were saying, "How's that for a sign?" So now Richard is always cautious with his prayers, he tells me. "Whenever I pray for anything these days, I always wrap it up by saying, 'Oh, and God? Please be gentle with me, OK?'"

"What should I do about my meditation practice?" I ask Richard one day, as he's watching me scrub the temple floors.

"Why do you have to do anything about it, Groceries?"

"I can't get my mind to sit still."

"Have you ever tried to take a toy away from a child? They don't like that, do they? They start kicking and screaming. The best way to take a toy away from a child is distract the kid, give him something else to play with. Divert his attention. Instead of trying to forcefully take thoughts out of your mind, give your mind something better to play with. Something healthier."

"Like what?"

"Like love, Groceries. Like pure divine love."

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

After my last conversation with Richard from Texas, I'm trying a new approach this morning. I sit down to meditate and I say to my mind, "Listen - I understand you're a little frightened. But I promise, I'm not trying to destroy you. I'm just trying to give you a place to rest. I love you."

I'm trying a different mantra, too. It's one I've had luck with in the past. It's simple, just two syllables:

Ham-sa.

In Sanskrit it means "I am That."

The Yogis say that Ham-sa is the most natural mantra, the one we are all given by God before birth. It is the sound of our own breath. Ham on the inhale, sa on the exhale. As long as we live, every time we breathe in or out, we are repeating this mantra. I am That. I am divine, I am with God, I am an expression of God, I am not separate, I am not alone, I am not this limited illusion of an individual. I've always found Ham-sa easy and relaxing.

So I'll sit with it here today.

Ham-sa.

I am That.

Thoughts come, but I don't pay much attention to them, other than to say to them in an almost motherly manner, "Oh, I know you jokers... go outside and play now... Mommy's listening to God."

Ham-sa.

I am That.

I fall asleep for a while. (Or maybe not. In meditation, you can never really be sure if what you think is sleep is actually sleep; sometimes it's just another level of consciousness.) When I awake, I can feel this soft blue electrical energy pulsing through my body, in waves. It's a little alarming, but also amazing. I don't know what to do, so I just speak internally to this energy. I say to it, "I believe in you," and it magnifies in response. It's frighteningly powerful now, like a kidnapping of the senses. The pounding blue energy keeps pitching through my body, and I can hear a sort of rhythmic humming sound in my ears, and it's so mighty now that I actually can't deal with it anymore. It scares me so much that I say to it, "I'm not ready yet!" and open my eyes. It all goes away. I'm back in a room again. I look at my watch. I've been here - or somewhere - for almost an hour.

I am panting, literally panting.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

To understand what that experience was, what happened in there (by which I mean both "in the meditation cave" and "in me") brings up a topic rather esoteric, the subject of kundalini shakti.

Every religion in the world has had a number of devotees who seek a direct, transcendent experience with God. The interesting thing about these mystics is that, when they describe their experiences, they all end up describing exactly the same occurrence. Generally, their union with God occurs in a meditative state, and is delivered through an energy source that fills the entire body with euphoric, electric light.

In Indian Yogic tradition, kundalini shakti is depicted as a snake who lies coiled at the base of the spine until it is released by a master's touch or by a miracle, and which then ascends up through seven chakras, or wheels, and finally through the head, exploding into union with God. These chakras do not exist in the physical body, say the Yogis, so don't look for them there; they exist only in the subtle body, in the body that the Buddhist teachers are referring to when they encourage their students to pull forth a new self from the physical body the way you pull a sword from its sheath.

In mystical India, as in many shamanistic traditions, kundalini shakti is considered a dangerous force to play around with if you are unsupervised; the inexperienced Yogi could quite literally blow his mind with it. You need a teacher - a Guru - to guide you on this path, and ideally a safe place - an Ashram - from which to practice. It is said to be the Guru's touch (either literally in person, or through a more supernatural encounter, like a dream) which releases the bound kundalini energy from its coil at the base of the spine and allows it to begin journeying upward toward God. This moment of release is called shaktipat, divine initiation, and it is the greatest gift of an enlightened master. After that touch, the student might still labor for years toward enlightenment, but the journey has at least begun. The energy has been freed.

I received shaktipat initiation two years ago, when I met my Guru for the first time, back in New York. To be honest, I felt nothing special afterward.

The next day, though, something interesting really happened. We were all gathered with the Guru once more. She led us into meditation, and in the middle of it all, I fell asleep (or whatever the state was) and had a dream. In this dream, I was on a beach, at the ocean. The waves were massive and terrifying. Suddenly, a man appeared beside me. It was my Guru's own master - a great charismatic Yogi I will refer to here only as "Swamiji" (which is Sanskrit for "beloved monk"). Swamiji had died in 1982. I knew him only from photographs around the Ashram. Even through these photographs - I must admit - I'd always found the guy to be a little too scary, a little too powerful. I'd been avoiding his gaze as it stared down at me from the walls. He seemed overwhelming. He wasn't my kind of Guru. I'd always preferred my lovely, compassionate, feminine living master to this deceased (but still fierce) character.

But now Swamiji was in my dream, standing beside me on the beach in all his power. I was terrified. He pointed to the approaching waves and said strictly, "I want you to figure out a way to stop that from happening." Panicked, I took out a notebook and tried to draw inventions that would stop the ocean waves from advancing. I drew massive seawalls and canals and dams. All my designs were so stupid and pointless, though. I could feel Swamiji watching me, impatient and judgmental. Finally I gave up. None of my inventions were clever or strong enough to keep those waves from breaking.

That's when I heard Swamiji laugh. I looked up at this tiny Indian man in his orange robes, and he was laughing, bent over double in delight, wiping joyful tears from his eyes.

"Tell me, dear one," he said, and he pointed out toward the colossal, powerful, endless, rocking ocean. "Tell me, if you would be so kind - how exactly were you planning on stopping that?"

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

Two nights in a row now I've had dreams of a snake entering my room. I've been waking up sweating. Even worse, once I am awake, my

mind has been betraying me into a state of panic like I haven't felt since the worst of the divorce years.

My thoughts keep flying back to my failed marriage. Worse, I'm again thinking about David. I'm arguing with him in my mind. Plus I can't stop thinking about all our happiness together.

Why is all this stuff coming up again now?

I recognize that everything is coming up. Like vomit it's coming up.

I don't want to disturb my roommates, so I hide in the bathroom. The bathroom, always the bathroom! There I am in a bathroom again, in the middle of the night again, weeping my heart out on the floor in loneliness.

When the crying doesn't stop, I take my notebook and a pen and I sit once more beside the toilet. I open to a blank page and scrawl my now-familiar plea of desperation:

"I NEED YOUR HELP."

Then a long exhale of relief comes as, in my own handwriting, my own constant friend (who is it?) starts loyally to my own rescue:

"I'm right here. It's OK. I love you. I will never leave you..."

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

The next morning's meditation is a disaster. Desperate, I beg my mind to step aside and let me find God, but my mind stares at me with steely power and says, "I will never let you pass me by."

I don't want anyone to talk to me. I can't tolerate anyone's face right now. But Richard from Texas eventually finds me at dinner and sits down - brave man - in my black smoke of self-loathing.

"What's up?" he asks, with a toothpick in his mouth, as usual.

"Don't ask," I say, but then I start talking and tell him every bit of it, concluding with, "And worst of all, I can't stop obsessing over David. I thought I was over him, but it's all coming up again."

He says, "Give it another six months, you'll feel better."

"I've already given it twelve months, Richard."

"Then give it six more. Just keep throwing six months at it till it goes away. Stuff like this takes time."

I exhale hotly through my nose, bull-like.

"Groceries," Richard says, "listen to me. Your problem is, you just can't let David go. It's over, Groceries. David's purpose was to shake you up, drive you out of that marriage that you needed to leave, tear apart your ego a little bit, show you your obstacles and addictions, make you so desperate and out of control that you had to transform your life, and then introduce you to your spiritual master. That was his job, and he did great, but now it's over. The problem is, you can't accept that this relationship had a real short life. Drop it."

"But I love him."

"So love him."

"But I miss him."

"So miss him. Send him some love and light every time you think about him, and then drop it. You're just afraid to let go of the last bits of David because then you'll really be alone, and Liz Gilbert is scared to death of what will happen if she's really alone. But here's what you have to understand, Groceries. If you clear out all that space in your mind that you're using right now to obsess about this guy, you'll have a vacuum there, an open spot - a doorway. And guess what the universe will do with that doorway? It will rush in - God will rush in - and fill you with more love than you ever dreamed. So stop using David to block that door. Let it go."

Then I ask Richard, "So how long will it be before all this grieving passes?"

"You want an exact date?"

"Yes."

"Something you can circle on your calendar?"

"Yes."

"Let me tell you something, Groceries - you have got some serious control issues."

My rage at this statement consumes me like lire. Control issues? ME? And then, from right down inside the intensity of my offended outrage comes the truth. The immediate, obvious truth.

He's totally right.

The lire passes out of me, fast as it came.

"You're totally right," I say.

"I know I'm right, baby. Listen, you're a powerful woman and you're used to getting what you want out of life, and you didn't get what you wanted in your last few relationships. Your husband didn't behave the way you wanted him to and David didn't either. Life didn't go your way for once. And nothing makes crazy a control freak more than life not going her way."

"Don't call me a control freak, please."

"You have got control issues, Groceries. Come on. Nobody ever told you this before?"

I admit it. "OK, I think you're probably right. Maybe I really have a problem with control. It's just weird that you noticed. Because I don't think it's that obvious on the surface. I mean - I bet most people can't see my control issues when they first look at me."

Richard from Texas laughs so hard he almost loses his toothpick.

"They can't? Honey - Ray Charles could see your control issues!"

"OK, I think I'm done with this conversation now, thank you."

"You have to learn how to let go, Groceries. Otherwise you're going to make yourself sick. You'll just toss and turn forever at nights, beating on yourself for being such a fiasco in life. What's wrong with me? Why am I such a failure? Let me guess - that's probably what you were doing to yourself again last night."

"All right, Richard, that's enough," I say. "I don't want you walking around inside my head anymore."

"Shut the door, then," says my big Texas Yogi.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

When I was nine years old, going on ten, I experienced a true metaphysical crisis. Maybe this seems young for such a thing, but I was always an intelligent child. It all happened over the summer between fourth and fifth grade. I was going to be turning ten years old in July, and there was something about the transition from nine to ten - from single digit to double digits - that shocked me into a genuine existential panic, usually reserved for people turning fifty. I remember thinking that life was passing me by so fast. It seemed like only yesterday I was in kindergarten, and here I was, about to turn ten. Soon I would be a teenager, then middle-aged, then elderly, then dead. And everyone else was aging in hyperspeed, too. Everybody was going to be dead soon. My parents would die. My friends would die. My cat would die. What was the point of all this?

This panic I was feeling at age ten was nothing less than a spontaneous realization of mortality's inevitable march.

My sense of helplessness was overwhelming. What I wanted to do was pull some massive emergency brake on the universe, like the brakes I'd seen on the subways during our school trip to New York City. I wanted to call a time out, to demand that everybody just STOP until I could understand everything. I suppose this was the beginning of what my dear friend Richard from Texas calls my "control issues." Of course, my efforts and worry were useless. The closer I watched time, the faster it spun, and that summer went by so quickly that it made my head hurt, and at the end of every day I remember thinking, "Another one gone," and bursting into tears.

I have searched for contentment for so many years in so many ways, and all these acquisitions and accomplishments - they exhaust you in the end. Life, if you keep chasing it so hard, will drive you to death. At some point you have to stop. You have to admit that you can't catch time. At some point, as Richard keeps telling me, you have to let go and sit still and allow contentment to come to you.

Letting go, of course, is a scary enterprise for those of us who believe that the world revolves only because it has a handle on the top of it which we personally turn, and that if we were to drop this handle for even a moment, well - that would be the end of the universe. But try dropping it, Groceries. This is the message I'm getting. Sit quietly for now and cease your relentless participation. Watch what happens. The birds do not crash dead out of the sky in mid-flight, after all. The trees do not die, the rivers do not run red with blood. Life continues to go on. Why are you so sure that your micromanagement of every moment in this whole world is so essential? Why don't you let it be?

I hear this argument and it appeals to me. I believe in it, intellectually. But then I wonder - with this stupidly hungry nature of mine - what should I do with my energy, instead?

That answer arrives, too:

Look for God, suggests my Guru. Look for God like a man with his head on fire looks for water.

CHAPTER FIFTY

When I tried this morning, after an hour or so of unhappy thinking, to dip back into my meditation, I took a new idea with me: compassion. Instead of thinking that I was a failure, could I perhaps accept that I am only a human being - and a normal one, at that? The thoughts came up as usual - OK, so it will be - and then the emotions rose, too. I began feeling frustrated and judgmental about myself, lonely and angry. But then a fierce response boiled up from somewhere in the deepest caverns of my heart, and I told myself, "I will not judge you for these thoughts."

My mind tried to protest, said, "Yeah, but you're such a failure, you're such a loser - "

But suddenly it was like a lion was roaring from within my chest. A voice roared in me like nothing I had ever heard before. It was so internally, eternally loud that I actually clamped my hand over my mouth because I was afraid that if I opened my mouth and let this sound out, it would shake the foundations of buildings as far away as Detroit.

And this is what it roared:

YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW STRONG MY LOVE IS!!!!!!!!!!

The chattering, negative thoughts in my mind scattered in the wind of this statement like birds - they ran away, terrified. Silence followed. An intense, vibrating silence. The lion in the giant savannah of my heart surveyed his newly quiet kingdom with satisfaction. He closed his yellow eyes and went back to sleep.

And then, in that regal silence, finally - I began to meditate on (and with) God.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

This morning, after I heard the lion roar YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW STRONG MY LOVE IS, I came out of that meditation cave like a warrior queen. Richard didn't even have time to ask if I thought I'd ever achieve anything in this life before I looked him eye to eye and said, "I already have, mister."

"This is cause for celebration," Richard said. "Come on, kiddo - I'll take you into town, buy you a Thumbs-Up."

Thumbs-Up is an Indian soft drink, sort of like Coca-Cola, but with much more corn syrup and caffeine. A few times a week, Richard and I wander into town and share one small bottle of Thumbs-Up - a radical experience after the purity of vegetarian Ashram food. We are always careful not to touch the bottle with our lips. Richard's rule about traveling in India is wise: "Don't touch anything but yourself." (And, yes, that was also a variant of the title for this book.)

We have our favorite visits in town, always stopping to say hello to Mr. Panicar, the tailor, who shakes our hands and says, "Congratulations to meet you!" every time. We watch the women doing road work under the very hot sun, swinging hammers, barefoot, looking so strangely beautiful in their jewel-colored saris and their necklaces and bracelets. They give us dazzling smiles which I can't begin to understand - how can they be happy doing this rough work under such terrible conditions? Why don't they all faint and die after fifteen minutes in the boiling heat with those hammers? I ask Mr. Panicar the tailor about it and he says that people in this part of the world were born to this kind of hard labor and work is all they are used to.

"Also," he adds casually, "we don't live very long around here."

It is a poor village, of course, but not desperate by the standards of India; the presence (and charity) of the Ashram and some Western currency floating around makes a significant difference. There are some Kashmiri guys - very shrewd salesmen, indeed. One of them really came after me today, asking if madam would perhaps like to buy a fine Kashmiri rug for her home?

This made Richard laugh. He enjoys making fun of me for being homeless.

"Save your breath, brother," he said to the rug salesman.

"This old girl hasn't got any floors to put a rug on."

After that, the Kashmiri salesman suggested, "Then perhaps madam would like to hang a rug on her wall?"

"See, now," said Richard, "that's the thing - she has no walls these days, too."

"But I have a brave heart!" I said, in my own defense.

"And other excellent qualities," added Richard, smiling at me.

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

The biggest obstacle in my Ashram experience is not meditation, actually. There's something even harder for me here. It is what we do every morning after meditation and before breakfast - a chant called the Gurugita. I do not like it at all, never have, not since the first time I heard it at the Ashram in New York. I love all the other chants and hymns of this Yogic tradition, but the Gurugita feels long, tedious and insufferable. That's just my opinion, of course; other people claim to love it, though I can't understand why.

The Gurugita is 182 verses long, for crying out loud, and each verse is a paragraph of impenetrable Sanskrit. The entire ritual takes about an hour and half to perform. This is before breakfast, remember, and after we have already had an hour of meditation and a twenty-minute chanting of the first morning hymn. The Gurugita is basically the reason you have to get up at 3:00 AM around here.

The Gurugita has an impressive spiritual roots; it's an excerpt from a holy ancient scripture, most of which has been lost, and little of which has

been translated out of Sanskrit. It's written in the form of a conversation. The conversation is between the goddess Parvati and the almighty god Shiva. Parvati and Shiva are the divine embodiment of creativity (the feminine) and consciousness (the masculine). She is the generative energy of the universe; he is its formless wisdom. Whatever Shiva imagines, Parvati brings to life. He dreams it; she materializes it. Their dance, their union (their Yoga), is both the cause of the universe and its manifestation.

I had hoped my feelings about the Gurugita would change during my stay at the Ashram. I'd hoped that putting it in an Indian context would help me learn how to love the thing. In fact, the opposite has happened. Over the few weeks that I've been here, my feelings about the Gurugita have shifted from simple dislike to solid dread. I've started skipping it and doing other things with my morning that I think are much better for my spiritual growth, like writing in my journal, or taking a shower, or calling my sister.

But when I try to go to the chant, all it does is agitate me. I mean, physically. It makes me sweat. I come out of the temple after the Gurugita and the sweat rises off my skin in the cold morning air. The physical reaction is mild compared to the hot waves of emotion that rock me as I try to sing the thing. And I can't even sing it. I can only croak it. Resentfully.

Did I mention that it has 182 verses?

So a few days ago, I decided to seek advice from my favorite teacher around here - a monk with a wonderfully long Sanskrit name which translates as "He Who Dwells in the Heart of the Lord Who Dwells Within His Own Heart." This monk is American, in his sixties, smart and educated.

I knew I could trust him to let me speak frankly about my problems with the Gurugita. We went for a walk in the gardens together one night after dinner, and I told him how much I disliked the thing and asked if he could please excuse me from having to sing it anymore. He immediately started laughing. He said, "You don't have to sing it if you don't want to. Nobody around here is ever going to make you do anything you don't want to do."

"But people say it's a vital spiritual practice."

"It is. But I'm not going to tell you that you're going to go to hell if you don't do it. The only thing I'll tell you is that your Guru has been very clear about this - the Gurugita is the one essential text of this Yoga, and maybe the most important practice you can do, next to meditation."

I explained to the monk why I dread the Gurugita, how tortuous it feels.

He said, "Wow - look at you. Even just talking about it you're getting all bent out of shape."

"Look," he answered, "the Gurugita isn't supposed to be a fun song to sing. It has a different function. It's a text of unimaginable power. It is a mighty purifying practice. It burns away all your negative emotions. And I think it's probably having a positive effect on you if you're experiencing such strong emotions and physical reactions while you're chanting it. This stuff can be painful, but it's awfully beneficial."

"How do you keep the motivation to stay with it?"

"What's the alternative? To quit whenever something gets challenging?"

"What should I do?"

"You have to decide for yourself. But my advice - since you asked - is that you stick to chanting the Gurugita while you're here, especially because you're having such an extreme reaction to it. If something is rubbing so hard against you, you can be sure it's working on you. This is what the Gurugita does. It burns away the ego. It's supposed to be hard, Liz. It has power beyond what can be rationally understood. You're only staying at the Ashram another week, right? And then you're free to go traveling and have fun. So just chant the thing seven more times, then you never have to do it again. Remember what our Guru says - be a scientist of your own spiritual experience. You're not here as a tourist or a journalist; you're here as a seeker. So explore it."

"So you're not letting me off the hook?"

"You can let yourself off the hook anytime you want, Liz. That's the divine contract of a little something we call free will."

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

So I went to the chant the next morning, all full of resolve, and the Gurugita made me feel awful. The following day it was even worse. I woke up in a fury, and before I even got to the temple I was already sweating, boiling.

