

! Last Tango

By Nancy Jensen

Whenever Mitch mentioned *The Last Tango in Paris*, I knew what was coming.

Most people, edging toward the sultry, drop their voices a pitch, but his would rise, and he'd get an absurd breathlessness about him, like some scatologically fascinated fifteen year old, when he'd refer to the film! quote s "butter scene." I had never seen *Last Tango*—it was released when I was ten—and so he told me of the graphic footage showing Marlon Brando greasing the French girl-woman's lower canal before fucking her—to both their pleasure—in the ass. It made sense, a stick of butter being the right shape and size, so I believed him.

Last night—I'm forty-two now and thirteen years divorced from Mitch—I finally saw *The Last Tango in Paris*. I waited for the butter scene. At last, more than an hour in, there it was.

The girl enters the shared vacant apartment she and her middle-aged lover, Brando, keep for their rendezvous. He doesn't answer at first when she calls to him, but he's in the camera shot, lying on the floor eating bread and cheese when he barks an order for her to get the butter. Angry at his tone, she retrieves a! stick and throws it at him. The girl's discovery of a secret hiding place in the apartment floor prompts from Brando a double entendre about "hidden jewels" while he grabs at her crotch. She slides away from him, but he pulls her back, violently flips her onto her stomach and yanks down her jeans, yammering something vile about family and religion, turning this into a nonsensical pseudo-Catholic litany that he forces the girl to recite as he plows into her.

It's true that the stick of butter was in the frame, within Brando's reach, but I never saw him pick it up, unwrap it, drive it in, the way Mitch said he did. That butter was my focal point. It stayed on the floor.

Maybe, I thought, graphic as this film was—certainly worthy of an X-rating in 1972, and possibly still in 2004—the original theatrical release might have been more so, and this scene, considered too vulgar, might have been re-edited, retaining only a quick hand gesture as Brando takes a smear of butter onto his fingers. Unlikely. This was, after all, a late night cable channel that frequently showed sexually explicit films, so it seemed more likely that Mitch had either misremembered the scene or concocted his own version.

No matter.

What caught my attention was the way Brando's character delighted in this violent act while the girl sobbed in pain and fear. Mitch's suggested use of the butter might have been fabricated; the shared pleasure most certainly was.

Lots of sexperts—silly word—argue there is no such thing as a perverse sexual act between consenting adults. In theory, I believe this, so long as I confine my imagination to things like bondage, spanking, and, okay, anal intercourse—but I can't avoid the word *perverse* when I reflect on things like golden showers or strangulation at the point of orgasm, or the bit, from *Last Tango*, when Brando, having demanded the girl drive her fingers up his ass, insists she declare she will “do anything” for him, which in his imagination includes having a pig fuck her until it dies vomiting on her.

Mitch's perversion—at least so far as he ever admitted it to me in our seven years together—never went so far as the pig, though he did suggest once he would like to see

our kitten suck at my nipples. Even so, what disgusts me now, when I think of Mitch, are not so much the mechanics of the acts he suggested, but what motivated his desire for them.

He was forty-nine when we met. I was twenty-two.

I'd come straight to the college from a therapy session with the pastor of the Eastside Christian Church, where my first husband Chad and I were members. Four or five months earlier, on the brink of suicide, I'd sought help from ! the pastor, who in addition to his theological training had a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Once or twice a week, I'd sat with Brother Waggoner for an hour, pouring out all my conflicted feelings about religion, my husband, and myself. I longed to write, but every time I showed my husband a story, he argued that I should write only "for the glory of God," by which he meant parables, Sunday school lessons, and the sermons he planned someday to deliver. I also longed to go back to school, as I had begun to see my lack of education as an even greater obstacle to good writing than Chad was. Brother Waggoner had finally persuaded me that it was a betrayal of neither God nor my husband to get a college education, and, before my courage waned, I drove the five miles to the local extension of the state university instead of going home.

