

SUPERPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

This novel follows the fate of a few characters that meet in a fictional country, which has started to implement regulations that are discrepant with human rights. The main character in the story is a famous painter, who, unconscious of the drastic changes in the country she is traveling to, visits her best friend and becomes immersed in an unexpected and difficult chain of events. The central theme of the story plays out the conflict between being alone vs. being in relationship and between individualism and collectivism.

In the beginning, the main character marginalizes the signs indicating the country's troubled climate, but after a while they become unavoidable. Just when the painter starts to understand how serious the situation is, her friend commits suicide. After this dramatic event, the main character goes into deep states of sorrow, emotional pain, and grieving. In the meantime, she receives an invitation to a party at the Presidents Palace, and a few days later she comes out from her room with a plan in mind. She meets the president of the country, and then uses her connection with him to unmask his miserable politics at an international press conference.

In addition to fulfilling her plan, meeting the president also brings forth some unexpected feelings between the artist and the president. They end up falling in love with each other, and the president starts to understand that the people of his nation need to have the option of being alone, and he also realizes

that this is his own personal need as well.

The main character returns to her home country with the piece of mind of knowing that she helped in a change the course of that country's development. In the end, the painter's eyes are filled with tears as she remembers her best friend, and her heart is broken because she cannot be with the person she fell in love with.

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CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Introduction

For my Process Work thesis, I have written a fiction novel that depicts a moment in time when a few characters meet and are exposed to different challenges and difficult situations. These characters find sorrow, misery, and depression, but they also find solutions and love. The story broaches issues such as: being alone vs. being with others, fighting vs. giving up, individualism vs. conformism, love vs. hate, and more.

This accompanying contextual essay explains how I used Process Work concepts and ideas in the story, and it also describes the problems that I encountered while writing the novel.

Writer's Block

During the long months of intensely struggling, fighting, meditating, and working with my writing, I came to the realization that since it was not happening no matter how hard I tried to push it, then maybe the writing was not meant to happen at that particular point in time. Maybe pushing was not the right approach. It took me another few months to let go of the idea that writing the novel was the only thing that I should be focused on, and then, during one of my inner works, the following thought came to me: What I am pushing for is not nearly as good for me as what is already happening. I realized that creativity is

not something that only occurs when I sit to write; it is something that is constantly present.

After that, about 90% of me was able to relax about this project, but there was still 10% that I couldn't let go. My stubbornness became very irritating, and after a while it even became depressing, because I felt that I was unable to do what I most desired and loved. The longing to be a writer started killing me from the inside. I knew enough about myself to foresee that this might lead to a crisis, but this time I would not allow myself to fall into the pattern of self-doubt that was well-known to me. I decided to believe in "me" whatever that meant or involved. I decided not to abandon myself and to trust that if I am stubborn about something (even if it irritates every last part of me), I will try to discover what might be important about it.

After experiencing a very intense emotional period of time and even more intense inner work, I slowly started to gain an ability to see things from a distance. I discovered that my biggest problem was constantly thinking about either the past or future. I had been working on past events in my life trying to solve problems and traumas that felt connected to my writing. I had also been jumping into the future and thinking about the success of my novel; imagining myself as a famous writer and influencing other people with my story. Of course, working on the past and dreaming about the future were also needed. It was absolutely necessary for me to go through a period of working on, thinking about, and analyzing all of the above issues, but to get stuck in these issues was another thing altogether.

What was missing was the present moment. In the present moment, I was not writing. So I asked myself, what was I doing then? Over the next months, weeks, and days, I started practicing Zen meditation along with Process-Oriented Inner Work in order to bring myself more fully into the present moment. I followed my dreams and my body to feel where I was at, and what I need and want to be doing with this creative journey.

In addition to feeling closer to myself and happier than I had ever felt in my life, I also began meditating in ways I had never tried before, and I even took classical ballet and modern dance classes. The thing that was most important and that my stubbornness insisted upon was that I continued to be creative and continued to explore each and every way that creativity wanted to manifest in my life. I took the path of least resistance, and, after all of the difficulty and striving, my book finally began to come into being.

Purpose

The main purpose of this novel is to demonstrate Process Work theories and methods in a creative and innovative way, and it is written for a broad spectrum of audiences, including people without any previous exposure to Process Work. Subsequently, there is a “world work” aspect to this thesis because it deals with difficult matters in an accessible way. At the same time, the novel provides readers with valuable insights and maybe even potential solutions to their personal problems and struggles. Since the novel is so focused on social and psychological entanglement, I also hope that it will reach out and sparkle a

spirit of open-mindedness towards, tolerance for, and deeper understanding of human beings and nature.