My anger was giant. It took in everyone in this world, but it was most specifically directed at Swamiji - my Guru's master, who had instituted this ritual chanting of the Gurugita in the first place. He was the one who had come to me in my dream on the beach, demanding to know how I intended to stop the tide, and I always felt like he was riding me.

Swamiji had been born into a wealthy family and had been expected to enter the family business. But when he was just a young boy, he met a holy man in a small village near his, and had been deeply touched by the experience. Still in his teens, Swamiji left home and spent years going to every holy spot in India, searching for a true spiritual master. He met over sixty saints and Gurus, never finding the teacher he wanted. He starved, wandered on foot, slept outside in Himalayan snowstorms, suffered from malaria, dysentery - and called these the happiest years of his life, just searching for somebody who would show God to him. Over those years, Swamiji became a Hatha Yogi, an expert in ayurvedic medicine and cooking, an architect, a gardener, a musician and a swordfighter (this I love). By his middle years, he had still not found a Guru, until one day he encountered a naked, mad sage who told him to go back home, back to the village where he had met the holy man as a child, and to study with that great saint.

Swamiji obeyed, returned home, and became the holy man's most devoted student, finally achieving enlightenment through his master's guidance. Eventually, Swamiji became a Guru himself. Overtime, his Ashram in India grew from three rooms on a farm to the wonderful garden

it is today. Then he got the inspiration to go traveling and incite a worldwide meditation revolution. He came to America in 1970 and blew everybody's mind. He gave divine initiation - shaktipat - to hundreds and thousands of people a day. He had a power that was transformative.

Swamiji demanded enthusiasm, commitment, self-control. He brought ancient concepts of discipline to the lives of his young Western followers. He was complicated but truly world-changing. The reason we have access now in the West to many ancient Yogic scriptures is that Swamiji presided over the translation and revitalization of philosophical texts that had long been forgotten even in much of India.

My Guru was Swamiji's most devoted student. She was literally born to be his disciple; her Indian parents were amongst his earliest followers. When she was only a child, she often chanted for eighteen hours a day, tireless in her devotion. Swamiji recognized her potential, and he chose her to be his translator when she was still a teenager. She traveled all over the world with him. She became his successor in 1982, still in her twenties.

All true Gurus are alike in the fact that they exist in a constant state of self-realization, but external characteristics differ. The apparent differences between my Guru and her master are vast - she's a feminine, multilingual, university-educated woman; he was a sometimes-capricious, sometimes-kingly South Indian old lion. For a nice New England girl like me, it is easy to follow my living teacher. But Swamiji... he was such a wild card. And from the first time I came to this Yogic path and saw photographs of him, and heard stories about him, I've thought, "I'm just going to stay clear of this character. He's too big. He makes me nervous."

But now that I am here in India, here in the Ashram that was his home, I'm finding that all I want is Swamiji. All I feel is Swamiji. The only person I talk to in my prayers and meditations is Swamiji. Even in his death, there's something so present about him. He's the master I need when I'm really struggling, because I can curse him and show him all my failures and flaws and all he does is laugh. Laugh, and love me. His laughter makes me angrier and the anger motivates me to act. And I never feel him closer to me than when I'm struggling through the Gurugita. I'm arguing with Swamiji the whole time in my head, making all kinds of proclamations,

like, "You better be doing something for me because I'm doing this for you! I better see some results here! This better be purifying!"

Every once in a while I recall that I used to live in Rome and spend my leisurely mornings eating pastries and drinking cappuccino and reading the newspaper.

That sure was nice.

Though it seems very far away now.

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

This morning, I overslept. I woke up at 4:15 AM only minutes before the Gurugita began. I got out of bed, splashed some water on my face, dressed and went to leave my room... only to find that my roommate had left the room before me and had locked me in.

My first thought was that it was a very good excuse not to go to the Gurugita. My second thought, though? Well - it wasn't even a thought. It was an action.

I jumped out the window.

I jumped through the dark air to the concrete sidewalk below, hitting something on the way down that peeled a long strip of skin off my right leg, but I didn't care. I ran barefoot, with my pulse slamming in my ears, all the way to the temple, found a seat, opened up my prayer book just as the chant was beginning and I started to sing the Gurugita.

I sat there, singing and bleeding and thinking that it was maybe time for me to change my relationship with this particular spiritual practice. The Gurugita is a hymn of pure love, but something had been stopping me from offering up that love in sincerity. So as I chanted each verse I realized that I needed to find something - or somebody - to whom I could devote this

hymn, in order to find a place of pure love within me. By Verse Twenty, I had it: Nick.

Nick, my nephew, is an eight-year-old boy, skinny for his age, very smart, sensitive and complex. This is a child for whom life is never simple, a child who hears and sees and feels everything intensely. I love this boy so deeply and protectively. I realized - doing the math on the time difference between India and Pennsylvania - that it was his bedtime back home. So I sang the Gurugita to my nephew Nick, to help him sleep. Sometimes he has trouble sleeping because he cannot still his mind. So each devotional word of this hymn, I dedicated to Nick. I filled the song with everything I wished I could teach him about life. I told him everything through this old Sanskrit scripture, and soon I noticed that I was weeping cool tears. But before I could wipe the tears away the Gurugita was over. The hour and a half was finished. It felt like ten minutes had passed. I realized what had happened - that Nicky had carried me through it. The little soul I'd wanted to help had actually been helping me.

Needless to say, I never missed the Gurugita again, and it became the most holy of my practices at the Ashram. And, of course, I called my sister the next week and she said that - for reasons nobody could understand - Nick suddenly wasn't having trouble falling asleep anymore.

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

It was then I decided I needed to stay here at the Ashram. This was so totally not my original plan. My original plan had been to stay here for just six weeks, have a bit of transcendental experience, then continue traveling all over India... um... looking for God.

On the other hand, the Zen masters always say that you cannot see your reflection in running water, only in still water. So something was telling me it would be wrong to run off now, when so much was happening right here in this small, sheltered place where every minute of the day is organized to help self-exploration and devotional practice. Is more travel really going to bring me any closer to contact with divinity?

I didn't know what to do. I spent a day thinking over the decision. As usual, Richard from Texas had the last word.

"Stay put, Groceries," he said. "Forget about sightseeing - you got the rest of your life for that. You're on a spiritual journey, baby. You got a personal invitation from God here - are you really going to turn that away?"

"But what about all those beautiful things to see in India?" I asked. "Isn't it a pity to travel halfway around the world just to stay in a little Ashram the whole time?"

"Groceries, baby, listen your friend Richard. If you come to meditation cave every day for the next three months, I promise you this - you're going to start seeing some stuff that's so beautiful it'll make you want to throw rocks at the Taj Mahal."

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

One evening, I tried something new. I'd recently met a woman at the Ashram who'd been studying Vipassana meditation. Vipassana is an ultraorthodox, very intensive Buddhist meditation technique. Basically, it's just sitting. An introductory Vipassana course lasts for ten days, during which time you sit for ten hours a day in stretches of silence that last two to three hours at a time. Your Vipassana master won't even give you a mantra. Vipassana meditation is the practice of pure witnessing your mind and offering your complete consideration to your thought patterns, but allowing nothing to move you from your seat.

It's physically exhausting too. You are forbidden to shift your body at all. You just sit there and tell yourself, "There's no reason I need to move at all during the next two hours." If you are feeling discomfort then you are supposed to meditate upon that discomfort, watching the effect that physical pain has on you. In our real lives, we are constantly hopping around to adjust ourselves around discomfort - physical, emotional and psychological - in order to avoid the reality of grief and nuisance. Vipassana meditation teaches that grief and nuisance are inevitable in this life, but if you can plant

yourself in stillness long enough, you will, in time, experience the truth that everything (both uncomfortable and lovely) does eventually pass.

Cultivating a measure of intelligent detachment in your life can be a valuable instrument of peace. So I found a quiet bench in one of the Ashram gardens and decided to sit in meditation for an hour - Vipassana-style. No movement, no agitation, not even mantra - just pure witnessing. Let's see what comes up. Unfortunately, I had forgotten about what "comes up" at dusk in India: mosquitoes. As soon as I sat down on that bench, I could hear the mosquitoes coming at me, brushing against my face and landing on my head, ankles, arms. And then their fierce little bums. I didn't like this. I thought, "This is a bad time of day to practice Vipassana meditation."

On the other hand - when is it a good time of day, or life, to sit in detached stillness? When isn't there something buzzing about, trying to distract you? So I made a decision (inspired again by my Guru's instruction that we are to become scientists of our own inner experience). I presented myself with an experiment - what if I sat through the discomfort, just for one hour of my long life?

So I did it. In stillness, I watched myself get eaten by mosquitoes. To be honest, part of me was wondering what this little experiment was meant to prove, but another part of me well knew - it was a beginner's attempt at self-mastery. If I could sit through this nonlethal physical discomfort, then what other discomforts might I someday be able to sit through? What about emotional discomforts, which are even harder for me to endure? What about jealousy, anger, fear, disappointment, loneliness, shame, boredom?

The itch was maddening at first but eventually it just turned into a general burning feeling and I rode that heat to a mild euphoria. I allowed the pain to become pure sensation - neither good nor bad, just intense - and that intensity lifted me out of myself and into meditation. I sat there for two hours.

Let me be clear about one thing. I realized that in my thirty-four years on earth I have never not slapped at a mosquito when it was biting me. I've been a puppet to this and to millions of other small and large signals of pain or pleasure throughout my life. Whenever something happens, I always

react. But here I was - disregarding the reflex. I was doing something I'd never done before. A small thing, yes, but how often can I say that? And what will I be able to do tomorrow that I cannot yet do today?

When it was all over, I stood up, walked to my room and assessed the damage. I counted about twenty mosquito bites. But within a half an hour, all the bites had vanished. It all goes away. Eventually, everything goes away.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

In the search for God, you turn away from what attracts you and swim toward that which is difficult. You leave your comforting and familiar habits with the hope (only hope!) that something greater will be offered you in return for what you've given up.

The devout of this world perform their rituals without guarantee that anything good will ever come of it. Faith is a way of saying, "Yes, I pre-accept the terms of the universe and I embrace in advance what I am presently incapable of understanding." If faith were rational, it wouldn't be - by definition - faith. Faith is belief in what you cannot see or prove or touch. If we truly knew all the answers in advance as to the meaning of life and the nature of God and the destiny of our souls, our belief would not be a courageous act of humanity; it would just be... an insurance policy.

I'm not interested in the insurance industry. I couldn't care less about evidence and proof. I just want God. I want God inside me. I want God to play in my bloodstream the way sunlight amuses itself on water.

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

My prayers are becoming more deliberate and specific. Every morning before meditation, I kneel in the temple and talk for a few minutes to God. I found during the beginning of my stay here at the Ashram that I

was often tired, confused and bored during those divine conversations. I remember kneeling down one morning, touching my forehead to the floor and saying to my creator, "Oh, I don't know what I need... but you must have some ideas... so just do something about it, would you?"

Of course God already knows what I need. The question is - do I know? There's a wonderful old Italian joke about a poor man who goes to church every day and prays before the statue of a great saint, begging, "Dear saint - please, please, please... give me the grace to win the lottery." This happens for months. Finally the annoyed statue comes to life, looks down at the begging man and says, "My son - please, please, please... buy a ticket."

Prayer is a relationship; half the job is mine. If I want transformation, but can't even be bothered to articulate what, exactly, I'm aiming for, how will it ever occur? Half the benefit of prayer is in the asking itself, in the offering of a well-considered intention. If you don't have this, all your pleas and desires swirl at your feet in a cold fog and never lift. So now I take the time every morning to search myself for specificity about what I am truly asking for. I kneel there in the temple with my face on that cold marble for as long as it takes me to formulate an authentic prayer.

Destiny, I feel, is also a relationship - a play between divine grace and willful self-effort. Half of it you have no control over; half of it is absolutely in your hands. Man is neither entirely a puppet of the gods, nor is he entirely the captain of his own destiny; he's a little of both.

There is so much about my fate that I cannot control, but other things I can choose. I can decide how I spend my time, whom I share my body and life and money and energy with. I can select what I eat and read and study. I can choose how I'm going to regard unfortunate circumstances in my life - whether I will see them as curses or opportunities. I can choose my words and the tone of voice in which I speak to others. And most of all, I can choose my thoughts.

On first glance, this seems a nearly impossible task. Control your thoughts? Instead of the other way around? But imagine if you could? So I've started watching my thoughts all day, and monitoring them. I repeat this

vow about 700 times a day: "I will not harbor unhealthy thoughts anymore." The first time I heard myself say this, my inner ear perked up at the word "harbor," which is a noun as well as a verb. A harbor, of course, is a place of refuge, a port of entry. I pictured the harbor of my mind. The harbor of my mind is an open bay, the only access to the island of my Self (which is a young and volcanic island, yes, but promising). This island has been through some wars, it is true, but it is now peaceful, under a new leader (me) who has instituted new policies to protect the place.

You may not come here anymore with your hard and abusive thoughts, with your plague ships of thoughts, with your slave ships of thoughts, with your warships of thoughts - all these will be turned away. This is a peaceful harbor, the entryway to a fine and proud island that is only now beginning to cultivate tranquillity. If you can obey these new laws, my dear thoughts, then you are welcome in my mind.

That is my mission, and it will never end.

CHAPTER FIFTY NINE

I've made good friends with this seventeen-year-old Indian girl named Tulsi. She works with me scrubbing the temple floors every day. Every evening we take a walk through the gardens of the Ashram together and talk about God and hip-hop music, two subjects for which Tulsi feels equivalent devotion. Tulsi is so many interesting and foreign things to me at once - a teenager, an Indian girl, a rebel in her family, a soul who is really crazy about God. She also speaks a delightful English - the kind of English you can find only in India - which includes such colonial words as "splendid!" and "nonsense!"

She's exactly half my age, and practically half my size.

Tulsi and I have been talking a lot about marriage lately during our walks. Soon she will turn eighteen, and this is the age when she will be regarded as a legitimate marriage prospect. It will happen like this - after her eighteenth birthday, she will be required to attend family weddings

dressed in a sari, signaling her womanhood. Some nice Amma ("Aunty") will come and sit beside her, start asking questions and getting to know her: "How old are you? What's your family background? What does your father do? What universities are you applying to? What are your interests? When is your birthday?" And then, Tulsi's dad will get a big envelope in the mail with a photo of this woman's grandson who is studying computer sciences in Delhi, along with the boy's astrology charts and his university grades and the inevitable question, "Would your daughter care to marry him?"

Tulsi had to go to another cousin's wedding last week, and she was saying (in very un-Indian fashion) how much she hates weddings. All that dancing and gossip. All that dressing up. She would rather be at the Ashram scrubbing floors and meditating. Nobody else in her family can understand this; her devotion to God is beyond anything they consider normal.

I asked her if she wanted to ever get married and she said:

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo..."

"I want to travel!" she said. "Like you."

"You know, Tulsi, I couldn't always travel like this. I was married once."

She frowned at me through her specs, studying me with a puzzled look. In the end, she pronounced: "You, married? I cannot picture this."

"But it's true - I was."

"Are you the one who ended the marriage?"

"Yes."

She said, "I think it's really good that you ended your marriage. You seem splendidly happy now. But as for me - how did I get here? Why was I born an Indian girl? It's outrageous! Why did I come into this family? Why must I attend so many weddings?"

Then Tulsi ran around in a circle, shouting (quite loudly for Ashram standards): "I want to live in Hawaii!!!"

CHAPTER SIXTY

Richard from Texas was married once, too. He had two sons, both of whom are grown men now, both close to their dad. Sometimes Richard mentions his ex-wife, and he always seems to speak of her with fondness. I get a bit envious whenever I hear this, imagining how lucky Richard is to be friends with his former spouse, even after separating. This is an odd side effect of my terrible divorce; whenever I hear of couples splitting kindly, I get jealous.

So I asked Richard one day about it. I said, "It seems like you have fond feelings toward your ex-wife. Are you two still close?"

"No," he said casually. "She thinks I changed my name to Motherfucker."

Richard's lack of concern about this impressed me. My own ex-spouse thinks I changed my name too, and it breaks my heart. One of the hardest things about this divorce was the fact that my ex-husband never forgave me for leaving. No. And that felt like it would never change, never release.

I was talking about all this one day with my friends at the Ashram - the newest member of whom is a plumber from New Zealand. He's a poet, too, who had recently published a terrific memoir in New Zealand called *A Plumber's Progress* about his own spiritual journey. The plumber/poet from New Zealand, Richard from Texas, the Irish dairy farmer, Tulsi, the Indian teenager, and Vivian, an older woman with white hair and humorous eyes (who used to be a nun in South Africa) - this was my circle of close friends here.

So, during lunch one day, we were all having this conversation together about marriage, and the plumber/poet from New Zealand said, "I

see marriage as an operation that sews two people together, and divorce is a kind of amputation that can take a long time to heal. The longer you were married, or the rougher the amputation, the harder it is to recover."

Richard from Texas was wondering if I was planning on allowing my ex-husband to dictate for the rest of my life how I felt about myself, and I said I wasn't too sure about that, actually, and to be honest I was still halfway waiting for the man to forgive me, to release me and allow me to go forth in peace.

"What I hate about the way my marriage ended," I said, "is that it's so unresolved. It's just an open wound that never goes away."

"If you insist," said Richard. "If that's how you've decided to think about it, don't let me spoil your party."

"One of these days this has to end," I said. "I just wish I knew how."

When lunch ended, the plumber/poet from New Zealand slipped me a note. It said to meet him after dinner; he wanted to show me something. So after dinner that night I met him by the meditation caves, and he told me to follow him, that he had a gift for me. He walked me across the Ashram, then led me to a building I'd never been inside before, unlocked a door and took me up a back set of stairs. He knew of this place, I guessed, because he fixes all the air-conditioning units, and some of them are located up there. At the top of the stairs there was a door which he unlocked. Then we were up on a gorgeous rooftop, tiled in ceramic chips that glittered in the evening twilight. He took me across that roof to a little tower, a minaret, really, and showed me another narrow set of stairs, leading to the very top of the tower. He pointed to the tower and said, "I'm going to leave you now. You're going to go up there. Stay up there until it's finished."

"Until what's finished?" I asked.

The plumber just smiled, handed me a flashlight, "for getting down safely when it's over," and also handed me a folded piece of paper. Then he left.

I climbed to the top of the tower. I was now standing at the tallest place in the Ashram, with a view overlooking the river valley. Mountains and farmland stretched out as far as I could see. The sun was going down right now. The breeze was warm. I unfolded the piece of paper the plumber/poet had given me.

He had typed:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FREEDOM

Life's metaphors are God's instructions.

You have just climbed up and above the roof. There is nothing between you and the Infinite. Now, let go.

The day is ending. It's time for something that was beautiful to turn into something else that is beautiful. Now, let go.

Your wish for resolution was a prayer. Your being here is God's response. Let go, and watch the stars come out - on the outside and on the inside.

With all your heart, ask for grace, and let go.

With all your heart, forgive him, FORGIVE YOURSELF, and let him go.

Let your intention be freedom from useless suffering. Then, let go.

Watch the heat of day pass into the cool night. Let go.

When the karma of a relationship is done, only love remains. It's safe. Let go.

When the past has passed from you at last, let go. Then climb down and begin the rest of your life. With great joy.

For the first few minutes, I couldn't stop laughing. I watched the sun go down, and then I lay down on my back and watched the stars come out. I sang a small little prayer in Sanskrit. Soon the whole sky was a flashy show of stars. The only thing between me and God was... nothing.

Then I shut my eyes and I said, "Dear Lord, please show me everything I need to understand about forgiveness."

What I had wanted for so long was to have an actual conversation with my ex-husband, but this was obviously never going to happen. And I was sure of this, too - that the rules of transcendence insist that you will not advance even one inch closer to divinity as long as you cling to even one last thread of blame. So what I asked of God that night on the Ashram roof was - might there be some level upon which we could communicate? Some level on which we could forgive?