It was mid-July, and the admissions counselor, determined to get me enrolled for the fall semester, quelled my fears by citing the statistics on nontraditional students at ! that campus—well over 50%--and by assuring me that since I was over 21 and had a high school diploma, admission was guaranteed. She asked about the bulging file folder I held in my lap, and I admitted it was full of short stories I had written, though I didn't mention

that I had brought them with me from the car, where I always kept them, in hopes someone at the college might read them.

“You need to speak to Dr. Ralston,” she said, picking up her phone to call the professor who directed creative writing. That was Mitch.

Minutes later, I was on the other side of campus, tapping timidly at the open door of an office so stuffed and piled with books and papers it seemed to house every word ever written. It was glorious.

! A rich, deep voice, bored and tired, called for me to come in. He didn't look up from his desk at first, but said, rather, “Just a moment,” so I stood awkwardly, trying to keep my purse strap up on my shoulder as well as manage the folder of stories, a stack of admissions forms, and a four-foot long closed umbrella without looking clumsy. The man at the desk looked wonderfully professorial, with a small bald patch at his crown ringed by tightly waved salt-and-pepper—a middle-aged Joseph Cotten, slightly rumped but still aristocratic.

Back then, there really wasn't much I knew about myself, particularly sexually, but I did know that my bright smile could charm almost anyone, so I flashed it at him, and he leapt to his feet to clear a pile of books from the chair nearest his desk. I was wearing a rose and ivory sundress that day, with wide straps and a loose bodice, and what I didn't realize, until it was too late, was that I gave Dr. Ralston a clear view of my braless breasts when I leaned down to stow my giant umbrella under the chair.

At first, I repeated most of what I'd told the admissions counselor, about how I wanted to study English and be a writer, and about how I felt nervous and even a bit guilty for having wasted the five years since high school. Naturally, he wanted to know

what I'd been up to during that time, so I told him about my evangelical husband—the one I'd married at seventeen because I believed God told me I should—and how, in the spirit of what Chad believed to be the true Christian marriage, I had been a housewife all those years. I found myself confiding things I had so far told to no one but Brother Waggoner, like how my husband and his whole family were pressuring me to have a baby but how I'd realized that I didn't want to—not with him, at least—and then I bitterly quipped that I didn't know how Chad expected me to get pregnant when he slept with me less than twice a year.

Like the counselor before him, he noticed my folder, and, without my asking, he offered to read the stories I'd brought with me. “Come back tomorrow,” he said, “and we'll discuss them.”

Twenty hours later, the confidence I'd been grasping at for years was mine in forty minutes of talk. He was particularly taken with an image in one of the stories, “Severance Pay,” about a girl so obsessed with wanting all her father's attention that she writes in her diary a series of fantasies about her mother's death, imagining how she herself would step into the role of wife she feels she was meant to fulfill. When the mother does die, the father chances upon the diary, and, enraged by what is written there, brutally beats the girl and drives her from the house. Years later, married and pregnant, she sees her father at a bus stop. She backs up to stay out of his line of vision, and, when the bus comes, she doesn't get on. She watches her father move to the back of the bus and take a window seat on her side of the street. Just as the doors whoosh to a close, he sees her and, realizing he has recognized her, she takes a reconciliatory step forward. He

spits on the glass in her direction, and the final image is of the foamy stream streaking down the dirty window as the bus pulls away.

Dr. Ralston declared that the spit was symbolic of semen—a pronouncement that shocked and scandalized me, as I'd had nothing of the sort in mind. I wonder myself, all these years later, if I, now a fifteen-year veteran of the teaching of literature and writing, would say the same thing to a student who presented me with a similar image. I don't know. What I do know is that when I wrote the scene, I wanted only for the father to respond to his daughter in the most contemptuous way possible, and I said so.

Dr. Ralston wouldn't have it, and I was flattered by his insistence that I had “instinctively” arrived at a symbol, something he decried his ability to do. “I'm too aware of them,” he said. “That's something you'll have to be on guard against as you become educated.” Already I was in his thrall, but he clinched my devotion in a particularly clever move when he asked me to read and comment on one of his stories. “I've been having trouble with it,” he said, “and I'd like a fresh pair of intelligent eyes to offer a another viewpoint.”