Zen Buddhism

In every chapter of the novel, I use different Process Work theories to create the action and inspire the characters. Process Work borrows the idea of focusing on the present moment from Zen Buddhism, and I decided to show to the reader in an unorthodox way how important it is to live life in the “here and now”.

Quantum Physics

Quantum physics and Arnold Mindell's (2000) efforts to bridge physics and psychology have had a tremendous influence on this novel. Theories concerning relativity, synchronicity, gravity, the Big Bang, and space and time have fascinated me for many years, and I hope that I was able to express at least some of that fascination through the novel. I also hope that the reader will be able to perceive the unbreakable connection between the world of matter and the world of psychic energy, which I tried to convey through the way that the main character finds herself aligned with all that is happening in her life at a particular time and in a particular space and mindset. To illustrate those concepts and dynamics, the main character arrives, not only into a new country, but also into great difficulties. She struggles to reconcile her internal feeling world with the world of physical consensus reality all around her. The character tries to use her

life situation to the best of her ability, and she tries to find a way to allow her wholeness to come forth. But she is then faced with the hardship of having to make decisions when everything seems even more relative than before. After the death of her best friend, this character experiences the curve of space and time as an extreme state. At another point in the story, she makes a plan that requires a great deal of patience, and in order to make the plan work, she must pretend to be someone else and quiet down her real feelings and thoughts for that moment. The arrival of unexpected love is the turning point or “big bang” moment for this character, and it brings forth destruction as well as the emergence of new life.

Polarizations

I have used the Process Work theory on polarizations to describe the opposition between two sides of a conflict and the motivations and determination behind those two sides. I also use this theory to point out some of the similarities between the two sides that occur at a deeper layer of the conflict. For example, the main conflict in the novel is between individualism and collectivism.

Relationship Work

The dialogue in the story is also strongly influenced by Process Work. Everything that happens between characters in the novel is based on a Process-Oriented model of relationship work. I built connections between characters, brought them to an edge, unfolded if or how a character crosses over an edge, and explored how edges influence other characters and the course of events.

Each thing that a character does in the story is echoed in a corresponding relationship with another character; nothing is isolated and everything is connected.

Altered and Extreme States Of Consciousness

I have also incorporated the Process Work concepts of altered and extreme states of consciousness and “city shadows” (Mindell, 1988) into my novel. These theories are weaved throughout the novel, and I relied on them to build characters. In the novel, a big part of the society is labeled as mentally ill for experiencing a “state of consciousness which is different from the state connected to collective primary process” (Mindell, 1988, p. 173). In other words, these people have experienced something different from what mainstream society accepts and understands as “normal.” Therefore, many people in the story have been locked up in mental institutions or overly medicated because they do not fit in with the mainstream.

Three Levels Of Reality

I also used Process Work to construct the psychological backgrounds of the characters and their actions. I used the theory that there are three levels of reality (i.e., consensus reality, dream land, and essence level) to deeply see into the characters and understand how they think, feel, and behave. Viewing the characters through these three levels of reality helped me to determine what stands behind their spoken words, what states they are going through, and what

processes are unfolding. I used my imagination as well as my experience as a Process-Oriented Therapist to create psychological depth in the lives of all the figures in the story.

Role Theory

Readers will notice that none of the characters in the novel have a name. Instead, I used the roles that characters play in the story to describe each person, so there is the role of a painter, president, friend, etc. This artistic intervention is based on the Process Work concept of role theory, and its main purpose is to expose the nature of roles and the patterns of energy that manifest through individuals in a group field, which allows varying perspectives and processes to be expressed. In other words, a role is more than just the individual playing it, and it is not limited to only one person. I hope that this artistic intervention allows readers to more easily feel into and explore how these different roles, feelings, and possibilities are also in themselves.

Contributions To Process Work

I hope this novel contributes to the field of Process-Oriented Psychology by bringing a larger spectrum of readers to the paradigm, especially readers who are not already connected to the larger field of psychology.

Another aspect of the project that I consider to be a contribution to the Process Work community lies in the unfolding of the story itself. I believe that by reading, understanding, and relating to the journey of these characters, readers

can feel enriched in numerous ways and learn from the characters' experiences. I also believe that this is a pioneering work, because a fiction novel based on Process Work theories, methods, and experiences has never before been undertaken by any member of the Process Work World Community. By breaking this new ground, I hope to broaden perspectives on how Process Work can be used, and I hope to positively influence the world.