I lay up there, high above the world, and I was all alone. I dropped into meditation and waited to be told what to do. I don't know how many minutes or hours passed before I knew what to do. I realized I'd been thinking about all this too literally. I'd wanted to talk to my ex-husband? So talk to him. Talk to him right now. I'd been waiting to be offered forgiveness? Offer it up personally, then. Right now. From that place of meditation, I found the answer - you can finish the business yourself, from within yourself. It's not only possible, it's necessary.

And then, to my surprise, still in meditation, I did an odd thing. I invited my ex-husband to join me up here on this rooftop in India. I asked him if he would be kind enough to meet me up here for this farewell event. Then I waited until I felt him arrive. And he arrived. His presence was suddenly absolute. I could practically smell him.

I said, "Hi, sweetie."

I almost started to cry right then, but quickly realized I didn't need to. Tears are part of this bodily life, and the place where these two souls were meeting that night in India had nothing to do with the body. The two people who needed to talk to each other up there on the roof were not even people anymore. They were just two cool blue souls who already understood everything. Unbound by their bodies, unbound by the complex history of their past relationship, they came together above this roof (above me, even) in infinite wisdom. Still in meditation, I watched these two cool blue souls join, divide again and regard each other's perfection and similarity. They knew everything. They knew everything long ago and they will always know everything. They didn't need to forgive each other; they were born forgiving each other.

The lesson they were teaching me in their beautiful turning was, "Stay out of this, Liz. Your part of this relationship is over. Let us work things out from now on. You go on with your life."

Much later I opened my eyes, and I knew it was over. Not just my marriage and not just my divorce, but all the unfinished hollow sadness of it... it was over. I could feel that I was free. Let me be clear - it's not that I would never again think about my ex-husband, or never again have any emotions attached to the memory of him. It's just that this ritual on the rooftop had finally given me a place where I could house those thoughts and feelings whenever they would arise in the future.

This is what rituals are for. We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to drag those feelings around with us forever. We all need such places of ritual safekeeping. And I believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you need, then you are absolutely permitted to make up your own ceremony, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems.

So I stood up and did a handstand on my Guru's roof, to celebrate my liberation. I felt the dusty tiles under my hands. I felt my own strength and balance. This kind of thing - a spontaneous handstand - isn't something a cool blue soul can do, but a human being can do it. We have hands; we can stand on them if we want to. That's our privilege. That's the joy of a mortal

body. And that's why God needs us. Because God loves to feel things through our hands.

CHAPTER SIXTY ONE

Richard from Texas left today. Flew back to Austin. I took the drive with him to the airport, and we were both sad. We stood for a long time on the sidewalk before he went inside.

"What am I going to do when I don't have Liz Gilbert to kick around anymore?" He sighed. Then he said, "You've had a good experience at the Ashram, haven't you? You look different from a few months back, like maybe you dropped out some of that sorrow you had been hauling around."

"I'm feeling really happy these days, Richard."

"So appreciate what you got now, OK? Keep cultivating gratitude. You'll live longer. And, Groceries? Do me a favor? Move ahead with your life, will you?"

"I am."

"What I mean is - find somebody new to love someday. Take the time you need to heal, but don't forget to eventually share your heart with someone. Don't make your life a monument to David or to your ex-husband."

"I won't," I said. And I knew suddenly that it was true. I could feel all this old pain of lost love and past mistakes vanishing before my eyes.

And then Richard spoke again, snapping my thoughts back quickly to the world's more basic realities: "After all, baby, remember what they say - sometimes the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else."

I laughed. "OK, Richard. Now you can go back to Texas."

"Yes," he said, looking around this desolate Indian airport parking lot. "I am not getting any prettier just standing around here."

CHAPTER SIXTY TWO

On my ride back to the Ashram, after seeing Richard off at the airport, I decide that I've been talking too much. I've been thinking lately that this is maybe a spiritual problem. Silence and solitude are universally recognized spiritual practices, and there are good reasons for this. Learning how to discipline your speech is a way of preventing your energies from spilling out of you through your mouth, exhausting you and filling the world with words, words, words instead of peace. Swamiji, my Guru's master, called silence the only true religion. It's ridiculous how much I've been talking at this Ashram, the one place in the world where silence should - and can - reign.

So I'm not going to be the Ashram social bunny anymore, I've decided. No more gossiping and joking. It's time to change. I'm going to make the remainder of my stay a completely quiet experience. This will be difficult, but not impossible, because silence is universally respected at the Ashram. The whole community will support it, recognizing your decision as a disciplined act of devotion. In the bookstore they even sell little badges you can wear which read, "I am in Silence."

I'm going to buy four of those little badges.

On the drive back to the Ashram, I really let myself dip into a fantasy about just how silent I am going to become now. I will be so silent that it will make me famous. People will talk about me. They'll ask, "Who is That Quiet Girl in the Back of the Temple, always scrubbing the floors, down on her knees? She never speaks. She's so mystical. I can't even imagine what her voice sounds like. She moves as silently as the breeze. She must be in a constant state of meditative communion with God. She's the quietest girl I've ever seen."

CHAPTER SIXTY THREE

The next morning I was down on my knees in the temple, scrubbing the marble floor again, in silence, when an Indian teenage boy came looking for me with a message - that I needed to report to the Seva Office immediately. Seva is the Sanskrit term for the spiritual practice of selfless service (for instance, the scrubbing of a temple floor). The Seva Office administers all the work assignments for the Ashram. So I went there, and the nice lady at the desk asked me, "Are you Elizabeth Gilbert?"

I smiled at her and nodded. Silently.

Then she told me that my work detail had been changed.

They had a new position in mind for me at the Ashram.

And the title of my new job was "Key Hostess."

CHAPTER SIXTY FOUR

This was so obviously another one of Swamiji's jokes.

You wanted to be The Quiet Girl in the Back of the Temple? Well, guess what...

But this is what always happens at the Ashram. You make some big grandiose decision about what you need to do, or who you need to be, and then circumstances arise that immediately reveal to you how little you understood about yourself. I don't know how many times Swamiji said it during his lifetime, and I don't know how many more times my Guru has repeated it since his death, but it seems I have not quite yet absorbed the truth of their most insistent statement:

"God dwells within you, as you."

AS you.

If there is one holy truth of this Yoga, that line contains it. God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are. God isn't interested in watching you pretend to be somebody else. We all seem to get this idea that, in order to be sacred, we have to make some massive, dramatic change of character, that we have to renounce our individuality. This is a classic example of what they call in the East "wrong-thinking." Swamiji used to say that every day people discontented with themselves find something new to reject, but it is usually depression, not peace, that they attain.

As Sextus, the ancient Pythagorean philosopher, said, "The wise man is always similar to himself."

This doesn't mean I cannot be devout. This does not mean I cannot serve humanity. It doesn't mean I can't improve myself as a human being, working daily to minimize my vices. For instance, I'm never going to be a wallflower, but that doesn't mean I can't take a serious look at my talking habits and alter some aspects for the better - working within my personality. Yes, I like talking, but perhaps I don't have to curse so much. Or here's a radical concept - maybe I can stop interrupting others when they are speaking. Because no matter how creatively I try to look at my habit of interrupting, I can't find another way to see it than this: "I believe that what I am saying is more important than what you are saying." And I can't find another way to see that than. "I believe that I am more important than you." And that must end.

All these changes would be useful to make. But even so, even with reasonable modifications to my speaking habits, I probably won't ever be known as That Quiet Girl. No matter how hard I try. Because let's be really honest about who we're dealing with here. When the woman at the Ashram Seva Center gave me my new job assignment of Key Hostess, she said, "We have a special nickname for this position, you know. We call it 'Little Suzy Creamcheese', because whoever does the job needs to be social and bubbly and smiling all the time."

What could I say?

I just stuck out a hand to shake, said good-bye to all my wishful old delusions and announced, "Madam - I'm your girl."

CHAPTER SIXTY FIVE

What I will be hosting, to be exact, is a series of retreats at the Ashram this spring. During each retreat, about a hundred devotees will come here from all over the world for a period of a week to ten days, to deepen their meditation practices. My role is to take care of these people during their stay here. For most of the retreat, the participants will be in silence. For some of them, it will be the first time they've experienced silence as a devotional practice, and it can be intense. However, I will be the one person in the Ashram they are allowed to talk to if something is going wrong.

That's right - my job officially requires me to be the speech-magnet.

I will listen to the problems of the retreat participants and then try to find solutions for them. Maybe they'll need to change roommates because of a snoring situation, or maybe they'll need to speak to the doctor - I'll try to solve it. I'll need to know everybody's name, and where they are from.

As the retreats begin, it is so quickly evident how much I am made for this job. I'm sitting there at the Welcome Table with my Hello, My Name Is badge, and these people are arriving from thirty different countries, and many of them have never been to India. They're thirsty, but don't know yet if they can drink the water. They're hungry, but don't know what time lunch is, or where the cafeteria can be found. They're dressed all wrong, wearing synthetics and heavy boots in the tropical heat. They don't know if there's anyone here who speaks Russian.

I can speak a little bit of Russian...

I love all these people, automatically and unconditionally. I can see through their neuroses and recognize that they're just horribly afraid of what they're going to face when they go into silence and meditation for seven days. They're going deep into their own minds and souls. Even for an experienced meditator, nothing is more unknown than this territory. Anything can happen in there. They'll be guided during this retreat by a

wonderful woman, whose every gesture and word is the embodiment of compassion, but they're still afraid because she cannot go with them where they are going. Nobody can.

CHAPTER SIXTY SIX

The topic of the retreat, and its goal, is the turiya state - the elusive fourth level of human consciousness. During the typical human experience, say the Yogis, most of us are always moving between three different levels of consciousness - waking, dreaming or deep dreamless sleep. But there is a fourth level, too. This fourth level is the witness of all the other states, the integral awareness that links the other three levels together. This is the pure consciousness, an intelligent awareness. And if you can move into that state of witness-consciousness, then you can be present with God all the time. This constant awareness and experience of the God-presence within can only happen on a fourth level of human consciousness, which is called turiya.

Here's how you can tell if you've reached the turiya state - if you're in a state of constant bliss. One who is living from within turiya is not affected by the swinging moods of the mind, nor fearful of time or harmed by loss. The great saints, the great Gurus, the great prophets of history - they were all living in the turiya state, all the time. As for the rest of us, most of us have been there, too, if only for fleeting moments. Most of us, even if only for two minutes in our lives, have experienced at some time or another an inexplicable and random sense of complete bliss, unrelated to anything that was happening in the outside world.

Of course, for most of us this state passes as fast as it came. It's almost like you are shown your inner perfection as a tease and then you tumble back to "reality" very quickly. Over the centuries, people have tried to hold on to that state of blissful perfection through all sorts of external means - through drugs and sex and power and adrenaline - but it doesn't keep. In order to get to your perfection you must leave the busy commotion of the mind and the desires of the ego and enter into the silence of the heart.

The kundalini shakti - the supreme energy of the divine - will take you there.

This is what everyone has come here for.

I spend the entire retreat in the back of the temple, watching over the participants as they meditate. It is my job to be concerned about their comfort, paying careful attention to see if anyone is in trouble or need. They've all taken vows of silence for the duration of the retreat.

As these hundred souls meditate, I have no idea what they're thinking or feeling, but I know what they want to experience, and I find myself in a constant state of prayer to God on their behalf like, Please give these wonderful people any blessings you might have originally prepared for me. It's not my intention to go into meditation at the same time the retreat participants are meditating; I'm keeping an eye on them, not worrying about my own spiritual journey. But I find myself every day lifted on the waves of their collective devotional Intention. So one Thursday afternoon in the back of the temple, right in the midst of my Key Hostess duties, wearing my name-tag and everything - I am suddenly transported through the portal of the universe and taken to the center of God's palm.

CHAPTER SIXTY SEVEN

I don't want to say that what I experienced that Thursday afternoon in India was indescribable, even though it was. I'll try to explain anyway. Simply put, I got pulled through the tunnel of the Absolute, and in that rush I suddenly understood the mechanism of the universe completely. I left my body, I left the room, I left the planet, I stepped through time and I entered the void. I was inside the void, but I also was the void and I was looking at the void, all at the same time. The void was a place of limitless peace and wisdom. The void was conscious and it was intelligent. The void was God, which means that I was inside God. I was both a tiny piece of the universe and exactly the same size as the universe.

It was heaven, yes. It was the deepest love I'd ever experienced, but it wasn't euphoric. It wasn't exciting. There wasn't enough ego or passion left in me to create euphoria and excitement. It was just obvious.

The place in which I was standing can't be described like an earthly location. It was neither dark nor light, neither big nor small. Nor was it a place, nor was I technically standing there, nor was I exactly "I" anymore. I still had my thoughts, but they were so modest, quiet and observatory. I felt unhesitating compassion and unity with everything and everybody. I also felt mildly charmed by all my old ideas about who I am and what I'm like. I'm a woman, I come from America, I'm talkative, I'm a writer - all this felt so cute and obsolete.

I don't know how long I was in this magnificent ether of union before I had a sudden thought: "I want to hold on to this experience forever!" And that's when I started to tumble out of it. Just those two little words - I want!- and I began to slide back to earth. Then my mind started to really protest - No! I don't want to leave here!- and I slid further still.

I want!

I don't want!

I want!

I don't want!

With each repetition of those desperate thoughts, I could feel myself falling through layer after layer of illusion. This return of useless longing was bringing me back again into my own small borders, my own mortal confines. I felt a tremor of panic, mildly heartbroken because I lost this divine experience. But exactly parallel to that panic I could also sense a witness, a wiser and older me, who just shook her head and smiled, knowing this: If I believed that this state of bliss was something that could be taken away from me, then I obviously didn't understand it yet. And therefore, I was not yet ready to inhabit it completely. I have to practice more. At that moment of realization, that's when God let me go, let me slide through His fingers with this last compassionate, unspoken message:

You may return here once you have fully come to understand that you are always here.

CHAPTER SIXTY EIGHT

The retreat ended two days later, and everyone came out of silence. I got so many hugs from people, thanking me for my help.

"Oh, no! Thank you" I kept saying, feeling how inadequate those words sounded.

Another one hundred seekers arrived a week later for another retreat, and the teachings and the brave travels inward and the silence were all repeated, with new souls in practice. I watched over them, too, and tried to help in every possible way and glided back into turiya a few times with them, too. I could only laugh later when many of them came out of their meditations to tell me that I had appeared to them during the retreat as a "silent, gliding, ethereal presence." So this was the Ashram's final joke on me? Once I had learned to accept my loud, chatty, social nature and fully embrace my inner Key Hostess - only then could I become The Quiet Girl in the Back of the Temple, after all?

In my final weeks there, every morning, it seemed, some more people and some more luggage got on a bus and left. There were no new arrivals. There would be no more retreats, so I was relocated for work again, now placed in the Office of Registration, where I had the bittersweet job of officially "departing" all my friends off the computer once they had left the Ashram.

I'm getting a lot of time alone here now. I'm spending about four or five hours every day in the meditation caves. I can sit in my own company for hours at a time now, at ease in my own presence, undisturbed by my own existence on the planet. Sometimes my meditations are experiences of shakti - all spine-twisting, blood-boiling wildness. I try to give in to it with as little resistance as possible. Other times I experience a sweet, quiet contentment, and that is fine, too. The sentences still form in my mind, and

thoughts still do their little dance, but I know my thought patterns so well now that they don't bother me anymore. My thoughts have become like old neighbors, kind of bothersome but they don't agitate my home. There's room for all of us in this neighborhood.

As for other changes within me during these last few months, perhaps I can't even feel them yet. My friends who have been studying Yoga for a long time say you don't really see the impact that an Ashram has had on you until you leave the place and return to your normal life. You may find that lifelong obsessions are gone. Petty irritations that once maddened you are no longer problems. Poisonous relationships vanish, and brighter people start arriving into your world.

Last night I couldn't sleep. Not out of anxiety, but out of thrilled anticipation. I got dressed and went out for a walk through the gardens. The moon was fantastically ripe and full. The air was perfumed with jasmine. The day had been humid and hot, and now it was only slightly less humid and hot. The warm air shifted around me and I realized: "I'm in India!"

I'm in my sandals and I'm in India!

I ran, galloping away from the path and down into the meadow. My body felt so alive and healthy from all these months of Yoga and vegetarian food and early bedtimes. My sandals on the soft dewy grass made this sound: shippa-shippa-shippa-shippa, and that was the only sound in the whole valley. I was so happy I ran straight to the clump of eucalyptus trees in the middle of the park and I threw my arms around one of those trees, which was still warm from the day's heat, and I kissed it with such passion.

It was pure, this love that I was feeling. It was godly. I looked around the darkened valley and I could see nothing that was not God. I felt so deeply, terribly happy. I thought to myself, "Whatever this feeling is - this is what I have been praying for. And this is also what I have been praying to."

CHAPTER SIXTY NINE

By the way, I found my word.

I'd been wondering about my word ever since that afternoon back in Rome when my Italian friend Giulio had told me that Rome's word is SEX, and had asked me what mine was. I didn't know the answer then, but I thought my word would show up eventually, and that I'd recognize it when I saw it.

So I saw it during my last week at the Ashram. I was reading through an old text about Yoga, when I found a description of ancient spiritual seekers. A Sanskrit word appeared in the paragraph: ANTEVASIN. It means "one who lives at the border." In ancient times this was a literal description. It indicated a person who had left the active center of worldly life to go live at the edge of the forest where the spiritual masters dwelled. The antevasin was not one of the villagers anymore - not a householder with a conventional life. But neither was he yet a transcendent - not one of those sages who live deep in the unexplored woods, fully realized. The antevasin was an in-between. He was a border-dweller. He lived in sight of both worlds, but he looked toward the unknown. And he was a scholar.

When I read this description of the antevasin, I got really excited. That's my word, baby! In the modern age, of course, that image of an unexplored forest is figurative, and the border is figurative, too. In the figurative sense, this is a border that is always moving - as you advance forward in your studies and realizations, that mysterious forest of the unknown always stays a few feet ahead of you, so you have to stay mobile, movable, supple.

I've spent so much time these last years wondering what I'm supposed to be. A wife? A mother? A lover? An Italian? A traveler? An artist? A Yogi? But I'm not any of these things, at least not completely. And I'm not Crazy Aunt Liz, either. I'm just an antevasin - a student on the ever-shifting border near the wonderful, scary forest of the new.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

I believe that all the world's religions share a desire to find a way to communicate with God. When you want to attain communion with God, what you're really trying to do is move away from the worldly into the eternal and you need some kind of magnificent idea to convey you there.

The Yogic scriptures say that God responds to the sacred prayers and efforts of human beings in any way whatsoever that mortals choose to worship - just so long as those prayers are sincere. As one line from the Upanishads suggests: "People follow different paths, straight or crooked, according to their temperament, depending on which they consider best, or most appropriate - and all reach You, just as rivers enter the ocean."

The other objective of religion, of course, is to try to make sense of our chaotic world and explain the inexplicabilities we see playing out here on earth every day: the innocent suffer, the wicked are rewarded. The Western tradition says, "It'll all get sorted out after death, in heaven and hell." In the East, though, the Upanishads shrug away any attempt to make sense of the world's chaos. They're not even so sure that the world is chaotic, but suggest that it may only appear so to us, because of our limited vision. Furthermore, the Upanishads suggest that so-called chaos may have an actual divine function, even if you personally can't recognize it right now. The best we can do, then, in response to our incomprehensible and dangerous world, is to practice holding balance internally - no matter what insanity is out there.

I have many friends in New York who are not religious people. What I'm seeing in some of my friends, though, as they are aging, is a longing to have something to believe in. But this longing rubs against any number of obstacles, including their intellect and common sense. Despite all their intellect, though, these people still live in a world that twists about in a series of wild and completely nonsensical things. Great and horrible experiences of either suffering or joy occur in the lives of all these people, just as with the rest of us, and these mega-experiences tend to make us long for a spiritual context in which to express either lament or gratitude, or to seek understanding. The problem is - what to worship, whom to pray to?