“You think I'm intelligent?” I asked, awed. “How do you know?”

“I've been doing this a long time.” Although it is hard to see as equally guilty an embarrassingly inexperienced twenty-two year old housewife and a forty-nine year old professor, I don't hold Mitch solely responsible for the affair's having begun. It was I, after all, who four days later wrote, “I think I'm falling in love with you” at the end of my comments on his story about a child in a bar—but, then, I'd written virtually the same thing months before in a note to Brother Waggoner, who sensibly ignored it without any change in behavior toward me.

Dr. Ralston was powerfully alluring, and nearly as sex-starved as I, as it turned out, so I can't blame either of us for the sudden, wild grasping and ravenous kissing. What shocked me, though, was the way within seconds he thrust his hands under my skirt and started tugging at my panties, trying to lift me up against the wall of the conference room where we'd gone to talk. Foolishly, I'd imagined that kissing would be enough. After all, for the three years before we married, Chad and I had never gone beyond fondling, and, now, though we rarely had sex, we still necked. I'd gotten used to feeling the sexual urge without acting on it, and so now I felt like an idiot for not knowing that most people did act. I didn't want to have sex with the professor, not right then—and perhaps not at all; I hadn't thought it through—but I felt obligated. Clearly, I'd opened Pandora's box, and I had to take the consequences, so I let him plunge awkwardly into me, astonished at how giving in to what might have been a fleeting impulse—writing the note, three seconds' work—could lead to such a thorough breaking of my marriage vows.

Spent! the entire act completed in under five minutes—Mitch thanked me and then told me that the moment he opened the door he would compose his face so as to erase all indication that anything had occurred between us.

And he did.

A coldness overtook every outlet of expression—his eyes, his mouth, his voice, his posture—while I still blushed and cooed. We walked back to his office where he perfunctorily jotted “student conference” on his calendar to represent our plan to meet again a few days later. Somehow in the interim between my literally coming off the wall and our getting back to his office, he had suggested “lunch” which I transformed to

“picnic,” but which we both understood to mean “sex.” The matter, on his side at any rate, apparently settled, I left, ! still flushed, wondering what the secretary I passed must be thinking, trying to shake off my confusion. By the time I reached my car, I’d decided he was just as confused as I—no doubt the reason for his change of manner—and that I would plan a romantic picnic with homemade French bread, cheese, wine, and fresh strawberries.

All these details came roaring back to me, with the understanding of middle age, while I watched *Last Tango*. Frame by frame, I saw more of Mitch in Brando, and I realized that, shortly after he met me, he took the fantasy he’d nurtured since first seeing the film—a sudden and intense sexual relationship with a buxom young woman—and began to live it as reality. He became the angry and disgruntled ex-pat Paul, bitterly seeking revenge on his dead wife for her affair and for his being left with guilt over her suicide, and he made me the sexually advanced Jeanne who entices Paul to lure her away from her boyish fiancé.

On the surface, there was nothing ! about the real situation, aside from our ages and the suddenness of our first sexual encounter, that matched with the film. Mitch wasn’t an expatriate managing a dingy flophouse in Paris but a tenured professor at an undistinguished college who owned a nice house in one of the better townships that flanked a mid-sized American city. His wife was very much alive, though he had pronounced her sexually dead, and his desire to see both his genetic material and his name carried into yet another generation seemed secure in his boast of three sons. And I was hardly a mini-skirted and panty-less overly-made-up sex-kitten, but instead a fairly

pretty, scrubbed, church-going housewife who, a virgin at marriage, was still very nearly one five years later.

Brando's character insisted on no names, no histories—a purely sexual involvement that could be dropped as quickly as it had been taken up, once the impulse had passed. I see now that's what! fascinated Mitch, what he wanted from me but was too middle class to suggest. Had I suggested it, I know he would have agreed, and, while it was already too late to banish names and some personal history, for a long time, I believe, he expected me to clarify that what we were having was nothing more than an intense interlude.