References

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SUPERPOSITION

If the world can be in any configuration, any possible arrangement of particles or fields, and if the world could also be in another configuration, then the world can also be in a state which is a superposition of the two. (Superposition, Wikipedia, 2008)

Journey From The Past To The Future:

The Marginalization Of Momentum

My body feels pulled in every direction. The north is calling my grey nature, howling through the wind. The south sweats out my daily troubles, it leaves no wisdom in the stuffy air, and it reaches my ears with the sound of flamenco. The east goes straight to my heart and divides everything into equal pieces, majoring time for a proper meditation. The west pushes and pulls and confuses me, it questions everything and brings a thunderstorm to my eyes, which cry endlessly. I am slowly adding all of the possible combinations: northwest, southwest, northeast, southeast. Up into space to dissolve and change into stardust. Down into the center of the Earth to reach the orgasmic feeling of unity with all of life. One direction at a time, all of them at the same time, pairs, triads, everything and nothing, every possibility, beyond life and death, with a witness and without, and everything that's in between and on the edges. Above all, there is the unknown, unpredictable, insane, and out of mind

voice that whispers the secrets of all times.

She opened her eyes and slowly arose from a kneeling position, stretching her legs and back by hanging her head downwards. Her long fingers surrounded her ankles with a gentle touch, and she froze for a moment. When she stood up straight, the morning sun was penetrating her right cheek with its dull yellow color.

She reached for her old fashion watch, and as she put it on her wrist, noticed the time.

- The meditation took longer than usual - she thought to herself, trying to hurry up.

When she arrived at the dispatch, there were just a few people waiting in line before her, but time was dragging as it usually does in a crowded room. After a moment, she noticed that the line wasn't moving forward and looked over the shoulder of the lady in front of her. With interest, she stared at the situation at the counter. A man was standing at the front of the line, and he was quite handsome, somewhere in his thirties. He had a small bag standing beside his right leg and a professional looking camera hanging from his neck.

- It's a scandal! - said the man, raising his voice higher and higher.

- First you send me away because I don't have my press I.D., and now you are saying that the visa regulations have changed? When did they change? -

- With the first day of this month, sir - replied a slightly irritated woman who wore a sweet facial expression and was standing in front of the inflamed photographer.

- But it's the second day of December today? How could I have possibly known? -

- I am very sorry, sir. I am not the one who makes those rules. I am just trying to

politely inform you that to be able to enter our country, you have to have a visa. Please, go to our embassy. This is the address - The woman handed him a small piece of paper that she picked up from a pile of identical pieces of paper held together by a spiral. The conversation created a commotion in the line.

- What kind of visa is she talking about? Do you have a visa? – asked the woman standing in line before her.

- No, I've never heard of it before - she replied.

As the young photographer walked away with the embassy address in his hand, the clerk at the counter declared in a raised but professionally kind voice to the rest of the passengers in line that the new visa regulations only applied to business travel. She breathed a sigh of relief along with the rest of the people in line because she didn't have the slightest desire to face any adversities.

When she finally stood in front of the clerk's glittering eyes, she handed over her passport and ticket, and the clerk asked two questions:

- Are you traveling alone? -

- Yes - she answered sharply.

- Will there be someone picking you up at the airport? -

Another quick - Yes. -

She almost asked the clerk why would it matter, but she didn't feel like having a conversation.

As she moved away, she heard an automatic - Have a good flight – and then she put her headphones on and switched her focus to the sounds of a trumpet. She planned on passing the nine hours of flight time in the pleasant

company of her music. Her head jumped slightly when the “fasten your seatbelts” sign lit up, and her face, which had been half covered by her hair, suddenly revealed some signs of tiredness mixed with excitement.

In her memory stood a solitary tree bent in one direction by a strong wind, and at the foot of that tree were hundreds or perhaps thousands of people sitting on a huge piece of bright green grass. Her friend, who was probably already waiting for her at the airport, had sent this post card photo a few months ago, and on the back her friend had scribbled: “Forget about loneliness and visit us.” She thought it was very funny how she mainly saw the lonely tree on the postcard, while her friend probably saw the thousands of friendly faces that were supposed to encourage her to visit.

When she saw her friend’s eyes looking around at all of the other eyes in the crowded airport, she suddenly felt anxious and thought - There’s something wrong – but then she immediately dismissed that thought when her friend’s eyes reached hers, and she smiled the same smile as years ago. Her friend had one of the most beautiful smiles, the kind of smile that could light up a ballroom.

They hugged and looked closely at each other, and then she greeted two other friends who had also come to welcome her, which was very nice. As they drove to her friend’s house, they talked non-stop about the usual things, like the flight, the food, jetlag, etc.

The house was bigger than she expected. It had light brown walls, lots of large windows, and red Persian shutters with carvings in the corners. The roof was covered in dark bronze tiles, and there was a beautiful front porch with two

stone columns on the sides. In the yard, a narrow path led to the entrance, and it was surrounded by lots of little flowers and plants that were no higher than one meter. Everything was carefully arranged, and it was easy to see that someone had worked on this garden with love and persistence. There was a bench to the right of the house that faced the street and could seat four or five people, and just next to it, on the edge of the lot, there were some small cubes made of stone that looked like they were the remnants of a fence.