I think you have every right to choose when it comes to moving your spirit and finding peace in God. I think you are free to search for any way

whatsoever which will take you across the worldly divide whenever you need comfort. It's the history of mankind's search for holiness. The evolution of religious thinking involves careful choice. You take whatever works from wherever you can find it, and you keep moving toward the light.

Even if it means coming to India and kissing trees in the moonlight for a while.

CHAPTER SEVENTY ONE

My flight leaves India at four in the morning, which is typical of how India works. I decide not to go to sleep at all that night, but to spend the whole evening in one of the meditation caves, in prayer.

I pack my bag and leave it by the temple gate, so I can be ready to grab it and go when the taxi arrives before dawn. And then I go into the meditation cave and I sit. I'm alone in there, but I sit where I can see the big photograph of Swamiji, my Guru's master. I close my eyes and let the mantra come. In my heart, the clock stops and the calendar pages stop flying off the wall. I am not actively praying. I have become a prayer.

I can sit here all night.

In fact, I do.

After several hours of stillness, something gives me a nudge, and when I look at my watch it's exactly time to go. I have to fly to Indonesia now. How funny and strange. So I stand up and bow before the photograph of Swamiji - the bossy, the marvelous. And then I slide a piece of paper under the carpet, right below his image. On the paper are the two poems I wrote during my four months in India. These are the first real poems I've ever written. A plumber from New Zealand encouraged me to try poetry for once - that's why it happened. One of these poems I wrote after having been here only a month. The other, I just wrote this morning.

In the space between the two poems, I have found a lot of grace.

CHAPTER SEVENTY TWO

Two Poems from an Ashram in India

First

All this talk of nectar and bliss is starting to annoy me.

I don't know about you, my friend,

but my path to God isn't sweet waft of incense.

It's a cat in a pigeon cage, and I'm the cat -

but also them who yell like hell when they get pinned.

My path to God is a worker's uprising,

won't be peace till they unionize.

Their protest is so fearsome

the National Guard won't go near them.

My path was beaten unconscious before me,

by a small brown man I had never seen,

who chased God through India, shin-deep in mud,

barefoot and famined, malarial blood,

sleeping in doorways, under bridges - a hobo.

(Which is short for "homeward bound," you know)

And he now chases me, saying: "Got it yet, Liz?

What HOMEWARD means? What BOUND really is?"

Second

However.

If they'd let me wear pants made out of the

fresh-mown grass from this place,

I'd do it.

If they'd let me make out

with every single Eucalyptus tree in Ganesh's Grove,

I swear, I'd do it.

I've sweated out dew these days,

worked out the dregs,

rubbed my chin on tree bark,

mistaking it for my master's leg.

I can't get far enough in.

If they'd let me eat the soil of this place

served on a bed of birds' nests,

I'd finish only half my plate,

Then sleep all night on the rest.

BOOK THREE

INDONESIA

or

36 Tales about the Pursuit of Balance

CHAPTER SEVENTY THREE

I've never had less of a plan in my life than I do upon arrival in Bali. I don't know where I'm going to live, I don't know what I'm going to do, I don't know what the exchange rate is, I don't know how to get a taxi at the airport - or even where to ask that taxi to take me. Nobody is expecting my arrival. I have no friends in Indonesia, or even friends-of-friends. And here's another problem: I'm actually not allowed to stay in Indonesia for four months, even if I want to. I find this out only upon entry into the country. It turns out I'm allowed only a one-month tourist visa.

As the nice immigration official is stamping my passport with permission to stay in Bali for only and exactly thirty days, I ask him in my most friendly manner if I can remain longer.

"No," he says, in his most friendly manner. The Balinese are famously friendly.

"You see, I'm supposed to stay here for three or four months," I tell him.

I don't mention that it's a prophecy - that my staying here for three or four months was predicted two years ago by an elderly and quite possibly demented Balinese medicine man, during a ten-minute palm-reading. I'm not sure how to explain this.

I haven't had any communication with the medicine man since that one evening. I wouldn't know how to contact him, anyway. What might his address be? "Medicine Man, On His Porch, Bali, Indonesia"? I don't know whether he's dead or alive. All I have for sure is his name - Ketut Liyer - and the memory that he lives in a village just outside the town of Ubud. But I don't remember the name of the village.

CHAPTER SEVENTY FOUR

But Bali is a simple place to navigate. This is an island approximately the size of Delaware and it's a popular tourist destination. The Westerner with the credit cards can get around with ease. English is spoken here widely and happily. You can change your money at the airport, find a taxi with a nice driver who will suggest to you a lovely hotel. Everyone wants to help you.

So I take a taxi to the town of Ubud, which seems like a good place to start my journey. I check into a small and pretty hotel there. The hotel has a sweet swimming pool and a garden. The staff is Balinese, which means they automatically start adoring you and complimenting you on your beauty as soon as you walk in. The room has a view of the tropical treetops and there's a breakfast included every morning with piles of fresh tropical fruit. In short, it's one of the nicest places I've ever stayed and it's costing me less than ten dollars a day. It's good to be back.

Ubud is in the center of Bali, located in the mountains, surrounded by terraced rice paddies and innumerable Hindu temples, with rivers that run through deep canyons of jungle and volcanoes visible on the horizon. Ubud

is the place where traditional Balinese painting, dance, carving, and religious ceremonies thrive. It isn't near any beaches, so the tourists who come to Ubud would prefer to see an ancient temple ceremony than to drink pina coladas in the surf. Regardless of what happens with my medicine man prophecy, this could be a lovely place to live for a while. Monkeys are walking around and Balinese families in traditional dress are all over the place.

By the time I unpack my bags it's still early afternoon, so I decide to take myself for a walk. And then I'll try to figure out how to start finding my medicine man. I'm not sure where to start with my search, so I stop at the front desk on my way out and ask Mario if he can help me.

Mario is one of the guys who work at this hotel. I already made friends with him when I checked in, largely on account of his name.

I had to ask, "Is your name really Mario? That doesn't sound very Indonesian."

"It's not my real name," he said. "My real name is Nyoman."

Ah - I could guess. In Bali there are only four names that the majority of the population give to their children, regardless of whether the baby is a boy or a girl. The names are Wayan (pronounced "Why-Ann"), Made ("mah- DAY"), Nyoman and Ketut. Translated, these names mean simply First, Second, Third and Fourth, and they mean birth order. If you have a fifth child, you start the name cycle all over again.

Understandably and necessarily, nicknaming is popular. For instance, somebody might be known as "Fat Made," or "Stupid-Ketut-Who-Burned-Down-His-Uncle's-House." My new Balinese friend Mario got around the problem by simply naming himself Mario.

"Why Mario?"

"Because I love everything Italian," he said.

When I told him that I'd recently spent four months in Italy, he found this fact so amazing that he came out from behind his desk and said, "Come, sit, talk." I came, I sat, we talked. And that's how we became friends.

So this afternoon I decide to start my search for my medicine man by asking my new friend Mario if by any chance he knows a man by the name of Ketut Liyer.

Mario frowns, thinking.

Then he says, "Ketut Liyer is famous healer."

"Yes! That's him!"

"I know him. I go in his house. Last week I take my cousin, she needs cure for her baby crying all night. Ketut Liyer fixes it."

I say, "Hey, Mario - do you think you could take me to visit Ketut Liyer someday? If you're not too busy?"

"Not now," he says.

Just as I'm starting to feel disappointed, he adds, "But maybe in five minutes?"

CHAPTER SEVENTY FIVE

So the very afternoon I have arrived in Bali I got suddenly on the back of a motorbike, clutching my new friend Mario, who is speeding me through the rice terraces toward Ketut Liyer's home. I actually have no idea what I'm going to say to him when I arrive. And of course we don't have an appointment. I recognize the sign outside his door, the same as last time, saying: "Ketut Liyer-painter." It's a typical, traditional Balinese family compound. A high stone wall surrounds the entire property, there's a courtyard in the middle and a temple in the back. Several generations live out their lives together in the various interconnected small homes within

these walls. We enter without knocking (there is no door, anyway), and there in the courtyard is Ketut Liyer the elderly medicine man, wearing his sarong and his shirt, looking precisely the same as he did two years ago when I first met him. Mario says something to Ketut, and Ketut turns his toothless smile upon me. This is so reassuring: I had remembered correctly, he is extraordinary. He shakes my hand with an excited and powerful grip.

"I am very happy to meet you," he says.

He has no idea who I am.

I remind him that I had been here to see him already, two years ago.

He looks puzzled. "Not first time in Bali?"

"No, sir."

He thinks hard.

I say, speaking slowly, "I was here two years ago with an American Yoga teacher, a woman who lived in Bali for many years."

He smiles. "I know Ann Barros!"

"That's right. Ann Barros is the Yoga teacher's name. But I'm Liz. I came here asking for your help once because I wanted to get closer to God. You drew me a magic picture."

"Don't remember," he says.

This is such bad news it's almost funny. So I describe the picture he had made for me, the figure with the four legs ("so grounded on earth") and the missing head ("not looking at the world through the intellect") and the face in the heart ("looking at the world through the heart") and he listens to me politely, with modest interest, like we're discussing somebody else's life entirely.

Then I say, "You told me I should come back here to Bali. You told me to stay here for three or four months. You said I could help you learn

English and you would teach me the things that you know."

He listens to me politely, smiling.

Finally I say, "I'm the book writer, Ketut. I'm the book writer from New York."

And for some reason that works. Suddenly his face turns bright.

"YOU!" he says. "YOU! I remember YOU!" He leans forward, takes my shoulders in his hands and starts to shake me happily. "You came back! You came BACK!"

"I came back! I came back!" I say.

"You, you, you!"

"Me, me, me!"

"I so happy!" he says. We're holding hands and he's wildly excited now. "I do not remember you at first! So long ago we meet! You look different now! So different from two years! Last time, you very sad-looking woman. Now - so happy! Like different person!"

I say, "Do you still want me to help you with your English, Ketut?"

He tells me I can start helping him right now. He goes into his little house and comes back with a pile of letters he's received from abroad over the last few years (so he has an address!). He asks me to read the letters aloud to him; he can understand English well, but can't read much. I'm his secretary already. I'm a medicine man's secretary. This is wonderful.

When the letters are finished, he updates me on his life over the last few years. Some changes have occurred. Now he has a wife, for instance. He points across the courtyard at a big woman who's been standing in the shadow of her kitchen door, glaring at me like she's not sure if she should shoot me, or poison me first and then shoot me. Last time I was here, Ketut had sadly shown me photographs of his wife who had recently died - a

beautiful old Balinese woman. I wave across the courtyard to the new wife, who backs away into her kitchen.

"Good woman," Ketut proclaims toward the kitchen shadows. "Very good woman."

He says that he's been very busy with his Balinese patients, always a lot to do. And then continues, "You come to my house every day to practice English with me now?" I nod happily and he says, "I will teach you Balinese meditation, OK?"

"OK," I say.

"I think three months enough time to teach you Balinese meditation, find God for you this way," he says. "Maybe four months. You like Bali?"

"I love Bali."

"You get married in Bali?"

"Not yet."

"I think maybe soon. You come back tomorrow?"

I promise to. So now it's time to go.

"I am very happy to meet you," he says, shaking my hand.

I offer up my first English lesson. I teach him the difference between "happy to meet you," and "happy to see you." I explain that we only say "Nice to meet you" the first time we meet somebody. After that, we say "Nice to see you," every time. Because you only meet someone once. But now we will see each other repeatedly, day after day.

He likes this. He says, "Nice to see you! I am happy to see you! I can see you! I am not deaf!"

This makes us all laugh, even Mario. We shake hands, and agree that I will come by again tomorrow afternoon.

CHAPTER SEVENTY SIX

Bali is a tiny Hindu island located in the middle of the two-thousand-mile-long Indonesian archipelago that constitutes the most populous Muslim nation on earth.

Balinese culture is one of the most methodical systems of social and religious organization on earth, a magnificent combination of tasks and roles and ceremonies. Religious ceremonies are of supreme importance here in Bali (an island, don't forget, with seven unpredictable volcanoes on it - you would pray, too). Life here is a constant cycle of offerings and rituals. You must perform them all, in correct order and with the correct intention, or the entire universe will fall out of balance.

The whole idea of Bali is a matrix, a massive and invisible grid of spirits, guides, paths and customs. Every Balinese knows exactly where he or she belongs, oriented within this great map. Just look at the four names of almost every Balinese citizen - First, Second, Third, Fourth - reminding them all of when they were born in the family, and where they belong. Mario, my new Italian-Indonesian friend, told me that he is only happy when he knows exactly where he is located at every moment, both in his relationship to the divine and to his family here on earth. If he loses that balance, he loses his power.

It's not an absurd hypothesis, therefore, to say that the Balinese are the global masters of balance. For me, on a personal search for balance, I had hoped to learn much from the Balinese about holding steady in this chaotic world. But the more I read and see about this culture, the more I realize how far off the grid of balance I've fallen, at least from the Balinese perspective.

So now I'm not so sure how much of the Balinese worldview I'm going to be able to incorporate into my own worldview. To me, balance means "equal freedom," or the equal possibility of falling in any direction at any given time, depending on... you know... how things go. The Balinese don't wait and see "how things go." That would be terrifying. They organize how things go, in order to keep things from falling apart.

When you are walking down the road in Bali and you pass a stranger, the very first question he or she will ask you is, "Where are you going?" The second question is, "Where are you coming from?" They're just trying to insert you into the grid for the purposes of security and comfort.

The third question a Balinese will almost certainly ask you is, "Are you married?" It's necessary for them to know this, to make sure that you are completely in order in your life. They really want you to say yes. If you're single, it's better not to say so directly. If you are a single woman traveling through Bali and somebody asks you, "Are you married?" the best possible answer is: "Not yet." This is a polite way of saying, "No," while indicating your optimistic intentions.

Even if you are eighty years old, or a lesbian, or a nun who has never been married and never intends to get married, the politest possible answer is still: "Not yet."

CHAPTER SEVENTY SEVEN

In the morning, Mario helped me buy a bicycle. I got a nice mountain bike, a helmet, a lock and a basket. Now I'm mobile though the roads are narrow and winding and badly maintained and crowded with motorcycles, trucks and tourist buses.

In the afternoon, I ride my bike down into Ketut's village. He's got guests when I arrive. It's a small family of rural Balinese who have brought their one-year-old daughter to Ketut for help. The poor little baby is teething and has been crying for several nights. Dad is a handsome young man in a sarong. Mom is pretty and shy. They have brought a tiny offering to Ketut for his services - 2,000 rupiah, which is about 25 cents, placed in a small handmade basket. There is one flower blossom in the basket, along with the money and a few grains of rice.

Ketut is relaxed and kind with his company. He listens to the parents explain their baby's troubles. Then he takes an ancient book filled with tiny writing in Balinese Sanskrit. He consults this book, then he takes a blank

page from a notebook and writes what he tells me is "a prescription" for the little girl.

After writing the prescription, Ketut turns his back to us, fills a bowl with water, and says a mantra above it. Then Ketut blesses the baby with the water he has just infused with sacred power. After that Ketut takes the rest of the holy water and pours it into a small plastic sandwich bag, ties the bag at the top and gives it to the family to use later. The mother carries this plastic bag of water away with her as she leaves; it looks like she has just won a goldfish, only she forgot to take the goldfish with her.

Ketut Liyer has given this family about forty minutes of his undivided attention, for the fee of about twenty-five cents. He sometimes works for free, too; this is his duty as a healer. He may turn nobody away, or the gods will remove his talent for healing. Ketut gets about ten visitors a day like this, Balinese who need his help or advice on some holy or medical matter. On some days, when everyone wants a special blessing, he might have over one hundred visitors.

"Don't you get tired?"

"But this is my profession," he tells me. "This is my hobby - medicine man."

Later he gives me my first lesson in Balinese meditation. He tells me that there are many ways to find God but most are too complicated for Westerners, so he will teach me an easy meditation. Which goes, essentially, like this: sit in silence and smile. I love it. He's laughing even as he's teaching it to me. Sit and smile. Perfect.

"You study Yoga in India, Liss?" he asks.

"Yes, Ketut."

"You can do Yoga," he says, "but Yoga too hard." Here, he twists his body in a lotus position and makes a grave face. Then he breaks free and laughs, asking, "Why they always look so serious in Yoga? When you make serious face like this, you scare away good energy. To meditate, only you

must smile. Smile with face, smile with mind, and good energy will come to you and clean away dirty energy. Even smile in your liver. Practice tonight at hotel. Not to hurry, not to try too hard. Too serious, you make you sick. You can call the good energy with a smile. All finish for today. See you later, alligator. Come back tomorrow. I am very happy to see you, Liss."

CHAPTER SEVENTY EIGHT

Here is Ketut Liyer's life story as he tells it:

"It is nine generations that my family is a medicine man. My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, all of them is a medicine man. They all wanted me to be medicine man because they saw I have light. But I did not want to be medicine man. Too much study! Too much information! And I didn't believe in medicine man! I wanted to be painter!

"When I was still young man, I met American man, very rich. He liked my painting. He wanted to buy big painting from me for lot of money. So I started to paint this picture for him. Every day I painting, painting, painting. Even in night I painting. Then, long time ago, no electric lightbulb, so I had lamp. Oil lamp, you understand? Pump lamp, have to pump it to make oil come. And I always make painting every night with oil lamp.

"One night, oil lamp is dark, so I pumping, pumping, pumping and it exploded! My arm was on fire! I went to hospital for one month with burned arm, it made infection. Infection went all the way to my heart. The doctor said I must to go to Singapore for cut off my arm, for amputation. I told doctor - first I must go home to my village.

"That night in village, I got dream. Father, grandfather, great-grandfather - all they came in my dream to my house together and told me how to heal my burned arm. They told me to make juice from saffron and sandalwood. Put this juice on burn. Then make powder from saffron and sandalwood. Rub this powder on burn. They told me I must do this, then I not lose my arm.

"I wake up. I don't know what to do, because sometimes dreams are just joking, you understand? But I put this saffron and sandalwood juice on my arm. And then I put this saffron and sandalwood powder on my arm. My arm very infected, very ache. But after juice and powder, became very cold. Start to feel better. In ten days, my arm is good. All heal.

"Because of that, I started to believe. Then I had dream again, with father, grandfather, great-grandfather. They told me now I must be medicine man. I must give my soul to God. To do this, I must make fast for six days, understand? No food, no water. No drink. Not easy. Only dew I had for six days. On number five day, I get unconscious. I see all gold color everywhere, even inside me. Very happy. I understand now. This gold color is God, also inside me. Same thing that is God is same thing inside me. Same-same.

"So then I must be medicine man. Then I learnt medical books from great-grandfather. These books not made on paper, made on palm leaves. Called lontars. This is Balinese medical encyclopedia. I learnt all different plants on Bali. Not easy. I learnt to take care of people with many problem.

"I still like to be artist, I like make painting when I have time, sell to gallery. Difficult for me to find time to make painting because of medicine man, but I must be medicine man. It is my profession. It is my hobby. Must help people or God is angry with me.

"I am in fourth caste in Bali, in very low caste like farmer. But I see many people in first caste not so intelligent as me. My name is Ketut Liyer. Liyer is name my grandfather gave me when I was little boy. It means 'bright light.' This is me."

CHAPTER SEVENTY NINE

I am so free here in Bali, it's almost ridiculous. The only thing I have to do every day is visit Ketut Liyer for a few hours in the afternoon. I meditate for an hour every morning using the Yogic techniques my Guru taught me, and then I meditate for an hour every evening with the practices

Ketut has taught me ("sit still and smile"). In between, I walk around and ride my bike and sometimes talk to people and eat lunch. I found a quiet little library in this town, got myself a library card, and now great, delicious portions of my life are spent reading in the garden.

A few days ago, on the top of one lovely rise of forest I saw a sign: "Artist's House for Rent, with Kitchen." Because the universe is generous, three days later I am living there. Mario helped me move in, and all his friends at the hotel gave me a tearful farewell.