I wish sometimes that I had been savvy enough then to recognize a fling would have been enough—enough to get me out of my first marriage, enough to make me more personally and sexually aware, enough to give me some of the toughening experience of life, all of which I needed. “Just an affair” might have bruised me a little, but it would have spared me—and him—the marriage and all its agony. Like Mitch, though, I had overlaid my own fantasy on the reality, and had made up my mind that first day, before the crotch of my panties had even cooled, that what we had really done against the wall in the conference room was make love, an act symbolic of the love that, for both of! us, was meant to be.

That picnic I planned was a disaster, though I refused to admit it. Desperate not to be seen, Mitch drove miles and miles into the wildest section of an area park, taking ever more dubious roads, assuring me we wouldn't get lost because he was making a map in his mind. That much was true—we got out again without mishap—but what I had dreamed as a delicious, sylvan passion was a scattered mess begun with a hot tramp over

a hill—so we couldn't be seen from the road if anyone happened by—punctuated with mosquitoes and briars and dried leaves that shifted beneath my back so that I constantly had to dig my feet into the hillside to keep from sliding into the rocky creek below. At last we gave up and pulled ourselves back to level ground to have the picnic. I felt the sting when he tugged the corkscrew from his pocketknife and then pulled the wine bottle from the cooler and said, "Screw top!" Knowing nothing at all about wine, I'd bought a bottle of rosé, as rosy as my naïve vision, because I thought it was the most beautiful, and because I thought a screw top to be merely a practical convenience.

On the drive out, I cuddled up to him, still trying to show myself irresistible, a woman in love, but his face was already growing cold again. "How many times have you done this?" he asked, keeping his eyes fixed on the road.

I pulled up, astonished. "Never," I said.

He did look at me then, with a flash of horror, quickly followed by steel. "That makes me more culpable."

I didn't know the word, but was ashamed to ask its meaning, so I said nothing. When I got home, I looked it up—*blameworthy*.

Still I didn't see, nor did I see for some years what would become one of the themes of our marriage: his blaming me entirely for the breakup of his family. In time he persuaded himself he wasn't responsible, since I, the sexual enchantress, had led him astray. Trained in literature, convinced that Lolita and not Humbert Humbert was the guilty one, he refused to entertain the notion that he was not the hapless fly caught in my web. One blames Calypso, after all, not Odysseus, for the years of sexual imprisonment.

Later that evening, Chad caught me in my lie. He'd already found the cooler, with the remnants of the picnic, in the trunk, and when he said that he needed something from the car, I tried to stop him from going out, saying, "I'll get it."

"I've already seen the cooler," he said. "And the wine glasses."

For a moment, I grasped for a story—an outing with a girlfriend—but it was pointless, so I coldly confessed, unmoved by his despair, and said I would sleep that night in the spare room and be out of the house within days. By the end of that week, I'd moved back in with my mother, had taken a student loan with her co-signature, enrolled full-time in college, and, with Mitch's help, had even made arrangements to attend a writers' conference a few hours away.

Less than a month after our first meeting, I lay in bed with Mitch at a Best Western in a neighboring town. We were talking, entwining our raised arms in idle play, when he grasped my hand and pressed his forearm against mine, sighing about how odd they looked together, mine so clear and white and firm against his, age-spotted and thick with gray hair. "What would your father say if he knew about me?"

"I never knew my father," I said.

"Well," he said, rolling away from me and onto his back to study the ceiling.

"That explains me."

"It doesn't," I said. I'd been accused of seeking the father figure before, when I'd taken up with Ed, seven years older than I, and I was impatient with this pop-psychology. "My grandfather was my father."

"But the story—that says it all. 'Severance Pay.'"

“It’s just a story,” I said, cringing now because I knew I didn’t entirely believe that. The events were contrived, but virtually every story I’d dreamed up as a child had included a particularly close relationship between father and daughter. I couldn’t deny—not to myself anyway—that I had longed for a father every day of my life. Still, I’d had plenty father substitutes over the years—a couple of men in my church, my mother’s best friend’s husband, several uncles. My feelings toward Dr. Mitch Ralston were very different. I wanted him as a lover, and so! meday, I decided early on, as a husband.

