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From the Mahamuni

The scene is the waiting area around Gate 3, Concourse C, at Taipei International Airport, where Peter Lewis sits cross-legged on the ledge by the window, waiting to board the China Airlines flight that will take him non-stop to Los Angeles. There is little to watch – a young boy playing a handheld video game, an old woman regarding a piece of art on the wall -- but he looks anyway because he doesn't feel like reading yet. Soon he notices a pack of female flight attendants stepping two at a time onto the escalator. They wear tight lavender skirts and matching jackets -- uniforms that make them look like cosmetics counter girls preparing to saturate the room with perfume samples.

There is one in particular, one who seems somehow separate from the others. Certainly she is pretty, but there is more, an air of detachment. She stands poised -- shoulders back, head pointed forward. Her eyes scan the waiting area, working it evenly from left to right in his direction. Unable to look away, he keeps gazing until her eyes lock onto his and she hesitates, briefly, before continuing on. It is a hesitation so slight that right away he wonders whether or not it actually happened. When the escalator deposits her at the bottom she begins to walk, to flow across the floor. Her movements are deliberate, her face expressionless save for a subtle, restful smile. Soon she is upon

him, but there is no glance, no hint of recognition -- just that straight-ahead stare, until he can only watch as she trails away, rounds the corner and then vanishes down the jetway.

When the call comes for them to board he rises, and out of habit counts his steps to the jetway, and then along the jetway to the plane. He walks nearly to the back before arriving at his seat -- 57A, where he waits as the woman on the aisle fidgets with her seatbelt, attempts to stand too quickly and grunts as she is pulled back down. Flushed, she tries again, and this time there comes the soft *tick* of the buckle releasing, after which she steps aside, both nervous and embarrassed.

“Seat belts,” he says, smiling. “What are you going to do?”

She looks at him briefly and then directs her gaze out the window, in which time he squeezes past and settles in with his hands on his lap.

Soon the plane pushes back from the gate. A light drizzle falls as they taxi across the tarmac, and then the engines roaring to life and the plane tugging back and forth a bit as they gain speed down the runway. He draws a deep breath as they lift skyward, presses his forehead to the window and counts to sixty. When his head starts to throb and the buildings below have begun to lose their form, he parts his lips and allows the air to escape, sounding as it goes like a gust of wind blowing through tree tops.

The cabin is awash in thick wands of light when he wakes from his sleep and squints at the large monitor that indicates the arcing path of their flight. They are somewhere along the Tropic of Cancer, northwest of Hawaii. It is 3:03 p.m. West Coast time and they have an estimated time to touchdown of two hours and thirty-six minutes. Incredibly, he has slept for nearly seven hours.

“Excuse me, do you know this?” asks the woman in the aisle seat. She points at the laminated image of a golden Buddha he is using as a bookmark.

He nods sleepily. “The Mahamuni.”

“I also know this,” she says, her face brightening. “It is very famous in my country. You have been to see it?”

“No,” he says. “I haven’t.”

“Oh.” She looks down at her intertwined hands, back at him, and then to her hands again. There seems to be a reserve of energy within her she is trying to restrain. Peter blinks heavily and stretches his neck and arms, raising them high over his head.

Eventually she continues. “That is unfortunate. Few things today are as old as this statue. People travel from very far away to kneel before it and pray -- women pray for children, the sick for good health.”

She pauses and he looks again at the monitor. Beside the bathroom an old man with thinning gray hair and liver spots stands with his feet shoulder-width apart, doing calisthenics. He wonders why she is telling him this, and for the first time since stepping onto the plane he turns to look at her. She has a plump frame with a round face and shoulder-length hair, which she has tied behind her head with a simple piece of cloth. She could be a few years older than him, or she could be his age – her plain appearance makes it difficult to tell. She wears no jewelry or makeup, save for a bright-red layer of lipstick, which has been mostly wiped away.

Of course it occurs to him that she has also prayed before the Mahamuni, and that she is waiting for him to ask her as much. But he thinks such a question would be too intrusive, so instead he asks, “Is this the first time you have left Burma?”