My new house is on a quiet road, surrounded in all directions by rice fields. It's a little cottage-like place inside ivy-covered walls. It's owned by an Englishwoman, but she is in London for the summer, so I replace her in this miraculous space. There is a bright red kitchen here, a pond full of goldfish, a marble terrace, an outdoor shower tiled in shiny mosaics. Little secret paths lead through a truly enchanting garden. The place comes with a gardener, so all I have to do is look at the flowers. The whole house is covered with vines; I feel like any day I will disappear with it and become a jungle flower myself. The rent is less than what I used to pay in New York City for taxi fare every month.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

I'd been telling people since I first visited Bali two years ago that this small island was the world's only true utopia, a place that has known only peace and harmony and balance for all time. A perfect Eden with no history of violence or bloodshed ever. I'm not sure where I got this grand idea, but I spread it with full confidence.

"Even the policemen wear flowers in their hair," I said, as if that proved it.

In reality, though, it turns out Bali has had a history as bloody and violent as anywhere else on earth where people have ever lived.

Reading about this during my afternoons in the local library leaves me a bit confused. Wait - why did I come to Bali again? To search for the balance between worldly pleasure and spiritual devotion, right? Is this, indeed, the right location for such a search? Do the Balinese truly inhabit that peaceful balance, more than anyone else in the world? I mean, they look balanced, because of all the dancing and praying and feasting and beauty and smiling, but I don't know what's actually going on under there. The policemen really wear flowers tucked behind their ears, but there's corruption all over the place in Bali, just like in the rest of Indonesia (as I found out a few days ago when I passed a uniformed man a few hundred dollars to illegally extend my visa so I could stay in Bali for four months, after all). The Balinese quite literally depend on their peaceful image as a source of income, but how much of that is natural and how much of that is economically calculated?

So far, all I can say for certain is that I love the house I have rented and that the people in Bali have been gracious to me without exception. I find their art and ceremonies beautiful. That's my empirical experience of a place that is probably more complex than I will ever understand. But I'm here to work on my own equilibrium, and this still feels like a good climate in which to do that.

CHAPTER EIGHTY ONE

"Liss, will you practice Balinese meditation every night? Keep mind and heart clean?" asked Ketut one day.

"Every night," I promised.

"Will you learn to smile even in your liver?"

"Even in my liver, Ketut. Big smile in my liver."

"Good. This smile will make you beautiful woman. This will give you power to be very pretty. You can use this power to get what you want in life. Do you still practice Indian meditation, too?"

"Every morning."

"Good. Don't forget your Yoga. Good for you to keep practice both ways of meditation - Indian and Balinese. Both different, but good in equal way. Same-same. I think about religion, most of it is same-same."

"Not everybody thinks so, Ketut. Some people like to argue about God."

"Not necessary," he said. "I have good idea. If you meet some person from different religion and he want to make argument about God, you listen to everything this man say about God. Never argue about God with him. Best thing to say is, 'I agree with you.' Then you go home, pray what you want. This is my idea for people to have peace about religion."

Ketut eats only one meal a day - a typically simple Balinese dish of rice mixed with either duck or fish. He likes to drink one cup of coffee with sugar every day, mostly just to celebrate the fact that he can afford coffee and sugar. He keeps his body strong, he says, by meditating every night before sleep and by pulling the healthy energy of the universe into his core.

Ketut says that the human body is made of the five elements of all creation - water, fire, wind, sky and earth - and all you have to do is concentrate on this reality during meditation and you will receive energy from all of these sources and you will stay strong.

Until this evening, I still wasn't sure what my role was in Ketut Liyer's life. Every day I've been asking him if he's really sure he wants me around, and he keeps insisting that I must come and spend time with him. I feel guilty taking up so much of his day, but he always seems disappointed when I leave at the end of the afternoon. I'm not teaching him any English, not really. All I can do is to teach him to say, "Nice to see you," when I arrive, instead of "Nice to meet you."

Tonight, when his last patient had left and Ketut was exhausted, I asked him whether I should go now and let him have some privacy. But he replied, "I always have time for you." Then he asked me to tell him some stories about India, about America, about Italy, about my family. That's

when I realized that I am not Ketut Liyer's English teacher, but I am the merest and simplest of pleasures for this old medicine man - I am his company. I'm somebody he can talk to because he enjoys hearing about the world and he hasn't had a chance to see it.

Ketut has never been off the island of Bali in his life. He has spent very little time, actually, off this porch. He goes to the temples for the big important ceremonies and he is invited to his neighbors' homes to perform some rituals, but most of the time he can be found right here, cross-legged upon this bamboo mat, surrounded by his great-grandfather's palm-leaf medical encyclopedias, taking care of people and occasionally treating himself to a cup of coffee with sugar.

CHAPTER EIGHTY TWO

As for Ketut's wife, it takes me a while to get along with her. Nyomo, as he calls her, is big and plump with a limp. Her toes are painfully crooked from arthritis. She was obviously suspicious of me at first - Who is this flamingo walking through my house every day?

But then something changed. It was after the photocopy incident.

Ketut Liyer has piles of old, lined notebooks, filled with tiny little handwriting, of ancient Balinese-Sanskrit mysteries about healing. He copied these notes into these notebooks in the 1940s or 1950s, sometime after his grandfather died. This stuff is invaluable. There are volumes of data about rare trees and leaves and plants and all their medicinal properties. He's got about sixty pages of diagrams about palm-reading, and more notebooks full of astrological data, mantras, spells and cures. The only problem is, these notebooks are in bad condition. They look like piles of autumn leaves. Every time he turns a page, he rips it.

So I asked if I could take a notebook into town with me and photocopy it. I had to explain what photocopying was, and promise that I would only keep the notebook for twenty- four hours and that I would do it no harm. Finally, he agreed to let me take it off the porch property. I rode

into town to the shop with the Internet computers and photocopiers and I delicately duplicated every page, then had the new, clean photocopies bound in a nice plastic folder. I brought the old and the new versions of the book back the next day before noon. Ketut was astonished and delighted, so happy because he's had that notebook, he said, for fifty years.

I asked if I could copy the rest of his notebooks, to keep that information safe, too. And by the end of the week, I'd photocopied several of the old manuscripts. Every day, Ketut called his wife over and showed her the new copies and he was overjoyed. Her facial expression didn't change at all, but she studied the evidence thoroughly.

And the next Monday when I came to visit, Nyomo brought me hot coffee, served in a jelly jar. The next day she brought me a glass of coffee and a bowl of sugar on the side. And the next day it was a glass of coffee, a bowl of sugar and a cold boiled potato. Every day that week, she added a new treat.

Then, yesterday, I was standing in the courtyard, saying my good-byes to Ketut, and Nyomo came shuffling past with her broom, sweeping and pretending not to be paying attention to everything that happens in her empire. I had my hands clasped behind my back as I was standing there, and she came up behind me and took one of my hands in hers. Then she gave me this deep, long squeeze. I could feel her love pulsing through her power grip, right up into my heart. Then she dropped my hand and limped away, saying not a single word, continuing her sweeping as though nothing had happened. While I stood there quietly drowning in happiness.

CHAPTER EIGHTY THREE

I have a new friend. His name is Yudhi, which is pronounced "You-Day." He's Indonesian, originally from Java. I got to know him because he rented my house to me; he's working for the Englishwoman who owns the place, looking after her property while she's away in London for the summer. Yudhi is twenty-seven years old and stocky in build. He's got a

smile that could stop crime, and he's got a long, complicated life story for somebody so young.

He was born in Jakarta; his mother was a housewife, his father an Indonesian fan of Elvis who owned a small air-conditioning and refrigeration business. The family was Christian - a strange thing in this part of the world, and Yudhi says that he was mocked by the neighborhood Muslim kids as "You eat pork!" and "You love Jesus!" Yudhi wasn't bothered by the teasing; Yudhi, by nature, isn't bothered by much.

The guy has a musical ear like maybe nobody I've ever met. He's beautiful with the guitar, never had lessons but understands melody and harmony really well. He makes these East-West blends of music that combine classical Indonesian lullabies with reggae and early-days Stevie Wonder funk - it's hard to explain, but he should be famous. I never knew anybody who heard Yudhi's music who didn't think he should be famous.

Here's what he always wanted to do most of all - live in America and work in show business. So when Yudhi was still a Javanese teenager, he somehow talked himself into a job (speaking hardly any English yet) on a Carnival Cruise Lines ship.

The first time the cruise ship sailed into New York Harbor, Yudhi stayed up all night, watching the city skyline appear over the horizon, and his heart was hammering with excitement. Hours later, he got off the ship in New York and hailed a yellow cab. When the recent African immigrant driving the taxi asked where he'd like to go, Yudhi said, "Anywhere, man - just drive me around. I want to see everything." A few months later the ship came to New York City again, and this time Yudhi disembarked for good. His contract was up with the cruise line and he wanted to live in America now.

He ended up in suburban New Jersey, living for a while with an Indonesian man he'd met on the ship. He got a job in a sandwich shop. Somehow (again - that smile) he met up in New York City with a crowd of young musicians from all over the world and he started playing guitar with them. And at one of the jam sessions, he met Ann - a pretty blonde from Connecticut who played bass. They fell in love. They got married. They

found an apartment in Brooklyn and they were surrounded by wonderful friends. Life was just unbelievably happy. His English was quickly perfect. He was thinking about going to college.

On September 11, Yudhi watched the towers fall from his rooftop in Brooklyn. Like everyone else he was paralyzed with grief. I don't know how much attention Yudhi was paying when the U.S. Congress passed the Patriot Act in response to the terrorist threat, which included new immigration laws, directed against Islamic nations such as Indonesia. It was demanded that all Indonesian citizens living in America register with the Department of Homeland Security. Yudhi decided that he wanted to register. He was married to an American and he wanted to update his immigration status and become a legal citizen. He didn't want to live in hiding.

He and Ann consulted all kinds of lawyers, but nobody knew how to advise them. "The laws haven't been tested yet," said the immigration lawyers. "The laws will be tested on you." So Yudhi and his wife had a meeting with a nice immigration official and shared their story. The couple were told that Yudhi was to come back later that same afternoon, for "a second interview." Yudhi was strictly instructed to return without his wife, without a lawyer, and carrying nothing in his pockets. Hoping for the best, he returned alone and empty-handed to the second interview - and that's when they arrested him.

They took him to a detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where he stayed for weeks amongst a vast crowd of immigrants, many of whom had been living and working in America for years. After a period of detention, the U.S. government sent my Christian friend Yudhi - now an Islamic terrorist suspect, apparently - back to Indonesia. I don't know if he's ever going to be allowed anywhere near America again. He and his wife are still trying to figure out what to do with their lives now; they didn't want to live the rest of their lives in Indonesia.

Yudhi came to Bali to see if he could make a living here, though it's difficult for him to be accepted into this society because he isn't Balinese - he's from Java. And the Balinese don't like the Javanese, thinking of them all as thieves and beggars. So Yudhi doesn't know what to do next. Maybe

his wife, Ann, will come and join him here. But maybe not. What's here for her? Their young marriage, conducted now entirely by e-mail, is on the rocks. He's so disoriented here. He's more of an American than he is anything else; Yudhi and I use the same slang, we talk about our favorite restaurants in New York and we like all the same movies. He comes over to my house in the evenings and I get him beers and he plays me the most amazing songs on his guitar. I wish he were famous. If there was any fairness, he would be so famous by now.

He says, "Why is life all crazy like this?"

CHAPTER EIGHTY FOUR

"Ketut, why is life all crazy like this?" I asked my medicine man the next day.

He replied, "Bhuta ia, dewa ia. "

"What does that mean?"

"Man is a demon, man is a god. Both true."

This was a familiar idea to me. It's very Indian, very Yogic. The notion is that human beings are born, as my Guru has explained many times, with the equivalent potential for both contraction and expansion. The ingredients of both darkness and light are equally present in all of us, and then it's up to the individual (or the family, or the society) to decide what will be brought forth - the good or the evil. The madness of this planet is a result of the human being's difficulty in coming into virtuous balance with himself.

"So what can we do about the craziness of the world?"

"Nothing." Ketut laughed, but with a dose of kindness. "This is nature of world. This is destiny. Worry about your craziness only - make you in peace."

"But how should we find peace within ourselves?" I asked Ketut.

"Meditation," he said. "Purpose of meditation is only happiness and peace - very easy. Today I will teach a new meditation, make you even better person. It is called Four Brothers Meditation."

Ketut went on to explain that the Balinese believe we are each accompanied at birth by four invisible brothers, who come into the world with us and protect us throughout our lives. The brothers inhabit the four virtues a person needs in order to be safe and happy in life: intelligence, friendship, strength and (I love this one) poetry. The brothers can be called upon in any critical situation for rescue and assistance. When you die, your four spirit brothers collect your soul and bring you to heaven.

Today Ketut told me that he's never taught any Westerner the Four Brothers Meditation yet, but he thinks I am ready for it. First, he taught me the names of my invisible siblings - Ango Patih, Maragio Patih, Banus Patih and Banus Patih Ragio. He instructed me to memorize these names and to ask for the help of my brothers throughout my life, whenever I need them. He tells me to say their names as I'm washing myself in the morning, and they will join me. Say their names again every time before I eat, and I will include my brothers in the enjoyment of the meal. Call on them before I go to sleep, saying, "I am sleeping now, so you must stay awake and protect me," and my brothers will shield me through the night, stop demons and nightmares.

Ketut then instructed me that whenever I speak to my four spirit brothers, I must tell them who I am, so they can recognize me. I must use the secret nickname they have for me. I must say, "I am Lagoh Prano."

Lagoh Prano means "Happy Body."

I rode my bicycle back home, pushing my happy body up the hills toward my house in the late afternoon sun. On my way through the forest, a big male monkey dropped out of a tree right in front of me. I was not frightened. I said, "Back off, Jack - I got four brothers protecting my ass," and rode on by him.

CHAPTER EIGHTY FIVE

Although the next day (in spite of my protective brothers) I got hit by a bus. It knocked me off my bicycle and I got tossed into a cement irrigation ditch. The worst of the damage was a deep cut on my knee, full of bits of pebbles and dirt, that proceeded - over the next few days in the moist tropical air - to become infected.

I didn't want to worry Ketut, but a few days later I finally showed my wound to the old medicine man. He looked at it, concerned.

"Infect," he diagnosed. "Painful."

"Yes," I said.

"You should go see doctor."

This was a little surprising. Wasn't he the doctor? But for some reason he didn't offer to help. Maybe Ketut just had a secret hidden plan, because it was my banged-up knee that allowed me, in the end, to meet Wayan. And from that meeting, everything that was meant to happen... happened

Wayan Nuriyasih is, like Ketut Liyer, a Balinese healer. There are some differences between them, though. He's elderly and male; she's a woman in her late thirties. He's more of a priestly figure, somewhat more mystical, while Wayan is a hands-on doctor, mixing herbs and medications in her own shop and taking care of patients right there on the premises.

Wayan has a little storefront shop in the center of Ubud called 'Traditional Balinese Healing Center.' I'd ridden my bike past it many times on my way down to Ketut's, noticing it because of all the potted plants outside the place, and because of the blackboard with the curious handwritten advertisement for the 'Multivitamin Lunch Special.' But I'd never gone into the place before my knee got messed up. After Ketut sent me to find a doctor, though, I remembered the shop and came by on my

bicycle, hoping somebody there might be able to help me deal with the infection.

Wayan's place is a very small medical clinic and home and restaurant all at the same time. Downstairs there's a tiny kitchen and a modest public eating area with three tables and few chairs. Upstairs there's a private area where Wayan gives massages and treatments. There's one dark bedroom in the back.

I limped into the shop with my sore knee and introduced myself to Wayan the healer - a strikingly attractive Balinese woman with a wide smile and shiny black hair down to her waist. There were two shy young girls hiding behind her in the kitchen who smiled when I waved to them. I showed Wayan my infected wound and asked if she could help. Soon Wayan had water and herbs boiling up on the stove. She placed hot green leaves on my knee and it started to feel better immediately.

We started talking. Her English was excellent. Because she is Balinese, she immediately asked me the three standard introductory questions - Where are you going today? Where are you coming from? Are you married?

When I told her I wasn't married ("Not yet!") she looked surprised.

"Never been married?" she asked.

"No," I lied. I don't like lying, but I generally have found it's easier not to mention divorce to the Balinese because they get so upset about it.

"Really never been married?" she asked again, and she was looking at me with great curiosity now. "Not even once?" she asked.

OK, so she can see through me.

"Well," I confessed, "there was that one time..."

And her face cleared like: Yes, I thought as much. She asked, "Divorced?"

"Yes," I said, ashamed now. "Divorced."

"I could tell you are divorced."

"It's not very common here, is it?"

"But me, too," said Wayan, entirely to my surprise. "Me too, divorced."

"You?"

"I did everything I could," she said. "I try everything before I got a divorce, praying every day. But I had to go away from him."

I stayed there in Wayan's shop for the next five hours, talking with my new best friend about her troubles. She cleaned up the infection in my knee as I listened to her story. Wayan's Balinese husband, she told me, was a man who "drink all the time, always gamble, lose all our money, then beat me when I don't give him more money to gamble and to drink." She said, "He beat me into the hospital many times. I think if I was not healer, I would lose my ears, you know, not be able to hear things anymore. Or maybe lose my eye, not be able to see." She left him, she told me, after he beat her so severely "that I lose my baby, my second child, the one in my belly." After which incident their firstborn child, a bright little girl with the nickname of Tutti, said, "I think you should get a divorce, Mommy. Every time you go to the hospital you leave too much work around the house for Tutti."

Tutti was four years old when she said this.

To exit a marriage in Bali leaves a person alone and unprotected in ways that are almost impossible for a Westerner to imagine. The Balinese family unit, enclosed within the walls of a family compound, is merely everything - four generations of siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents and children all living together in small bungalows surrounding the family temple, taking care of each other from birth to death. The family compound is the source of strength, financial security, health care, education and - most important to the Balinese - spiritual connection.

Wayan's choice was either to stay in the family compound safety net with a husband who kept putting her in the hospital, or to save her own life and leave, which left her with nothing.

Bali is a patriarchy to the end. In the rare case of a divorce, the children automatically belong to the father. To get Tutti back, Wayan had to hire a lawyer, whom she paid with every single thing she had. But she got her daughter back, in the end, after a two-year battle.

For the last few years now, Wayan and Tutti have been living on their own, moving from place to place every few months as money comes and goes, always sleepless with worry about where to go next. Which has been difficult because every time she moves, her patients have trouble finding her again. Also, with every move, little Tutti has to be pulled out of school.

In the middle of Wayan's telling me this story, Tutti herself came into the shop. She had just arrived home from school. She's eight years old now. The girl is very energetic and charming. She asked me in lively English if I'd like to eat lunch, and Wayan said, "I forgot! You should have lunch!" and the mother and daughter rushed into their kitchen and - with the help of the two shy young girls - produced sometime later the best food I'd tasted yet in Bali.

Little Tutti brought out each course of the meal with a bright-voiced explanation of what was on the plate.

"Seaweed, for calcium!" she announced.

"Tomato salad, for vitamin D!"

"Mixed herbs, for not get malaria!"

I finally said, "Tutti, where did you learn to speak such good English?"

"From a book!" she proclaimed.

Balinese kids are usually all quiet and polite, hiding behind their mother's skirts. Not Tutti.

"She wants to be an animal doctor," Wayan told me. "What is the word in English?"

"Veterinarian?"

"Yes. Veterinarian. But she has many questions about animals, I don't know how to answer. I hope she can go to university."

I'd been in their shop now for hours and felt I should leave. "I will come back tomorrow," I promised Wayan, "and I'll order the multivitamin lunch special again."

"Your knee is better now," Wayan said. "Quickly better. No infection anymore."

She wiped the last of the green herbal goo off my leg, then moved my kneecap around a bit, feeling for something. Then she felt the other knee, closing her eyes. She opened her eyes, grinned and said, "I can tell by your knees that you don't have much sex lately."

I said, "Why?"

"It's the cartilage. Very dry. Hormones from sex lubricate the joints. You need a good man. I will find one for you. I will pray at the temple for a good man for you, because now you are my sister. Also, if you come back tomorrow, I will clean your kidneys for you."