“It’s an Electra complex,” he said.

“A what?” I asked, and he told me the legend of Electra, who had plotted to slay her mother and her mother’s lover in revenge for the murder of Electra’s father, Agamemnon. Then he told me about Freud and asked me about my mother—trying to find out, I suppose, if I hated her or felt threatened by her—but I told him that after years of tension, borne from my relationship with Ed, we were close again.

“Is she in ill health?” he asked.

“Of course not,” I said. “Where did you get that idea?” I told him that she was always stressed from the demands of helping to care for my grandparents, stopping in every day on her way to and from work.

“She still works?”

! His shock shocked me. “She’s only forty-four.”

“So I could be your father...” He turned completely away this time, his face to the wall.

Now I was annoyed. He was twenty-seven years older than I, so of course he was old enough to be my father. I was just three years older than his eldest son. Why was he suddenly acting as if he'd had a terrible revelation?

But I had misread him. He wasn't worrying over the age difference at all. Instead, he was becoming enchanted with the notion that I actually could be his daughter. When, moments later, I mentioned that my mother had completed only a year at the local university before she had become pregnant, his eyes brightened lustily.

! 0“That would have been around 1960, wouldn't it?”

I tried correcting him—it would have been 1958—but he wasn't listening. Instead, he was inventing a tale.

“Yes,” he said. “It's possible. I taught here part-time that summer, a few years before I took the permanent job. There was a student—pretty, short, small waist, light-brown hair, fair skin and big eyes.” He was describing me. Aside from the lightness of our skin and the natural color of our hair, Mother and I didn't look much alike. I favored the women on my grandfather's side of the family, and anyone could see I'd inherited my grandmother's figure—broad shoulders, large chest, short legs, and a flat behind. Again, I tried to tell him, but he went on. “Just a brief encounter. Months later, after I'd returned to New York, an acquaintance passing through told me she'd dropped out of school and that it ! was rumored she was pregnant.”

“Stop it!” I furiously pulled myself up and started to get out of the bed, but he caught me and pulled me back into his arms. “The dates are all wrong anyway. Mother was in Indianapolis in 1960, with two babies. I wasn't born until November of '61.”

“I'm just teasing,” he murmured, biting gently at my earlobe.

I looked at him, ready to forgive. I smiled, he kissed me. And then the leer came back into his eye. “But it IS possible.”

I struggled to get away, but he held me down by my shoulders, and mused, “Would it matter so very much?”

“It’s disgusting!” I cried. “Let me go!”

! 033 “Never mind,” he said. “Never mind.” He still held me down, but he took advantage of my having turned my head away to dot my neck with soft kisses. Gradually, these increased in passion, and moments later, we were making love again.

For the next seven years, that’s how we staunched every wound—intense, experimental, unrestrained, our intimate tango growing ever fiercer as we each struggled to pull the shadow-partner of our fantasies into step. In the early years, before we were married, when Mitch was still married elsewhere, we rendezvoused much like the lovers in *The Last Tango in Paris*, traveling separately to our meeting place, linking for a few hours, then separating again into our real lives, shimmering a little at the idea that the world knew nothing of us.

! Once, when we hadn’t been together long, Mitch went a little beyond detailing the scene with the butter and portrayed the film as a grand love story. “She worshipped him,” he said of the girl, Jeanne. “Really loved him.”

In a quiet moment, Jeanne tells Paul about her father, an Army colonel killed in Algeria when she was a small girl. “I loved him like a god,” she says. Paul curses; reminding her he wants none of her stories, insisting, “nothing matters outside this room.” Exasperated, she demands to know what she must do to get close, and he mocks her, pulling her onto him, inviting her to “come on the Good Ship Lollipop.” In another

scene, Paul says to her, “I think I’m happy ! with you,” but a few minutes later, when she tries to leave the apartment with him, he shoves her back inside and slams the door. Even so, she comes back, again and again, bringing records and other small items to make the apartment seem more of a home, refusing to give up her quest to learn who he truly is, each attempt answered with greater coldness and cruelty.