“Yes,” she responds. “And my family also. I am coming to America to be with my husband.”

He nods slowly. “That must be difficult.”

“Yes. A little.”

“But still, congratulations, right?”

“Yes.” She manages a weak smile. “It is only, it has been almost four years that we have last seen each other, and in this time I have worked hard to practice my English. My friend, he is a teacher at the school. He gives me books, and has been very patient to teach me. He thought maybe it would not be possible for me to leave, and that I would stay and be with him. Sometimes I did not know, and also thought this would be better.”

“Really?” he says, surprised she would be capable of such behavior.

She nods emphatically. “Not many people leave my country, and when I am with my friend I think, I am no different. Two years past, my husband writes he has a job and sends me money. But first I must have a passport, and the man behind the desk is very fat. He says to me the price and it is far too much. He was very bad, and very fat. I ask him many times, but always he says ‘no.’ I am mad and I want to cry. I leave, but always I come back and hope his mind will be different. But before even I say anything he says to me ‘no,’ and then ‘no’ again. He smiles at me and begins to laugh. This smiling and laughing makes me very mad, but I can do nothing. Finally I give him the money and there is no more.”

Peter shakes his head and shrugs in an attempt to stifle the ensuing, awkward silence. He looks down at his lap and then out the window before turning once again to face her. She smiles faintly and continues.

“Another year I wait, and always my friend is very nice. My mother is ill and he brings her medicine that is expensive and difficult to find. I think to myself perhaps it is easier to stay with him and be with my family, but finally my husband sends to me a letter, and inside is a ticket. This ticket I hold in my hands, and they are shaking. I decide I will go to the Mahamuni and pray that I may know the right thing to do.” She looks at him meaningfully and he smiles back, thinks – *There it is*. “Many hours I am there, and when finally I am tired, and my knees hurt, I ask myself what I know, and it is this – I do not want to leave my home, but I am married, so I must go and be the wife to my husband.”

He says, “So here you are.”

“Yes, here I am.”

“My name is Peter.”

“Thank you, I am Beetah.”

“Good to know you,” he says. And then adds, “You are very strong.”

This remark she shoos away with an impatient flip of her hand. “I know my English is not good. I know this, and I have only little education, so it will be hard for me. Not much is there that I can do. And I know, I must drive, and this, also, it worries me very much.”

“Your English isn’t so bad,” he says, his words dissipating into nothing as he turns his head to notice the flight attendant from the terminal working her way towards them. She carries a stainless steel pitcher in one hand, a tray with paper cups in the other. Soon she stands beside them in the aisle, smelling evanescently of something flowery. He notices her hand as she pours Beetah’s cup. It is delicate, like a bird’s wing. Their eyes

meet again, and when they do she hits him with a lingering stare before filling his cup. This she follows with a subtle, artistic smirk.

“Please,” says Beetah, jarring him back. She loosens her seatbelt and, smiling, squares in her seat to face him. “Tell me about you.”

“Me? I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Allow me to help. For example, how long are you away from your home?”

“Eleven months.”

“Such a long time!”

“A lifetime.”

“Tell me?”

He takes a deep breath and says, “Just standard stuff. Two months became three and three became eleven.” Her mouth forms a silent **O** of understanding as she nods her head. He looks at the monitor again -- two hours, twenty-nine minutes – and then thinks - *In for a penny, in for a pound*. “Thailand turned into Cambodia, followed by Vietnam, Laos, back to Thailand, the Philippines, back to Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, and finally Burma. If I really liked someplace I would stay for a couple weeks, but usually every five, six days I bought a bus ticket, or a boat or a plain ticket, zipped up my backpack and, you know, just went to the next place.”

“So good!”

The excitement in her voice marks the second time she has surprised him. It seeps into him and mingles there with the fresh remembrance of his own excitement. Because he’d been happy to be gone, grateful simply to be someplace foreign and new, experiencing straight away that sight and sound explosion which, against long odds, had

succeeded in allowing him to forget. It had replaced his sorrow with new things, experiences to be had, until soon the pressure in his head, like an underwater squeeze, began to lessen. He had his problems, sure, but he believed in happiness, believed in it to his core. He started a journal and that was a good step. And then he discarded it and that was a good step too. Goodness was everywhere and for months on end things made sense, but as the time drew nearer for him to return home his feeling of contentment gradually dissipated into pangs of dread, into that crushed feeling in his stomach. It was a problem of faith, that and the prospect of an intolerable future.