"A good man and clean kidneys, too? That sounds like a great deal."

"I never tell anybody these things before about my divorce," she told me. "But my life is heavy, too much sad, too much hard. I don't understand why life is so hard."

Then I did a strange thing. I took both the healer's hands in mine and I said with the most powerful conviction, "The hardest part of your life is behind you now, Wayan."

I left the shop, then, trembling with some potent intuition or impulse that I could not yet identify or release.

CHAPTER EIGHTY SEVEN

Now my days are divided into natural thirds. I spend my mornings with Wayan at her shop, laughing and eating. I spend my afternoons with Ketut the medicine man, talking and drinking coffee. I spend my evenings in my lovely garden, either reading a book, or sometimes talking with Yudhi, who comes over to play his guitar. Every morning, I meditate while the sun comes up over the rice fields, and before bedtime I speak to my four spirit brothers and ask them to watch over me while I sleep.

I've been here only a few weeks and I feel satisfaction already. The task in Indonesia was to search for balance, but I'm not searching for anything anymore because the balance has naturally come into place. I can feel my own peace, and I love the swing of my days between easeful devotional practices and the pleasures of beautiful landscape, dear friends and good food. I have never felt less burdened by myself or by the world.

I remember one of my Guru's teachings about happiness. She says that people think that happiness is a stroke of luck. But that's not how happiness works. Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must make a mighty effort to stay afloat on top of it.

Recalling these teachings as I ride my bike so freely in the sunset through Bali, I keep making prayers, saying, "This is what I would like to hold on to. Please help me memorize this feeling of contentment and help me always support it."

Ketut - one of the happiest humans I've ever encountered - is giving me the freedom to ask any questions about divinity, about human nature. A few days ago the medicine man told me that he knows sixteen different

meditation techniques. For instance, he said, he knows one meditation that takes him "to up."

"To up?" I asked. "What is to up?"

"To seven levels up," he said. "To heaven."

Hearing the familiar idea of "seven levels," I asked him if he meant that his meditation took him up through the seven sacred chakras of the body, which are discussed in Yoga.

"Not chakras," he said. "Places. This meditation takes me seven places in universe. Up and up. Last place I go is heaven."

I asked, "Have you been to heaven, Ketut?"

He smiled. Of course he had been there, he said. Easy to go to heaven.

"What is it like?"

"Beautiful. Everything beautiful is there. Every person beautiful is there. Everything beautiful to eat is there. Everything is love there. Heaven is love."

Then Ketut said he knows another meditation. "To down." This down meditation takes him seven levels below the world. This is a more dangerous meditation. Not for beginning people, only for a master.

I asked, "So if you go up to heaven in the first meditation, then, in the second meditation you must go down to...?"

"Hell," he finished the statement.

This was interesting. Heaven and hell aren't ideas I've heard discussed very much in Hinduism.

But Ketut was talking about heaven and hell in a different way, as if they are real places in the universe which he has actually visited. At least I think that's what he meant.

Trying to get clear on this, I asked, "You have been to hell, Ketut?"

He smiled. Of course he's been there.

"What's it like in hell?"

"Same like heaven," he said.

He saw my confusion and tried to explain. "Universe is a circle, Liss."

I still wasn't sure I understood.

He said, "To up, to down - all same, at end."

I asked, "Then how can you tell the difference between heaven and hell?"

"Because of how you go. Heaven, you go up, through seven happy places. Hell, you go down, through seven sad places. This is why it better for you to go up, Liss." He laughed.

I asked, "You mean, you might spend your life going upward, through the happy places, since heaven and hell - the destinations - are the same thing anyway?"

"Same-same," he said. "Same in end, so better to be happy on journey."

I said, "So, if heaven is love, then hell is..."

"Love, too," he said.

I sat with that one for a while, trying to make the math work.

Ketut laughed again, slapped my knee affectionately with his hand.

"Always so difficult for young person to understand this!"

CHAPTER EIGHTY EIGHT

So I was in Wayan's shop again this morning.

As we're talking, little Tutti is sitting on the floor, drawing a picture of a house. Mostly, houses are what Tutti draws these days. She's dying to have a house of her own. There's always a rainbow in the background of her pictures, and a smiling family - father and all.

Wayan keeps telling me she's been going to the temple every evening and praying for a good man to show up in my life, to be my lover.

"Everybody need sex, Liz," she says.

At this moment, a great-looking woman came into the shop, smiling. Tutti ran into her arms, shouting, "Armenia! Armenia! Armenia!" Which, as it turned out, was the woman's name. I introduced myself to Armenia, and she told me she was from Brazil. She was so dynamic, this woman - so Brazilian. She was gorgeous, elegantly dressed, charismatic and just insistently sexy.

Armenia, too, is a friend of Wayan's, who comes to the shop frequently for lunch and for various traditional medical and beauty treatments. She sat down and talked with us for about an hour. She's in Bali for only a week before she has to fly off to Africa, or maybe it's back to Thailand, to take care of her business. Armenia used to work for the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees. Now she runs a multinational marketing business called Novica, which supports artists all over the world by selling their products on the Internet. She speaks about seven or eight languages. She's got the most fabulous pair of shoes I've seen since Rome.

Looking at us both, Wayan said, "Liz - why do you never try to look sexy, like Armenia? You such a pretty girl, you have nice face, nice body, nice smile. But always you wear this same T-shirt, same jeans. Don't you want to be sexy, like her?"

"Wayan," I said, "Armenia is Brazilian. It's a completely different situation."

"How is it different?"

"Armenia," I said, turning to my new friend. "Can you please try to explain to Wayan what it means to be a Brazilian woman?"

Armenia laughed, but then considered the question seriously and answered, "Well, I always tried to look nice and be feminine even in the war zones and refugee camps of Central America. Even in the worst tragedies and crisis, there's no reason to add to everyone's misery by looking miserable yourself. That's my philosophy. This is why I always wore makeup and jewelry into the jungle - nothing too extravagant, but maybe just a nice gold bracelet and some earrings, a little lipstick, good perfume. Just enough to show that I still had my self-respect."

Armenia couldn't stay for too long at Wayan's shop because she had work to do, but that didn't stop her from inviting me to a party tonight. She knows another Brazilian guy in Ubud, she told me, and he's hosting a special event at a nice restaurant this evening. He'll be cooking a feijoada - a traditional Brazilian feast consisting of massive piles of pork and black beans. There will be Brazilian cocktails, as well. Lots of interesting expatriates from all over the world who live here in Bali. Would I like to come? They might all go out dancing later, too. She doesn't know if I like parties, but...

Cocktails? Dancing? Piles of pork?

Of course I'll come.

CHAPTER EIGHTY NINE

I can't remember the last time I got dressed up, but this evening I dug out my one fancy spaghetti-strap dress from the bottom of my backpack and put it on. I even wore lipstick. I can't remember the last time I wore lipstick, but I know it wasn't anywhere near India. I stopped at Armenia's house on the way over to the party, and she gave me some of her fancy jewelry, let

me borrow her fancy perfume, let me store my bicycle in her backyard so I could arrive at the party in her fancy car, like a proper adult woman.

The dinner with the expatriates was great fun. I even got a little bit drunk, which was notable after all the purity of my last few months of praying at the Ashram and sipping tea in my Balinese flower garden. And I was flirting! Though I couldn't really tell who I was flirting with. Was I attracted to the witty Australian former journalist sitting next to me? Or was it the quiet intellectual German down the table? Or was it the handsome older Brazilian man who had cooked this giant feast for all of us in the first place? (I liked his kind brown eyes and his accent. And his cooking, of course. I said something very provocative to him, out of nowhere. He was making a joke, saying, "I'm a full catastrophe of a Brazilian man - I can't dance, I can't play soccer and I can't play any musical instruments." For some reason I replied, "Maybe so. But I have a feeling you could play a very good Casanova." Time suddenly stopped for a long, long moment, then, as we looked at each other frankly, like, That was an interesting idea. He didn't deny it. I looked away first, feeling myself blush.)

Then we went out dancing at a local nightclub. There was a live band of Balinese kids playing good reggae music. Armenia hadn't come along, claiming she had to work the next day, but the handsome older Brazilian man was my host. He wasn't such a bad dancer as he claimed. Probably he can play soccer, too. I liked having him nearby, opening doors for me, complimenting me, calling me "darling."

It had been so long since I'd been in a bar. I think the last time I'd gone dancing was back when I was married... back when I was happily married. On the dance floor I ran into my friend Stefania, a lively young Italian girl I'd met recently in a meditation class in Ubud, and we danced together. Sometime after midnight, the band stopped playing.

That's when I met the guy named Ian. Oh, I really liked this guy. Right away I really liked him. He was very good-looking. He was smart, asked questions, spoke to my friend Stefania in the same primitive Italian that I speak. It turned out that he was the drummer in this reggae band. Somehow we started laughing and talking.

Felipe came over then - that was the Brazilian's name, Felipe. He invited us all to go out to a local restaurant owned by European expatriates, a place that never closes, he promised, where beer and other drinks are served at all hours. I found myself looking to Ian (did he want to go?) and when he said yes, I said yes, also. So we all went to the restaurant and I sat with Ian and we talked and joked all night, and, oh, I really liked this guy. He was the first man I'd met in a long while who I really liked in that way, as they say. He was a few years older than me, had led a most interesting life. He'd started his career in the British Army in Northern Ireland, then built refugee camps in Bosnia, was now taking a break in Bali to work on music...

I could not believe I was still up at 3:30 AM, and not to meditate, either! I was up in the middle of the night and wearing a dress and talking to an attractive man. How terribly radical. At the end of the evening, Ian and I admitted to each other how nice it had been to meet. He asked if I had a phone number and I told him I didn't, but that I did have e-mail, and he said, "Yeah, but e-mail just feels so... ech..." So at the end of the night we didn't exchange anything but a hug. He said, "We'll see each other again when they" - pointing to the gods up in the sky - "say so."

Just before dawn, Felipe offered me a ride home. As we rode up the twisting back roads he said, "Darling, you've been talking to the biggest liar in Ubud all night long."

My heart sank.

"Is Ian really a liar?" I asked. "Tell me the truth now and save me the trouble later."

"Ian?" said Felipe. He laughed. "No, darling! Ian is a serious guy. He's a good man. I meant myself. I'm the biggest liar in Ubud."

We rode along in silence for a while.

"You like Ian, don't you?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. My head wasn't clear. I'd been drinking too many Brazilian cocktails. "He's attractive, intelligent. It's been a long time since I thought about liking anybody."

"You're going to have a wonderful few months here in Bali. You wait and see."

"But I don't know how much more socializing I can do, Felipe. I only have the one dress. People will start to notice that I'm wearing the same thing all the time."

"You're young and beautiful, darling. You only need the one dress."

CHAPTER NINETY

Am I young and beautiful?

I thought I was old and divorced.

I can barely sleep at all this night, so unaccustomed to these odd hours, the dance music still thrumming in my head, my hair smelling of cigarettes, my stomach protesting the alcohol. I doze a bit, then wake as the sun comes up, just as I am accustomed to. Only this morning I am not rested and I am not at peace and I'm in no condition for meditation. Why am I so agitated? I had a nice night, didn't I? I met some interesting people, I dressed up and danced, flirted with some men...

MEN.

The agitation increases at the thought of that word, turning into panic. I don't know how to do this anymore. I am feeling only panic and uncertainty. I start imagining myself getting involved with Ian who hadn't even given me an e-mail address. I can see all the way into our future already, including the arguments over his smoking habit. Then I start to miss David more than I have in months, thinking, Maybe I should call him and see if he wants to try getting together again... It's never a far leap from

thinking about David to obsessing about the circumstances of my divorce, and so soon I start brooding (just like old times) about my ex-husband, my divorce...

And then I start thinking about Felipe, for some reason that handsome older Brazilian man. He's nice. Felipe.

He says I am young and beautiful and that I will have a wonderful time here in Bali. He's right, right? I should relax and have some fun, right? But this morning it doesn't feel fun.

I don't know how to do this anymore.

CHAPTER NINETY ONE

"What is this life? Do you understand? I don't."

This was Wayan talking.

She had just learned that the lease on her shop was going to come up at the end of August - only three months from now - and that her rent would be raised. She would probably have to move again because she couldn't afford to stay here. She only had about fifty dollars in the bank, and no idea where to go. Moving would take Tutti out of school again. They needed a home - a real home. This is no way for a Balinese person to live.

Here are the facts: Single mom, talented child, poor business, virtual homelessness. Where will she go? She can't live with the ex-husband's family, obviously. Wayan's own family are rice farmers in the countryside and poor. If she goes and lives with them, it's the end of her business as a healer in town because her patients won't be able to reach her and you can forget about Tutti getting enough education to go someday to Animal Doctor College.

I learnt something about those two shy girls I noticed on the first day. It turns out that these are a pair of orphans Wayan has adopted. They are

both named Ketut and we call them Big Ketut and Little Ketut. Wayan found the Ketuts starving and begging in the marketplace a few months ago. They were abandoned there by a woman who deposit parentless children in various marketplaces across Bali to beg for money, then pick the kids up every night in a van, collecting their money and giving them a place somewhere to sleep. When Wayan first found Big and Little Ketut, they hadn't eaten for days, had lice and parasites. She thinks the younger one is maybe ten and the older one might be thirteen, but they don't know their own ages or even their last names. Wayan has taken them in and cares for them as lovingly as she does her own Tutti. She and the three children all sleep on the same mattress in the one bedroom behind the shop.

I want to help them.

Today as Wayan and Armenia and I were eating our lunch, I looked over at little Tutti and noticed that she was doing something rather odd. She was walking around the shop with a single, small square of pretty cobalt blue ceramic tile resting on the palms of her upturned hands, singing in a chanting sort of way. I asked Wayan what this was all about. She said that Tutti had found the tile outside the construction site of a fancy hotel project down the road and had pocketed it. Ever since Tutti had found the tile, she kept saying to her mother, "Maybe if we have a house someday, it can have a pretty blue floor, like this." Now, according to Wayan, Tutti often likes to sit on that tiny blue square for hours, shutting her eyes and pretending she's inside her own house. What can I say? When I heard that story, and looked at that child deep in meditation upon her small blue tile, I thought, "That's enough."

And I excused myself from the shop to go take care of this intolerable state of affairs.

CHAPTER NINETY TWO

I came to Ubud's local Internet cafe, where I sat and wrote a fund-raising e-mail to all my friends and family across the world.

I told everyone that my birthday was coming up in July and that soon I would be thirty-five. I told them that there was nothing in this world that I needed or wanted, and that I had never been happier in my life. I told them that, if I were home in New York, I would be planning a big stupid birthday party and I would make them all come to this party, and they would have to buy me gifts and bottles of wine and the whole celebration would get ridiculously expensive. Therefore, I explained, a cheaper and more lovely way to help celebrate this birthday would be if my friends and family made a donation to help a woman named Wayan Nuriyasih buy a house in Indonesia for herself and her children.

Then I told the whole story of Wayan and Tutti and the orphans and their situation.

I won't go through the entire drama of the week, or try to explain what it feels like to open e-mails every day from all over the world that all say, "Count me in!" Everyone gave. Seven days later my friends and my family and a bunch of strangers all over the world helped me get almost \$ 18,000 to buy Wayan Nuriyasih a home of her own.

I knew that it was Tutti who had manifested this miracle, thanks to her prayers.

One last thing. I'm embarrassed to admit that it was my friend Bob, not me, who noticed that the word "Tutti" in Italian means "Everybody." Bob wrote an e-mail last week, saying, "So that's the final lesson, isn't it? When you set out in the world to help yourself, you inevitably help... Tutti."

CHAPTER NINETY THREE

I don't want to tell Wayan about it, not until all the money has been raised. So for the whole week, I keep my mouth shut about my plans, and I keep myself occupied having dinner almost every night with Felipe the Brazilian.

I guess I have a crush on him.

He's fifty-two years old. He's got silver hair. His eyes are warm and brown. He has a gentle face and he smells wonderful. And he is an actual grown man.

He's been living in Bali for about five years now, working with Balinese silversmiths to make jewelry for export to America. I like the fact that he was faithfully married for almost twenty years before his marriage broke down for its own reasons. I like the fact that he has already raised children, and that he raised them well, and that they love him. I like that he was the parent who stayed home with his children when they were little, while his Australian wife made her career. I like the fact that Felipe speaks four, maybe more, languages fluently. I like that he's traveled through over fifty countries in his life, and that he sees the world as a small and easily managed place. I like the way he listens to me.

He said to me the other night, "Why don't you take a lover while you're in Bali, Liz?"

"I don't think I'm ready for it," I told him. "I don't want to go through all the effort of romance again, you know? I don't want to show my body to a new lover. And I don't want to tell my life story all over again, or worry about birth control. Anyway, I'm not even sure I know how to do it anymore. I think I was more confident about sex and romance when I was sixteen than I am now."

"Of course you were," Felipe said. "You were young and stupid then. Only the young and stupid are confident about sex and romance."

We talk about our marriages, our divorces. We compare notes about the bottomless depths of post-divorce depression. We drink wine and eat well together and we tell each other the nicest stories we can remember about former spouses, just to take the sting out of all that conversation about loss.

He says, "Do you want to do something with me this weekend?" and I find myself saying yes, that would be nice. Because it would be nice.

I let him hold me for a while. I can feel him press his face into my hair, as my face presses somewhere against his chest. I can smell his shirt. I really like the way he smells. When I let him hold me at the end of the evening, I let myself be held.

Which hasn't happened for a long time.

CHAPTER NINETY FOUR

I asked Ketut, my old medicine man, "What do you know about romance?"

He said, "What is this, romance?"

"Romance," I defined. "Women and men in love. Kissing and sex and marriage - all that stuff."

"I not make sex with too many people in my life, Liss. Only with my wife."

"You're right - that's not too many people. But do you mean your first wife or your second wife?"

"I only have one wife, Liss. She dead now."

"What about Nyomo?"

"Nyomo not really my wife, Liss. She the wife of my brother." Seeing my confused expression, he added, "This typical Bali," and explained. Ketut's older brother, who is a rice farmer, lives next door to Ketut and is married to Nyomo. They had three children together. Ketut and his wife, on the other hand, were unable to have any children at all, so they adopted one of Ketut's brother's sons in order to have an heir. When Ketut's wife died, Nyomo began living in both family compounds, splitting her time between the two households, taking care of both her husband and his brother, and tending to the two families of her children. She is in every way a wife to

Ketut in the Balinese manner (cooking, cleaning, taking care of household religious ceremonies and rituals) except that they don't have sex together.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Too OLD!" he said. Then he called Nyomo over, to let her know that the American lady wants to know why they don't have sex with each other. Nyomo was laughing at the very thought of it.

"I only had one wife," Ketut went on. "And now she dead."

"Do you miss her?"

"When she die, I very sad in my mind."

"Did you cry?"

"Only little bit, in my eyes. But I do meditation, to clean the body from pain. I visit her in meditation every day, even to kissing her. She the only woman I ever make sex with. So I do not know... what is new word, from today?"

"Romance?"

"Yes, romance. I do not know romance, Liss."

CHAPTER NINETY FIVE

I finally sat down with Wayan and told her about the money I'd raised for her house. I explained about my birthday wish, showed her the list of all my friends' names, and then told her the final amount which had been raised: eighteen thousand American dollars. At first she was shocked, so I sat there with her for a few hours, telling her the story repeatedly and showing her the numbers again and again, until the reality began to sink in.

Her first really articulate response was to say, "Please, Liz, you must explain to everyone who helped raise money that this is not Wayan's house.

This is the house of everyone who helped Wayan. If any of these people comes to Bali, they must never stay in a hotel, OK? You tell them they come and stay at my house, OK? Promise to tell them that? We call it Group House... the House for Everybody..."

Then she realized about the garden, and started to cry.

Slowly, though, happier realizations come to her. If she had a home, she could have a small library, for all her medical books! And a pharmacy for her traditional remedies! And a proper restaurant with real chairs and tables. If she had a home, she could finally be listed in Lonely Planet, who want to mention her services, but never can do so, because she never has a permanent address that they can print. If she had a home, Tutti could have a birthday party someday!