A year after Mitch’s marriage dissolved—it was she, not he, who ended it—he told me, as I was about to board a plane for a six-week French course in Québec, “When you come back, Little Girl, I’ll make you Mrs. Ralston.” And for those six weeks, we each scripted our future: mine full of candlelight dinners, Shakespeare in the Park, lazy Saturday mornings reading in a double hammock; his a post-modern hybrid of *The Brady Bunch* and *A Clockwork Orange* in which his aging but still delicious ! nymphet becomes tender mother to his teenage twin droogs, boys who, by his own admission, were violent and without conscience.

Eight months after we married, I agreed he should accept a two-year teaching post in Malaysia when he described how we would live together in an exotic land, away from disapproving colleagues, his ex-wife, and his sons—one of whom had twice wrapped his hands tightly around my neck to prove he could strangle me. The contract signed, Mitch said, “The boys are excited about living in Malaysia,” and answered my weeping and raging with, “You can come or not,” adding if I didn’t, the marriage was over.

So many chances I had, like Jeanne, to break away. I could have stayed behind, not gone to Malaysia, let the marriage end. Twice that first year, I traveled alone back to the States. Nobody made me complete the round trip, get on the plane once again bound for Kuala Lumpur. A! ll Jeanne would have had to do was never go back to the

apartment. Paul didn't know where she lived. He didn't even know her name. She could simply have disappeared. But it seems Jeanne and I both favored drama. At least three times, Jeanne cries out that she is leaving, never to return, and runs from Paul. Once I left a lengthy letter on my pillow and fled to the hotel where Mitch and I had stayed when we first arrived in Malaysia. No matter how I tried to leave, I always came back, sometimes lured by Mitch's sexual hunger disguised as repentance, sometimes by my own, but each time waking from the dream a little sooner.

Jeanne retreats from Paul by returning, at brief intervals, to her fiancé to plan the wedding, search for an apartment, talk about having babies. Ever the imaginative fool, I escaped into my own fresh fantasy of security, imagining myself by turns with Geoff and Ben, the two kindest men I knew, wondering what it would be like to be on the other side of the world with them! , held in their arms, warm in their beds, to be lover, wife. An even greater fool, I wrote it all down.

For a year I'd looked forward to the day when the twins would return to the States to start college, convinced that Mitch and I, alone at last, could match our steps again. But we were too far apart, each too practiced in our own version of the dance. A conversation about laundry could spark us into lobbing verbal shells at each other in our battle to win the crown of most-wronged, so more and more, Mitch played solitaire at the dining table, while I curled in the armless living room chair, surrounded by burning mosquito coils, and wrote.

One day while I was out, he stole my journals, photocopied all the pages, and, late in the night while I was sleeping, he read them. He cut them to bits and reconstructed

them into “proof” that I’d had affairs with those good kind men, and then mailed the pages folded inside! letters sharing the news with their wives.

It was weeks before I learned everything he had done. After I found out about the stolen journals, I wanted to cancel a weekend we’d planned at a resort in Phuket, but when he threatened to go alone and walk into the sea, I said I would come, which made him swing me round the room and proclaim the trip our second honeymoon. “We’ll start again,” he said.

When we returned, he moved into the spare bedroom, locking himself in with the photocopies, coming out from time to time to call me whore, slut, murderer—and then to snap-turn and swear I was his life, his cherished love. As always, sex was the only thing that quieted him, but he no longer cared if it was consensual. “If you love me,” he might say, clutching my throat, “you must show me.” Once during a tangled argument, he raised his arm to strike me and I ran toward the only room that locked, but he pushed in behind me, and trapped me in a corner. I screamed, pleaded, sobbed. He pulled me to him, pressed my face into my chest, his hand tight against my skull, and clenched his other arm around my back. “I’ll hold you until you stop crying,” he said. And I had to stop, because I couldn’t breathe. He took my calm—the unnatural calm of terror—for agreement with all he had said. Again, he asked for proof of love, insisting I keep my eyes open the whole time, so he could be certain I was thinking of no one else.