“Yeah, well, everyone does it,” he says, and then catches himself. “OK, maybe not everyone, but you know, a lot of people. Everywhere I went? There were other travelers, people just like me.”

“No, not just like you. We are all different.”

“I suppose.”

“And you are not now happy to go home?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. I sort of quit everything, my life, you know?”

“Do I know?” She laughs. “Yes. And maybe, like me, you are about to begin a new one.” When he doesn’t respond to this she says, “Tell me, did you like Burma?”

He tic-tocs his head back and forth in deliberation. “I did, yes, but it was, how should I put it? Hard.”

“Yes,” she agrees, and there is something within her face that changes, a minor shift toward the contemplative. It pulls him in farther.

“I went to stay at this monastery in Sagaing,” he says. “And there were these kids there, these novices I ate my meals with. They taught me some Burmese. ‘Duame, tome teme.’ That was my big line.”

“Now I go up the mountain.”

“Right, because I was sleeping in this sort of man-made cave, up on a hill. I would finish eating, spend some time with them, and then, ‘Duame, tome teme.’ It was nice.” He pauses and looks at her and she smiles, apparently not about to say anything. “So up on the hill? I just read books and practiced simple meditation by counting breaths, and then going for walks and counting my steps. I tell you I could not, I cannot, stop counting. And then I ate something and came down with dysentery.”

“What is this?” she says, and he realizes he’s been going off and that she’s catching maybe every third word. Still, she seems happy just to listen.

“Sick. It means I had a fever?” A nod. “I would go and squat in the bushes, weak, delirious, and there would be these” – how else to say it? – “dragonflies all around my head, their wings catching the light with flecks of blue and green. And then I’d go back and fall asleep on top of this wooden bench. I kept losing weight until after a week when I wasn’t any better they took me to the hospital.”

“Hospital,” she says, a worried look on her face.

“Yeah, they had me in this large room filled with the sick and the dying. For three days I slept, waking now and then to find the novices by my bedside, a few each time, dabbing my face with wet rags and chanting.”

“Pali,” she says.

“What?”

“The language. It is called Pali.”

“Oh.” He eases for a moment into her smile. “So anyway, when I was well enough to leave a couple of the older monks came to pick me up. The light outside was blinding and I closed my eyes and just stood there for a while. I could smell bread and roasting meat and realized for the first time in a long time I was hungry. I wanted food, real food, but they took me back to the monastery and gave me soup, and when I was finished the novices came to be with me. I stayed with them for a while, an hour or so before, you know, ‘Duame, tome teme.’”

He pauses and looks at the monitor, and at the old man who is still there touching his toes, and then at the stewardess as she strolls confidently down the aisle.

Beetah says, “Our government does not want those foreign to die when they visit, because they are afraid it will make them look bad. But they *are* bad. If you are Burmese, they do not care. My brother, he drives a small taxi in Mandalay and is allowed only two gallons of gasoline each week. After this he must buy on the black market at terrible prices. Now he has found a second job selling locks, but I think even this will not be enough. I think I should not have left my family, but it is too late. My husband writes that he works in a warehouse and receives \$500 each week in pay. I cannot imagine this money! Even so, I will find a job and work very hard and send dollars home.”

She says all of this and sighs heavily. He nods and looks out the window at the blueness below that is the Pacific, and then down at the floor. He sees a few bits of rice, some breadcrumbs.

“Listen,” he says. “Beetah, I have been to the Mahamuni.” She gives him a quizzical look -- chin pressed down, eyes looking up – and recoils a little. Just like that,

he believes he knows her. “I’m sorry, but I just didn’t feel like talking. I was there though, before sunrise, for the ceremony.”

“You were very lucky!” she says, her eyes brightening.