Then she got very sober and serious again.

"What would I do if you never came here?"

I thought about one of my favorite Sufi poems, which says that God long ago drew a circle in the sand exactly around the spot where you are standing right now. I was to come here.

"Where are you going to build your new house, Wayan?" I asked.

Wayan already knew exactly the piece of land she would like to buy. It was in the center of a nearby village, was connected to municipal water and electricity, had a good school nearby for Tutti, was nicely located in a central place where her patients and customers could find her on foot. Her brothers could help her build the home, she said.

So we went together to visit a nice French expatriate financial adviser and real estate guy, who was kind enough to suggest the best way to transfer the money. Then we went to Wayan's little bank, and talked to the manager about how to make a transfer. Finally, the bank manager said, "So, Wayan. When this transfer goes through, in just a few days, you should have about 180 million rupiah in your bank account."

Wayan and I looked at each other and started laughing. Such an enormous sum!

We returned to the shop, found Tutti just home from school. Wayan dropped to her knees, grabbed her girl, and said, "A house! A house! We have a house!" Tutti pretended to have a faint.

While we were all laughing, I noticed the two orphans watching this scene from the background of the kitchen, and I could see them looking at me with something in their faces that resembled... fear. I asked Wayan, just to be sure: "What about Big Ketut and Little Ketut? Is this good news for them, too?"

Wayan looked at the girls in the kitchen and saw the same uneasiness I had seen. She came to them and hugged them and whispered some reassuring words. They buried their heads in her belly and armpits, and even after a long time they refused to let her go.

CHAPTER NINETY SIX

I went out with Brazilian Felipe again, twice over the weekend. On Saturday I brought him to meet Wayan and the kids. I also brought Felipe to meet Ketut, my medicine man, and Ketut read his palm and said (while fixing me with a penetrating stare) that my friend is "a good man, a very good man, a very, very good man. Not a bad man, Liss - a good man."

Then on Sunday, Felipe asked me if I'd like to spend a day at the beach. It occurred to me that I'd been living here in Bali for two months already and had not yet seen the beach, so I said yes. He picked me up at my house in his jeep and we drove an hour to this hidden little beach in Pedangbai where hardly any tourists ever go. This place was a good imitation of paradise, with blue water and white sand and the shade of palm trees. We talked all day, interrupting our talking only to swim and nap and read, sometimes reading aloud to each other.

Then it was dark, so we packed up our things and went for a walk through the main street of this old Balinese fishing village under the stars. And then Felipe from Brazil asked me in the most natural way, "Should we have an affair together, Liz? What do you think?"

I liked everything about the way this was happening. Not with an action - not with an attempted kiss - but with a question. And the correct question, too.

I said, "I would probably say yes, Felipe, under normal circumstances. Whatever normal circumstances are..."

We both laughed. But then I showed him my hesitation. Which was this - that as much as I might enjoy to give my body and heart to the expert hands of an expat lover, something else inside me has requested that I donate this whole year of traveling all to myself. That some vital transformation is happening in my life, and this transformation needs time and room in order to finish its process undisturbed. I don't want to lose control of my life again.

Of course Felipe said that he understood, and that I should do whatever's best for me.

"Although," he went on, "you need to listen to me now."

"Fair enough," I said.

"For one thing, if I understand you correctly, this whole year is about your search for balance between devotion and pleasure. I can see where you've been doing a lot of devotional practices, but I'm not sure where the pleasure has come in so far."

"I ate a lot of pasta in Italy, Felipe."

"Pasta, Liz? Pasta?"

"Good point."

"For another thing, I think I know what you're worried about. Some man is going to come into your life and take everything from you again. I won't do that to you, darling. I've been alone for a long time, too, and I've lost a great deal in love, just like you have. I don't want us to take anything from each other. It's just that I've never enjoyed anyone's company as much as I enjoy yours, and I'd like to be with you. Don't worry - I'm not going to chase you back to New York when you leave here in September."

But still I said no.

He drove me home. Parked in front of my house, we shared a few sweet kisses. It was lovely. Of course it was lovely. But still, and again, I said no.

"That's fine, darling," he said. "But come over to my house tomorrow night for dinner, and I'll make you a steak."

Then he drove off and I went to bed alone.

I woke to a quiet blue sky and an even quieter bedroom. Still feeling unbalanced, I chanted the entire 182 Sanskrit verses of the Gurugita - the great, purifying fundamental hymn of my Ashram in India. Then I meditated for an hour until I finally felt it again - that specific, constant, clear-sky, never-shifting, nameless and changeless perfection of my own happiness. That happiness which is better, truly, than anything I have ever experienced anywhere else on this earth.

I was so glad I had made the decision to stay alone.

CHAPTER NINETY SEVEN

So I was surprised the next night when - after he'd made me dinner at his house and after we'd lain on his couch for several hours and discussed all kinds of subjects and after he'd unexpectedly leaned to me for a moment and sunk his face toward my armpit and pronounced how much he loved

the marvelous smell of me - Felipe finally put his palm against my cheek and said, "That's enough, darling. Come to my bed now," and I did.

Yes, I came to his bed with him, in that bedroom with its big open windows looking out over the nighttime and the quiet Balinese rice fields. He parted the sheer, white curtain of mosquito netting that surrounded his bed and guided me in there. Then he helped me out of my dress with the tender competence of a man who had obviously spent many comfortable years getting his children ready for bathtime, and he explained to me his terms - that he wanted absolutely nothing from me except permission to adore me for as long as I wanted him to. Were those terms acceptable to me?

Having lost my voice somewhere between the couch and the bed, I only nodded. There was nothing left to say. It had been a long, ascetic season of solitude. I had done well for myself. But Felipe was right - that was enough.

CHAPTER NINETY EIGHT

We didn't sleep at all, of course. And then, it was ridiculous - I had to go. I had to go back to my house stupidly early the next morning because I had a date to meet my friend Yudhi. He and I had long ago planned that this was the very week we were going to leave on a big cross-Balinese road trip together. This idea came to us one evening at my house when Yudhi said that, aside from his wife and Manhattan, what he most missed about America was driving - just taking off with a car and some friends and going on an adventure across those great distances. I told him, "OK, so we'll go on a road trip here in Bali together, American-style."

This had struck us both as irresistibly comic - there's no way you can do an American-style road trip in Bali. There are no great distances, first of all, on an island the size of Delaware. But Yudhi and I decided to do it anyway, to take off for a week, rent a car and drive all over this tiny island, pretending that we are in America and that both of us are free. The idea charmed me when we came up with it last month, but the time for it now -

as I am lying in bed with Felipe and he's kissing my fingertips and forearms and shoulders - seems unfortunate. But I have to go. And in a way, I want to go. Not only to spend a week with my friend Yudhi, but also as a rest after my big night with Felipe, to understand the new reality that, as they say in the novels: I have taken a lover.

So Felipe drops me off at my house with one last passionate embrace and I have just enough time to shower and pull myself together when Yudhi arrives with our rental car.

We set off for our fake American road trip across Bali, me and this cool young Indonesian musical genius. The back of our car is filled with guitars and beer and the Balinese equivalent of American road trip food - fried rice crackers and dreadfully flavored candies.

We drive along the coast, and it's beaches, beaches, beaches for a whole week. Sometimes we take a little fishing boat out to an island. We spend one day on the long southern California-style wonderful white sand surf of Kuta. Just as intended, we forget for long hours (purely for Yudhi's benefit) that we are in Indonesia at all as we tool around in this rented car, eating junk food and singing American songs, having pizza everywhere we can find it. Sometimes we discover calm stretches of blue ocean and we swim all day, permitting each other to start drinking beer at 10:00 AM. We make friends with everyone we encounter.

Every day I call Felipe, and he asks, "How many more sleeps until you come back to me?" He tells me, "I'm enjoying falling in love with you, darling. I haven't felt this way about anyone in nearly thirty years."

Not there yet, not yet to that place of a free fall into love, I make hesitant noises to remind him that I am leaving in a few months. Felipe is unconcerned. He says, "Maybe this is just some stupid romantic South American idea, but I need you to understand - darling, for you, I am even willing to suffer. Whatever pain happens to us in the future, I accept it already, just for the pleasure of being with you now. Let's enjoy this time. It's marvelous."

The last day of our road trip, Yudhi and I laze on a beach someplace for hours, and - as often happens with us - we start talking about New York City again, how great it is, how much we love it. Yudhi misses the city, he says, almost as much as he misses his wife - as if New York is a person, a relative, whom he has lost since he got deported.

I feel his longing for New York so deeply that for a moment I mistake it for my own. His homesickness infects me so completely that I forget for an instant that I am actually free to go back to Manhattan someday, though he is not. Yudhi looks out at the quiet, blue ocean and says, "I know it's beautiful here... but do you think I'll ever see America again?"

What can I tell him?

CHAPTER NINETY NINE

When we return to Ubud, I go straight back to Felipe's house and don't leave his bedroom for approximately another month. I have never been loved and adored like this before by anyone, never with such pleasure and single-minded concentration. Never have I been so unpeeled, revealed through the event of lovemaking.

One thing I do know about intimacy is that there are certain natural laws which govern the sexual experience of two people, and that these laws cannot be changed. To feel physically comfortable with someone else's body is not a decision you can make. It has very little to do with how two people think or act or talk or even look. The mysterious magnet is either there, or it is not. When it isn't there (as I have learned in the past, with heartbreaking clarity) you can no more force it to exist than a surgeon can force a patient's body to accept a kidney from the wrong donor.

Felipe and I, as we discover to our delight, are a perfectly matched success story. There are no parts of our bodies which are in any way allergic to any parts of the other's body. Nothing is dangerous, nothing is difficult, nothing is refused. Everything in our sensual universe is - simply and thoroughly - complemented.

I'm losing days here, disappearing under his sheets, under his hands. I like the feeling of not knowing what the date is. My nice organized schedule has been blown away by the breeze.

I still meditate every day of the week, slipping out of Felipe's bed and over to the couch, where I can sit in silence and offer up some gratitude for all of this. I am so relaxed now that I kind of slide into meditation like it's a bath prepared by my lover. Naked in the morning sun, with nothing but a light blanket wrapped over my shoulders, I disappear into grace.

Why did life ever seem difficult?

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED

But all the fun and games caught up with me after a few weeks. After all those nights of not sleeping and all those days of too much lovemaking, my body struck back and I got attacked by a nasty infection in my bladder. It is a typical problem of the overly sexed. It came up as fast as any tragedy can strike. I was walking through town one morning when suddenly I felt burning pain and fever. I'd had these infections before, in my youth, so I knew what it was. I panicked for a moment - these things can be awful - but then thought, "Thank God my best friend in Bali is a healer," and I ran into Wayan's shop.

"I'm sick!" I said.

She took one look at me and said, "You sick from making too much sex, Liz."

I groaned, buried my face in my hands, embarrassed.

She chuckled, said, "You can't keep secrets from Wayan..."

Wayan, like a veteran firefighter, never moves fast. She methodically started chopping some herbs, boiling some roots, wandering back and forth

between her kitchen and me, bringing me one warm, brown, toxic-tasting mixture after another, saying, "Drink, honey..."

Whenever the next batch boiled, she sat across from me, giving me sly, dirty looks and using the opportunity to get nosy.

"Are you careful not to get pregnant, Liz?"

"That's not possible, Wayan. Felipe has a vasectomy."

"Felipe has a vasectomy?" she asked, in awe. "Very difficult in Bali to get a man to do this. Always the woman problem, birth control."

"Sex is funny," she said. "Make people do funny things. Everyone gets like this, at the beginning of love. Wanting too much happiness, too much pleasure, until you make yourself sick. Even to Wayan this happens at beginning of love story. Lose balance."

"I'm embarrassed," I say.

"Don't," she said. Then she added in perfect English (and perfect Balinese logic), "To lose balance sometimes for love is part of living a balanced life."

I decided to call Felipe. I had some antibiotics at the house, an emergency pack I always travel with, just in case. As I have had these infections before, I know how bad they can get, even traveling up into your kidneys. I didn't want to go through that, not in Indonesia. So I called him and told him what had happened (he was horrified) and asked him to bring me over the pills. It wasn't that I didn't trust Wayan's healing competence, it's just that this was really serious pain...

She said, "You don't need Western pills."

"But maybe it's better, just to be safe..."

"Give two hours," she said. "If I don't make you better, you can take your pills."

Reluctantly, I agreed. My experience with these infections is that they can take days to clear, even with strong antibiotics. But I didn't want to make her feel bad.

Tutti was playing in the shop and she kept bringing little drawings of houses over to cheer me up, patting my hand with an eight-year-old's compassion.

"Did you buy your house yet, Wayan?" I asked.

"Not yet, honey. No hurry."

"What about that place you liked? I thought you were going to buy that?"

"Found out not for sale. Too expensive."

"Do you have any other places in mind?"

"Not worry about it now, Liz. For now, let me make you quickly feel better."

Felipe arrived with my medicine and a face full of guilt, apologizing to both me and Wayan.

"Not serious," said Wayan. "Not worry. I fix her soon. Quickly better."

Then she went into the kitchen and produced a giant glass mixing bowl full of leaves, roots, berries, some mass of something that looked like witches' hair... all floating in its own brown juice. There was about a gallon of it in the bowl.

"Drink, honey," Wayan said. "Drink all."

I suffered it down. And in less than two hours... well, we all know how the story ends. In less than two hours I was fine, totally healed. An infection was gone. I tried to pay Wayan, but she only laughed. "My sister

doesn't need to pay." Then she turned on Felipe: "You be careful with her now. Only sleep tonight, no touching."

Then she said to us, "Go home now, you both. Go home, go to bed, but only sleeping, OK? Only SLEEPING!"

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND ONE

On the ride home Felipe asked, "Has she bought a house yet?"

"Not yet. But she says she's looking."

"It's been over a month already since you gave her the money, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, but the place she wanted, it wasn't for sale..."

"Be careful, darling," Felipe said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not trying to interfere in your business, but I've lived in this country for five years and I know how things are. Stories can get complicated around here. Sometimes it's hard to get to the truth of what's actually happening."

"What are you trying to say, Felipe?" I asked, and when he didn't answer immediately, I quoted to him one of his own signature lines: "If you tell me slowly, I can understand quickly."

"What I'm trying to say, Liz, is that your friends have raised an awful lot of money for this woman, and right now it's all sitting in Wayan's bank account. Make sure she actually buys a house with it."

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND TWO

The end of July came, and my thirty-fifth birthday with it. Wayan threw a birthday party for me in her shop, quite unlike any I have ever experienced before. Wayan had dressed me in a traditional Balinese birthday suit - a bright purple sarong, a strapless bustier and a long length of golden fabric that she wrapped tightly around my torso. As she was putting me into this exquisite costume, she asked, not quite looking at me, but doing some fancy tucking and pinning of material around my ribs, "You have prospect to marrying Felipe?"

"No," I said. "We have no prospects for marrying. I don't want any more husbands, Wayan. And I don't think Felipe wants any more wives. But I like being with him."

"Handsome on the outside is easy to find, but handsome on the outside and handsome on the inside - this not easy. Felipe has this."

I agreed.

She smiled. "And who bring this good man to you, Liz? Who prayed every day for this man?"

I kissed her. "Thank you, Wayan. You did a good job."

We started the birthday party. Wayan and the kids had decorated the whole place with balloons and palm fronds and handwritten signs with complex, run-on messages like, "Happy birthday to a nice and sweet heart, to you, our dearest sister, to our beloved Lady Elizabeth, Happy Birthday to you, always peace to you and Happy Birthday." Wayan has a brother whose young children are gifted dancers in temple ceremonies, and so the nieces and nephews came and danced for me right there in the restaurant.

Balinese parties are generally organized around the principle of people getting dressed up in their finest clothes, then sitting around and staring at each other. ("My God, darling," moaned Felipe, when I told him that Wayan was throwing me a Balinese birthday party, "it's going to be so boring...") It wasn't boring, though - just quiet. And different. There was the whole dressing-up part, and then there was the whole dance performance part, and then there was the whole sitting around and staring at each other

part, which wasn't so bad. Everyone looked lovely. Wayan's whole family had come, and they kept smiling and waving at me from four feet away, and I kept smiling at them and waving back at them.

I blew out the candles of the birthday cake along with Little Ketut, the smallest orphan, whose birthday, I had decided a few weeks before, would also be on July 18 from now on, shared with my own, since she'd never had a birthday or a birthday party before. After we blew out the candles, Felipe presented Little Ketut with a Barbie doll, which she unwrapped in stunned wonder and then regarded as though it were a ticket for a rocket ship to Jupiter - something unimaginable.

Outside, the roosters started crowing, even though it was not yet evening, not yet dusk. My traditional Balinese clothing was squeezing me like a passionate hug, and I was feeling like this was definitely the strangest - but maybe the happiest - birthday party I'd ever experienced in my whole life.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND THREE

Still, Wayan needs to buy a house, and I'm getting worried that it's not happening. I don't understand why it's not happening, but it absolutely needs to happen. Felipe and I have stepped in now. We found a realtor who could take us around and show us properties, but Wayan hasn't liked anything we've shown her. I keep telling her, "Wayan, it's important that we buy something. I'm leaving here in September, and I need to let my friends know before I leave that their money actually went into a home for you. And you need to get a roof over your head before you get driven out."

"Not so simple to buy land in Bali," she keeps telling me. "Not like to walk into a bar and buy a beer. Can take long time."

"We don't have a long time, Wayan."

She just shrugs, and I remember again about the Balinese concept of "rubber time," meaning that time is a very relative idea. "Four weeks"

doesn't really mean to Wayan what it means to me. One day to Wayan isn't necessarily composed of twenty-four hours, either; sometimes it's longer, sometimes it's shorter, depending upon the spiritual and emotional nature of that day.

Meanwhile, it also turns out that I have completely underestimated how expensive it is to buy property in Bali. Because everything is so cheap here, you would assume that land is also undervalued, but that's a mistaken assumption. To buy land in Bali - especially in Ubud - can get almost as expensive as buying land in Tokyo, or on Rodeo Drive.

Moreover - as I discover throughout the month of August - it's almost impossible to find out when land is actually for sale around here. Balinese who are selling land typically don't like other people to know that their land is up for sale. If you're a Balinese farmer and you're selling your land, it means you are desperate for cash, and this is humiliating. Also, if your neighbors and family find out that you actually sold some land, then they'll think you came into some money, and everyone will be asking if they can borrow that money. So land becomes available for sale only by... rumor. And all these land deals are executed under strange veils of secrecy and deception.

Besides, it's almost impossible for Wayan to find a piece of land she deems appropriate for a home. She has to examine the taksu - the spirit - of each place. As a healer, Wayan's sense of taksu, even by Balinese standards, is supremely acute. I found one place that I thought was perfect, but Wayan said it was possessed by angry demons. The next piece of land was rejected because it was too close to a river, which, as everyone knows, is where ghosts live. Then we found a lovely little shop near town, with a backyard and everything, but it was located on a corner, and only somebody who wants to go bankrupt and die young would ever live in a house located on a corner. As everyone knows.

"Don't even try talking her out of it," Felipe advised me. "Trust me, darling. Don't get between the Balinese and their taksu."

Then last week Felipe found a place that fitted the criteria exactly - a small, pretty piece of land, close to central Ubud, on a quiet road, next to a

rice field, with plenty of space for a garden and within our budget. When I asked Wayan, "Should we buy it?" she replied, "Don't know yet, Liz. Not too fast, for making decisions like this. I need talk to a priest first."

She explained that she would need to consult a priest in order to find a favorable day upon which to purchase the land, if she decides to buy it at all. Because nothing significant can be done in Bali before a favorable day is chosen. But she can't even ask the priests for the favorable date upon which to buy the land until she decides if she really wants to live there. Which she can't do until she's had a favorable dream. I asked Wayan, like a good New Yorker, "How soon can you arrange to have a favorable dream?"