In *The Last Tango in Paris*, when Jeanne finally resolves to leave Paul for good, he follows her in the street. “It’s over,” she says. “Finished.”

“We’ll start again,” he says, as cheerful as can be. “When something’s finished, it begins again.” He proclaims his love for her and rattles out the

details of his life, concocting on the spot a new fantasy in which they will live together in the flophouse left to him by his dead wife. She fights to get away from him, but he is stronger and pulls her into a sleazy dancehall, and as they wander among the dancing couples, Paul enjoys the fantasy of courting Jeanne, imagining he is charming her with sophisticated pick-up lines straight out of a 1950's cocktail drama, saying things like, "May I offer you some champagne" and inviting her to dance. She lets him lead her to the dance floor where, amidst the couples competing in mechanical steps, they improvise a more erotic and playful tango. When they are chased from the floor by a judge, Paul still prances and jokes, but for Jeanne, the spell is broken. She moves to a table in a dark corner. Paul follows her, and again, she tells him it's over. "When something's finished," he repeats, "it begins again."

Desperate now, she sees she must take herself away, for he will not let her go. And for that, a new fiction is required. While he keeps up his movie-style wooing, she weakly plays along, and then, weeping, jerks him off under the table. When he is spent, she takes advantage of his distraction and his drunkenness to run. Paul, realizing suddenly that she if she gets away he will never find her, staggers after her. The labyrinthine chase through the streets of Paris ends in her apartment where a terrified Jeanne, unable to attract the attention of either the neighbors or the police with her cries for help, shoots Paul with her father's pistol at the very moment he asks to know her name.

When it came time for me to break free, the end was neither so quick, nor so violent. Because Mitch had one day slipped my credit cards from my wallet, leaving me no way to book a flight back to the States, I needed help, so I turned to Dr. Roselle, a

clinical psychologist at the American Institute. Mitch approved of my twice-weekly appointments—it was he, after all, who had shoved me through the door of Dr. Roselle’s office months before and said, “Fix her. She’s broken.” The doctor helped me weave a new tale, one that would persuade Mitch that I had no intention of divorcing him. Dr. Roselle’s role was to urge Mitch to let me leave Malaysia, convincing him that the survival of our marriage depended on our being separated for a while. Whether Mitch believed the lie or only pretended he did, I’ll never know. But at last, he agreed that I should go.

Eighteen months after we’d arrived in Malaysia, thirty months after we had married, Mitch and I stood alone together for the last time in the front room of our apartment off the Old Klang Road in Kuala Lumpur. My Indian friend, Vijaya, who had come to help me manage the luggage and the carriers holding my three cats, had slipped discreetly onto the exterior landing to watch for the truck that would take me to the airport in Subang Jaya. In the weeks it had taken to get my tickets and the vaccination papers and import stamps for the cats, Mitch and I had barely spoken. Now, saying goodbye, we flung ourselves at each other, clinging and pawing awkwardly, kissing in desperation, pressing together so forcefully that I could feel the stirring of his erection against my hipbone. In his arms—he still is the only man I’ve ever known who could hold me as tightly as I wanted to be held—I began to forget why I had to go. Sobbing into his chest, I whispered, “I love you. I’m sorry,” and he pulled his arms around me even tighter. “Stay, Little Girl. Stay.”

And then! dash a faint horn, Vijaya’s light tap, the click of a door handle, and her soft voice, “The lorry has come.”

Mitch's arms dropped away like slit rope. And just like that day when we had stepped out of the university conference room, all expression evaporated from his face. This time, I was grateful, for otherwise, I'm not sure I could have stepped away, wiped my cheeks dry, picked up my purse from the table, closed the door behind me.

Author's Note: Names have been changed to protect the privacy of all those involved.

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