“I wouldn’t call it luck. More like selfish. I walked right up front, a little at a time, expecting someone to stop me, but no one did. There must have been five hundred people gathered around, and whatever the abbot did once he did, oh, ten times.”

“He is called Sayadaw,” she corrects him.

“Uh huh. Instead of using one sponge to clean the Mahamuni’s face he used ten. There was this chain of monks handing him one sponge at a time. He would make a pass and then grab another. It was spooky almost, the way he avoided its eyes, or dripping any of the water onto its lips. When he was finished with that he sprayed perfume on it, and all around me was the chanting, vibrating off the walls, coming at me from every angle. I remember thinking, here I am, standing on the pedestal of an enormous golden god at four in the morning, in the midst of this religious spectacle I can’t begin to comprehend, and no way do I belong here.”

“Yes,” she says. “I understand.”

“And also there was this young man. His knees were folded beneath him as he pressed his forehead to the floor. On his back was a large grasshopper. It must have been as big as my thumb. I watched it crawl slowly up his robe, across his neck, and then stop on the back of his head, which was shaved. I kept waiting for him to feel it and brush it away, but he never did. That grasshopper must have stayed there like that for half an hour. It would clean its legs from time to time, reposition itself. When the ceremony was

over I left, and the boy and the grasshopper still hadn't moved. It's a very strange story, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," she says, a far-off look in her eyes. "Tell me, what does this bookmark mean to you?"

"Nothing I suppose, it's just a reminder."

"Yes, a reminder, but there is something more I think."

"Maybe, but if so it has nothing to do with the Mahamuni. If anything it's that boy."

"Yes, the boy."

"I was jealous of him."

"Yes."

"Because he really didn't feel it, the grasshopper. And I wanted to be in that place, that space, because when I was sick? For that time I understood."

He mines her face for some trace of understanding, perhaps a smile of encouragement which will prompt him to continue. But she sits there placidly, giving nothing away. He notices the brown specks in her eyes, wide and observant.

In time she cups her chin within the palm of her hand, frowns, begins to open her mouth and then closes it. When at last she speaks it is slowly. "Tell me," she says. "If you could say something to that boy, what would it be?"

It is an insightful question and he ponders it for a while. He considers his feelings of having been cast aside, and how those feelings return stronger with each minute ticked off by the monitor, like a low-grade infection, or an allergy sprung up. He wants to

believe in himself again, in his power to make happiness happen, and not on the other side of the globe but on the same sidewalks and streets he fled nearly a year ago.

Eventually he says, “I’d say, ‘Hey, kid, teach me what you know because my life depends on it.’ Something like that.” The response pleases her and she returns his smile with one of her own. “And you. If you could say anything to your husband, when you land I mean, what would it be?” She frowns and shakes her head and he feels suddenly as if he has overstepped his boundaries. “Don’t answer that,” he says. “It’s none of my business.”

“No,” she replies. “It is only, the question is difficult. But I think, first, my friend at home, I would say to him, ‘I am sorry that I leave.’ Because this ‘sorry’ I never tell him. And that I love him. Also, this he does not know.” She sighs and swallows hard, her shoulders going limp. “And to my husband I would say, ‘I am sorry.’ And I hope to remember him, and to love him once more.”

When she opens her eyes again and looks over at him he says, “Yeah,” and the effect is of some sort of closure. The two settle into a long solitude, in which he thinks of all his belongings packed away in storage, and of how he will soon have a need for them again. He tells himself he is only twenty-eight and can still do anything he wants, maybe even go back to school. But for what? And he thinks also of Beetah, and of how hard her life is surely about to become.

At last the pilot cuts back the engines and the plane gradually descends as they make their way down the California coast from Salinas to LAX. Although the horizon still shows a thin line of orange the night is coming on clear. Soon the first lights of America are visible below and he trades seats with her so she can look out the window.

The sound of hydraulics punctuates the cabin as the plane banks back and forth. They tilt left and now she is looking almost straight down at the turquoise glow of backyard swimming pools and the red-and-white lights of cars on the freeway.

“So much electricity!” she says.