Wayan replied, like a good Balinese, "Cannot be rushed, this." Although, she thought it might help if she could go to one of the major temples in Bali with an offering, and pray to the gods to bring her a favorable dream...

"OK," I said. "Tomorrow Felipe can drive you to the major temple and you can make an offering and ask the gods to send you a favorable dream."

Wayan would love to, she said. It's a great idea. Only one problem. She's not permitted to enter any temples for this entire week.

Because she is... menstruating.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR

I always liked Felipe. But his participation in buying Wayan's House brings us together during the month of August like a real couple. It's none of his concern, of course, what happens to this Balinese medicine woman. He's a businessman. But suddenly here he is walking with me through muddy rice paddies and trying to find a priest who will give Wayan a favorable date...

"I was perfectly happy in my boring life before you came along," he always says. He was bored in Bali before. That idleness stopped the moment we were introduced.

He's a caregiver by nature, and I can feel him going into a kind of orbit around me. Felipe is the kind of man who desperately needs a woman in his life - but not so that he can be taken care of; only so that he can have someone to care for. Now he is organizing himself around me. It's lovely to be treated this way. But it also scares me. I wonder if I am capable of being somebody's sun, somebody's everything. Am I centered enough now to be the center of somebody else's life? But when I finally brought up the topic with him one night, he said, "Have I asked you to be that person, darling? Have I asked you to be the center of my life?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "That was a little arrogant, wasn't it?"

"A little," he acknowledged, then kissed my ear. "But not so much, really. Darling, of course it's something we have to discuss because here's the truth - I'm wildly in love with you." Then he made a quick joke, trying to be reassuring: "I mean that in a completely hypothetical way, of course." But then he said in all seriousness, "Look, I'm fifty-two years old. Believe me, I already know how the world works. I recognize that you don't love me yet the way I love you, but the truth is that I don't really care. For some reason, I feel the same way about you that I felt about my kids when they were small - that it wasn't their job to love me, it was my job to love them. You can decide to feel however you want to, but I love you and I will always love you. Even if we never see each other again, you already brought me back to life, and that's a lot. And of course, I'd like to share my life with you. The only problem is, I'm not sure how much of a life I can offer you in Bali."

This is a concern I've had, too. I've been watching the expatriate society in Ubud, and I know for sure this is not the life for me. Westerners living here are talented and clever people. But it seems to me that everyone I meet here used to be something once (generally "married" or "employed"); now they are all united by the absence of the one thing they seem to have surrendered completely and forever: ambition. Needless to say, there's a lot of drinking.

There is much to enjoy in their lazy company, in these long Sunday afternoons spent at brunch, drinking champagne and talking about nothing. Still, when I am around this scene, I feel somewhat like Dorothy in the poppy fields of Oz. Be careful! Don't fall asleep in this narcotic meadow, or you could doze away the rest of your life here!

So what will become of me and Felipe? He told me not long ago, "Sometimes I wish you were a lost little girl and I could pick you up and say, 'Come and live with me now, let me take care of you forever.' But you aren't a lost little girl. You're a woman with a career, with ambition. You are a perfect snail: you carry your home on your back. You should hold on to that freedom for as long as possible. But all I'm saying is this - if you want this Brazilian man, you can have him. I'm yours already."

I'm not sure what I want. I know that there's a part of me which has always wanted to hear a man say, "Let me take care of you forever," and I have never heard it spoken before. Over the last few years, I'd given up looking for that person, learned how to say this heartening sentence to myself, especially in times of fear. But to hear it from someone else now, from someone who is speaking sincerely...

I was thinking about all this last night after Felipe fell asleep, and I was curled up beside him, wondering what would become of us. What are the possible futures? What about the geography question between us - where would we live? Then there's the age difference to consider. Truthfully, though, I actually like that Felipe is so much older. I think it's sexy. Makes me feel kind of... French.

What will happen with us?

Why am I worrying about this, by the way?

So after a while, I stopped thinking about all this and just held him while he slept. I am falling in love with this man. Then I fell asleep beside him and had two memorable dreams.

Both were about my Guru. In the first dream, my Guru informed me that she was closing down her Ashrams and that she would no longer be

speaking, teaching or publishing books. She gave her students one final speech, in which she said, "You've had more than enough teachings. You have been given everything you need to know in order to be free. It's time for you to go out in the world and live a happy life."

The second dream was even more confirming. I was eating in a terrific restaurant in New York City with Felipe. We were having a wonderful meal of lamb chops and artichokes and fine wine and we were talking and laughing happily. I looked across the room and saw Swamiji, my Guru's master, who died in 1982. But he was alive that night, right there in a noisy New York restaurant. He was eating dinner with a group of his friends and they were also having a good time. Our eyes met across the room and Swamiji smiled at me and raised his wineglass in a toast.

And then - quite distinctly - this small Indian Guru mouthed this one word to me across the distance:

Enjoy.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE

I haven't seen Ketut Liyer so long. I was so busy with my romance and my struggle to secure a home for Wayan. Still, I miss the old man, so I stopped by to talk with him this morning. He beamed at me, as usual, saying, "I am very happy to meet you!" (I never was able to break him of that habit.)

"I am happy to see you, too, Ketut."

"You leaving soon, Liss?"

"Yes, Ketut. In less than two weeks. That's why I wanted to come over today. I wanted to thank you for everything you've given me. I came back to Bali thanks to you."

"You would come back to Bali, anyway," he said without doubt or drama. "You still meditate with your four brothers like I teach you?"

"Yes."

"You still meditate like your Guru in India teach you?"

"Yes."

"You happy now with God?"

"Very."

"You love new boyfriend?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Then you must spoil him. And he must spoil you."

"OK," I promised.

"You are good friend to me. Better than friend. You are like my daughter," he said. "When I die, you will come back to Bali, come to my cremation. Balinese cremation ceremony very fun - you will like it."

"OK," I promised.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND SIX

The deal failed with Wayan. That property Felipe had found for her somehow didn't happen. When I ask Wayan what went wrong, I get some unclear reply. What matters is only that it's a dead deal. I'm starting to get panicked about this whole Wayan house situation.

But a few days later Wayan calls over at Felipe's house, excited. She's found a different piece of land, and this one she really loves. An emerald expanse of rice field on a quiet road, close to town. It has good taksu.

Wayan tells us that the land belongs to a farmer, a friend of her father's, who is desperate for cash. He has seven aro total to sell, but (needing fast money) would give her only the two aro she can afford. She loves this land. I love this land. Felipe loves this land. Tutti loves it, too.

"Buy it," I tell Wayan.

But a few days pass, and nothing happens. "Do you want to live there or not?" I keep asking.

She changes her story again. This morning, she says, the farmer called to tell her he isn't certain anymore whether he can sell only the two-aro parcel to her; instead, he might want to sell the whole seven- aro lot... it's his wife that's the problem... The farmer needs to talk to his wife, see if it's OK with her to break up the land...

Wayan says, "Maybe if I had more money..."

I'm telling her, "Wayan, I can't do it, I don't have the money. Can't you make a deal with the farmer?"

Then Wayan tells a complicated story. She tells me that she visited a mystic the other day and the mystic went into a trance and said that Wayan absolutely needs to buy this entire seven-aro package in order to make a good healing center... that this is destiny... and, anyway, the mystic also said that if Wayan could have the entire package of land, then maybe she could someday build a nice fancy hotel there...

A nice fancy hotel?

Ah.

That's when suddenly I go deaf and I can see Wayan's mouth moving but I'm not listening to her anymore because a thought has just come: SHE'S THROWING DUST INTO MY EYES.

I stand up, say good-bye to Wayan, walk home slowly and ask Felipe for his opinion: "Is she throwing dust into my eyes?"

He has not ever commented upon my business with Wayan, not once.

"Darling," he says kindly. "Of course she is."

My heart drops into my guts.

"But not intentionally," he adds quickly. "You need to understand the thinking in Bali. It's a way of life here for people to try to get the most money they can out of visitors. It's how everyone survives. So she's making up some stories now about the farmer. Darling, since when does a Balinese man need to talk to his wife before he can make a business deal? Listen - the guy is desperate to sell her a small parcel; he already said he would. But she wants the whole thing now. And she wants you to buy it for her."

I get embarrassed at this for two reasons. First of all, I hate to think this could be true of Wayan. Second, I hate the cultural implications under his speech, "this-is-what-all-these-people-are-like" argument.

But Felipe explains, "Listen, I grew up poor in South America. You think I don't understand the culture of this kind of poverty? You've given Wayan more money than she's ever seen in her life and now she's thinking crazy. As far as she's concerned, you're her miracle benefactor and this might be her last chance."

"What should I do?"

"Don't get angry about it, whatever happens. If you get angry, you'll lose her, and that would be a pity because she's a marvelous person and she loves you. This is her survival tactic, just accept that. You must not think that she's not a good person, or that she and the kids don't honestly need your help. But you cannot let her use you."

"But what should I do?"

"You need to get back some control of the situation. Play some kind of game with her, like the games she's playing with you. Threaten her with something that motivates her to act. You'll be doing her a favor; she needs a home."

"I don't want to play games, Felipe."

He kisses my head. "Then you can't live in Bali, darling."

The next morning, I make my plan. I can't believe it - I'm about to lie to my favorite person in Bali, to someone who is like a sister to me, someone who has cleaned my kidneys. I'm going to lie to Tutti's mommy!

I walk into town, into Wayan's shop. Wayan goes to hug me. I pull away, pretending to be upset.

"Wayan," I say. "We need to talk. I have a serious problem."

"With Felipe?"

"No. With you."

She looks like she's going to faint.

"Wayan," I say. "My friends in America are very angry with you."

"With me? Why, honey?"

"Because four months ago, they gave you a lot of money to buy a home, and you did not buy a home yet. Every day, they send me e-mails, asking me, 'Where is Wayan's house? Where is my money?' Now they think you are stealing their money, using it for something else."

"I'm not stealing!"

"Wayan," I say. "My friends in America think you are... a bullshit."

She looks really wounded. Bullshit is a word that has been more emotionally incorporated into Balinese than almost any other in the English language. It's one of the very worst things you can call someone in Bali - "a bullshit."

"Honey," she said, eyes tearing. "I am not a bullshit!"

"I know that, Wayan. This is why I'm so upset. I try to tell my friends in America that Wayan is not a bullshit, but they don't believe me."

She lays her hand on mine. "I'm sorry, honey."

"Wayan, my friends are angry. They say that you must buy some land before I come back to America. They told me that if you don't buy some land in the next week, then I must... take the money back."

Now she doesn't look like she's going to faint; she looks like she's going to die. How could she know that I have no power to take that money out of her bank account? I made the money magically appear in her bankbook, didn't I? Couldn't I just as easily take it away?

"Honey," she says, "believe me, I find land now, don't worry, very fast I find land. Please don't worry... maybe in next three days this is finish, I promise."

"You must, Wayan," I say. "I'm going back to Felipe's house now. Call me when you've bought something." Then I walk away from my friend, aware that she is watching me but refusing to turn around and look back at her. I go home to Felipe, feeling awful.

Just four hours later the phone rings in Felipe's house. It's Wayan. She's breathless. She wants me to know the job is finished. She has just purchased the two aro from the farmer (whose "wife" suddenly didn't mind breaking up the property). There was no need, as it turns out, for any magic dreams or priestly interventions or taksu radiation-level tests. Wayan even has the certificate of ownership already, in her hands! And it's notarized! Also, she assures me, she has already ordered construction materials for her house and workers will start building early next week - before I leave. So I can see the project under way. She hopes that I am not angry with her. She wants me to know that she loves me more than she loves her own body, more than she loves her own life, more than she loves this whole world.

I tell her that I love her, too. And that I can't wait to be a guest someday in her beautiful new home. And that I would like a photocopy of that certificate of ownership.

When I get off the phone, Felipe says, "Good girl."

I don't know whether he's referring to her or me. But he opens a bottle of wine and we raise a toast to our dear friend Wayan the Balinese landowner.

Then Felipe says, "Can we go on vacation now, please?"

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN

The place we go on vacation is a tiny island called Gili Meno. I'd been to Gili Meno before, and I wanted to show it to Felipe, who had never been there.

The island of Gili Meno is one of the most important places in the world to me. I came here by myself two years ago when I was in Bali for the first time. I was on that magazine assignment, writing about Yoga vacations, and I'd just finished two weeks of Yoga classes. But I had decided to extend my stay in Indonesia after the assignment was up. What I wanted to do, actually, was to find someplace very remote and give myself a ten-day retreat of absolute solitude and absolute silence.

When I look back at the four years between my marriage starting to fall apart and the day I was finally divorced and free, I see a detailed chronicle of total pain. And the moment when I came to this tiny island all by myself was the very worst of that entire dark journey.

I rented myself a little cabin on the beach for a few dollars a day and I shut my mouth and vowed not to open it again until something inside me had changed. I had chosen the right place. The island itself is tiny, sandy, blue water, palm trees. It's a perfect circle with a single path that goes around it, and you can walk the whole circumference in about an hour. It's located almost exactly on the equator. The sun comes up on one side of the island at about 6:30 in the morning and goes down on the other side at around 6:30 PM, every day of the year. The place is inhabited by a small handful of Muslim fishermen and their families. There is no spot on this

island from which you cannot hear the ocean. There are no motorized vehicles here. Electricity comes from a generator, and for only a few hours in the evenings. It's the quietest place I've ever been.

Every morning I walked the circumference of the island at sunrise, and walked it again at sunset. The rest of the time, I just sat and watched. Watched my thoughts, watched my emotions, watched the fishermen. The Yogic sages say that all the pain of a human life is caused by words, as is all the joy. To stop talking for a while, then, is to attempt to strip away the power of words, to liberate ourselves from our suffocating mantras.

It took me a while to drop into true silence. Even after I'd stopped talking, I found that I was still humming with language. It took a surprisingly long time for all this pulsation of speech to fall away. Maybe it took about three days.

Then everything started coming up. In that state of silence, there was room now for everything hateful, everything fearful, to run across my empty mind. I cried a lot. I prayed a lot. It was difficult and it was terrifying, but I knew that I needed to do this and that I needed to do it alone.

On my ninth day of silence, I went into meditation one evening on the beach as the sun was going down and I didn't stand up again until after midnight. I remember thinking, "This is it, Liz." I said to my mind, "This is your chance. Show me everything that is causing you sorrow. Let me see all of it. Don't hold anything back." One by one, the thoughts and memories of sadness raised their hands, stood up to identify themselves. I looked at each thought, at each unit of sorrow, and I accepted its existence and felt (without trying to protect myself from it) its horrible pain. And then I told that sorrow, "It's OK. I love you. I accept you. Come into my heart now. It's over." I would actually feel the sorrow (as if it were a living thing) enter my heart (as if it were an actual room). Then I would say, "Next?" and the next bit of grief came.

I experienced it, blessed it, and invited it into my heart, too. I did this with every sorrowful thought I'd ever had - reaching back into years of memory - until nothing was left.

Then I said to my mind, "Show me your anger now." One by one, my life's every incident of anger rose. Every injustice, every betrayal, every loss, every rage. I saw them all, one by one, and I accepted their existence. I felt each piece of anger completely, and then I said, "Come into my heart now. You can rest there. It's safe now. It's over. I love you." This went on for hours.

Then came the most difficult part. "Show me your shame," I asked my mind. Dear God, the horrors that I saw then. A pitiful parade of all my failings, my lies, my selfishness, jealousy, arrogance. When I tried to invite these units of shame into my heart, they each hesitated at the door, saying, "No - you don't want me in there... don't you know what I did?" and I said, "I want you. Even you. I do. Even you are welcome here. It's OK. You are forgiven. You are part of me. You can rest now. It's over."

When all this was finished, I was empty. Nothing was fighting in my mind anymore. I looked into my heart, and I saw that my heart was not even nearly full, not even after having taken in sorrow and anger and shame; my heart could easily receive and forgive even more. Its love was infinite.

I knew then that this is how God loves us all and receives us all, and that there is no such thing in this universe as hell, except maybe in our own terrified minds. Because if even one broken and limited human being could experience even one such episode of absolute forgiveness and acceptance of her own self, then imagine - just imagine! - what God, in all His eternal compassion, can forgive and accept.

I also knew somehow that this period of peace would be temporary. I knew that I was not yet finished for good, that my anger, my sadness and my shame would all creep back eventually, escaping my heart, and occupying my head once more. But my heart said to my mind in the dark silence of that beach: "I love you, I will never leave you, I will always take care of you." That promise floated up out of my heart and I caught it in my mouth and held it there, tasting it as I left the beach and walked back to the little cabin where I was staying. I found an empty notebook, opened it up to the first page - and only then I opened my mouth and spoke those words into the air, letting them free. I let those words break my silence and then I allowed my pencil to document their colossal statement onto the page:

"I love you, I will never leave you, I will always take care of you."

Those were the first words I ever wrote in that private notebook of mine, which I carried with me from that moment on, turning back to it many times over the next two years, always asking for help - and always finding it, even when I was most deadly sad or afraid. And that notebook, with that promise of love, was the only reason I survived the next years of my life.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT

And now I'm coming back to Gili Meno under notably different circumstances. Since I was last here, I've circled the world, settled my divorce, survived my final separation from David, erased all mood-altering medications from my system, learned to speak a new language, sat upon God's palm for a few unforgettable moments in India, studied at the feet of an Indonesian medicine man and purchased a home for a family who badly needed a place to live. I am happy and healthy and balanced. And, yes, I am sailing to this pretty little tropical island with my Brazilian lover. Which is - I admit it! - an almost ridiculously fairy-tale ending to this story. Yet I was not rescued by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue.

My thoughts turn to something I read once, something the Zen Buddhists believe. They say that an oak tree is brought into creation by two forces at the same time. Obviously, there is the acorn from which it all begins, the seed which holds all the promise and potential, which grows into the tree. Everybody can see that. But only a few can recognize that there is another force operating here as well - the future tree itself, which wants so badly to exist that it pulls the acorn into being, guiding the evolution from nothingness to maturity. In this respect, say the Zens, it is the oak tree that creates the very acorn from which it was born.

I think about the woman I have become lately, about the life that I am now living, and about how much I always wanted to be this person and live this life, liberated from the farce of pretending to be anyone other than myself. And I wonder if it was me - I mean, this happy and balanced me,

who is now dozing on the deck of this small Indonesian fishing boat - who pulled the other, younger, more confused and more struggling me forward during all those hard years. The younger me was the acorn full of potential, but it was the older me, the already-existent oak, who was saying the whole time: "Yes - grow! Change! Evolve! Come and meet me here, where I already exist in wholeness and maturity! I need you to grow into me!" And maybe it was this present and fully actualized me who whispered lovingly to that desperate girl on the bathroom floor, "Go back to bed, Liz..." Knowing already that everything would be OK, that everything would eventually bring us together here. Right here, right to this moment.

Then Felipe wakes up. He tells me that he had an idea while he was sleeping. He says, "You know - I obviously need to keep living in Bali because my business is here, and because it's so close to Australia, where my kids live. I also need to be in Brazil often, because that's where the gemstones are and because I have family there. And you obviously need to be in the United States, because that's where your work is, and that's where your family and friends are. So I was thinking... maybe we could try to build a life together that's somehow divided between America, Australia, Brazil and Bali."

All I can do is laugh, because, hey - why not? Of course this is how we should live. And I quite like the poetry of his idea, too, I must say. I mean that literally. After this whole year spent exploring the individual and fearless I's, Felipe has just suggested to me a whole new theory of traveling:

Australia, America, Bali, Brazil = A, A, B, B.

Like a classic poem, like a pair of rhyming couplets.

The little fishing boat anchors right off the shore of Gili Meno. There are no docks here on this island. So me and my lover, we take off our shoes, we pile our small bags of belongings on the tops of our heads and we prepare to leap over the edge of that boat together, into the sea.

You know, it's a funny thing. The only Romance language Felipe doesn't speak is Italian. But I go ahead and say it to him anyway, just as we're about to jump.

I say: "Attraversiamo"

Let's cross over.

- THE END -

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