Standing in the aisle, she tugs on the garment bag that is packed tightly into the overhead bin. It refuses to budge until all at once it bursts free and drops heavily onto the seat. She chews on her bottom lip and stares dolefully at it for a moment before hoisting it, with considerable effort, over her shoulder. Passengers are stacked up behind them, waiting patiently for the moment. When he sees her look into the bin at another suitcase he pulls it down, offers up what he hopes to be a reassuring smile, and says, “I’ll deliver you to your husband.”

She smiles weakly and they walk off the plane, and then up the jetway, Peter trailing behind her and not saying anything. The jetway opens onto a quiet hallway, Muzak wafting softly down from the intercom as they continue along.

And then they turn the corner and it hits her.

The room is expansive and chaotic. Disembarking passengers zig-zag in front of them, all in a hurry to secure a place in one of the dozen-or-so lines that stretch out across the room. Beetah stops, not knowing in which direction to head. He puts a hand on her shoulder and gently steers her toward the line for non-U.S. citizens, where he takes her bag and rests it on top of the suitcase, points to the other side and says he will meet her there.

Then he heads over to his own line and passes quickly through.

He is both watching the crowd and keeping an eye on Beetah when he sees the flight attendant walking in his direction. Her moist and slender eyes are a warm hello and it quickens his heart. He turns back to Beetah and sees, with a twinge of dread, that the passport control officer has begun to lose patience. The man raises his voice as he explains she has forgotten to fill out her declaration of goods form and must go to the back of the line. She looks at the card he hands her, and then wonderingly at Peter, who frowns and glances back at the flight attendant. Like a dog he feels the impulse to shake himself, to slip his confining leash and make the short trip back home.

But he is already home, and in the time it takes him to decide if he can manage the guilt of leaving Beetah the flight attendant walks past him and is quickly lost in the crowd. He stands there in the wake of her departure and considers whether she were really a possibility after all. This he will later remember – the pretending.

Soon Beetah is successfully through the line and stands pulled up alongside him, obviously relieved. They share a smile and he walks her over to her bags and lifts them onto a cart, which together they push through immigration and then up the ramp into the terminal. An expectant crowd is gathered behind a barrier, and standing off to the side is a dark-skinned man in a brown corduroy suit, holding a bouquet of daisies.

When Beetah notices him she stops.

Now that the time has come to say goodbye Peter doesn't feel quite ready to leave, so he stands there with that old pressure building inside his head and no words coming out of his mouth.

“Goodbye, Beetah,” he says finally.

“Yes, goodbye.”

“And good luck.”

“Bless you,” she says.

“Yes, bless you too.”

“No,” she replies firmly, and when she looks down at her feet he notices she has taken off her shoes and is standing barefooted, her palms pressed together in a gesture of prayer. She bows to him, and as she does Peter slides out of his sandals and brings his hands together as hers are.

“Bless you,” he says again. Next he steps forward and, to her surprise, hugs her. Soon they are both laughing, and when he releases her he pulls out his bookmark of the Mahamuni. “I think it would be better if you have this.”

“Thank you,” she says. “It is a good gift.”

A lingering silence ensues and he fills it by saying, “Remember, Beetah, driving is easy. You can do it!”

“I can do it,” she says, forcing out the words.

Now he really must go, so with a wave he turns and makes his way through the mass of bodies and out into the long, well-lighted walkway that leads to the exit. Once there he lengthens his stride, concentrating on its deliberate cadence, which soothes his wandering mind. His toes extend outwards to grip the floor when they land. With each step he counts a number, and when he arrives at twenty he begins again. He feels his hips and the familiar weight of his pack on his shoulders. He feels his elbows, his nose and his stomach. He is aware of his entire body at once. Everything is a component part that if detached equals nothing. His limbs become heavy and he turns left into the dark-blue corridor of his memory. He is in the past looking at the future, at what is now the present,

observing it in singular footfalls that become minor stopgaps in time. It is a knowledge that has no end. His feet strike the floor like the opening notes of a battle aria, and within the spaces that separate them are his eye of wisdom, a newfound tolerance and a fleeting but unmistakable bliss.