The first thing that struck her after entering into the house was the smell of dinner. Different kinds of herbs and vegetables were speaking to her empty stomach. She took one step further and entered into the living room, where she saw ten more people gathering to greet her and bustling around the food. It was very nice to see them all, and it was an honor to be welcomed in this way, but she only said a quick hello to everyone before leaving to take a shower.

When she returned, everybody was seated at the table, talking and laughing as they waited for their guest. She was absolutely in awe of the food and asked how they had prepared such an amazing meal. Someone told her that they used a herb from the vegetable garden at the back of the house, and that they liked to cook together. After the delicious meal, she felt exhausted and excused herself from the table to go to sleep.

She got up early the next morning and noticed that two people were already working in the garden. She went down to the garden and saw that the two were working hand in hand, talking constantly, and looking at each other from time to time. They invited her to join them as soon as they became aware of

her presence.

The garden was magnificent. The entire plane of the back yard was alternating lines of carrots, tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, cabbage, and herbs such as thyme, cilantro, sage, basil, cumin, lemongrass, rosemary, and many more. The smells, colors, and even the order in which they had been planted seemed to be perfect and magical in some way. As the two women showed her their creation with great pride, she became a true admirer. The women talked about the soil and about planting, and they picked some freshly grown food for breakfast. She couldn't help but notice how much love they had put into this garden together and asked:

- Have you known each other for a long time? You look like good friends? -

- Yes - said one of them - We have been friends for twenty years now, and we have sheard this passion for gardening for about five years. -

- How did you get interested in gardening? -

This time the other woman spoke - It's a long story really, but five years ago we decided that we wanted to join some kind of group or community and learn something new together and with others. We took a class on gardening and joined the National Association of Gardeners. We thought it might be fun to have a garden, and we weren't mistaken. -

- I am so glad you did that. Thanks to you I can now enjoy this beautiful view and even taste it. -

- Yes, that's why vegetable gardens are very popular in our country these days, because you can also use what you grow to cook for your family, friends, and

painters. -

- Thank you - she said, flattered by the comment. - Can I at least help with the cooking? -

- Absolutely. There's space for everyone. -

They headed back to the house, which was already as busy as a beehive.

- I didn't know that you're such an early bird - said her friend when the three women came in.

- I'm not. It's just the time difference. -

- Well, it's good to know that the time difference can result in something positive, like seeing the garden first thing in the morning. -

- That's true. The garden's unbelievable. -

They all cooked together, ate, and then sat down to listen as one person sang and two others accompanied on piano and violin. Then they drank some coffee. The painter was feeling great; the atmosphere was so friendly that, even though it had been less than a day, she was feeling very much at home.

- Is it always like this here? - she asked her friend.

- Yes, most of the time, although some things have just a little extra splendor right now because of your presence. People here admire your paintings very much. You have some true fans here. -

- That's nice to hear - she said, turning her head away like she didn't really hear it.

- Oh, come on, don't be so modest. You know very well that you are probably the most famous and successful painter in the world. Everybody loves you. -

- Thanks dear, but it's still nice to hear that someone likes my paintings. It's not like you can spoil me with compliments after all of those years when I painted alone in my small attic and no one would even look at my art. Back then I was just another person in this world trying to make something, and I didn't expect anyone to ever see my paintings, not to mention appreciate them. -

- Well, that's certainly in the past. -

- But I always have it in mind when I hear a compliment. -

- Let's drop that subject for now. Let me show you the city. -

- So soon? You're not wasting any time, are you? -

- Why would I? -

- Good point - she agreed with a little nod.

What she saw that day in the city couldn't compare with Rome, New York, London, Mumbai, or any of the world's other busiest cities. There were people everywhere. It was so noisy and crowded that she could hardly bear it. The friends that accompanied her on this tour were so enthusiastic that she tried to ignore how much the city disturbed her, but, with every hour that passed, it was getting harder and harder to ignore. She developed a headache, got conjunctivitis, and had difficulty hearing. Her efforts to be polite and show interest in the city weren't working anymore, and her symptoms were becoming too visible. After seeing the famous Family Center, visiting the Group Sports Academy (where the country had won most of the Olympics last year), having dinner at The Big Band restaurant, and watching an outdoor ballroom dance

show near by piazza, she had had more than enough.

Finally, she turned to her friend and whispered in her ear:

- Do you think it would be ok if we went back home now? I don't want to be rude, but I 'm very tired. I think it's still the jetlag. -

- Sure, no problem. -

She was surprised by how much she able to conform and how long she was able to ignore the demands of her body and the present moment.

When they arrived back at the house at 5:30 in the afternoon, she went straight up to her room, but she couldn't sleep that night, so she went down to get a glass of water. It was well after midnight, but when she reached the end of the stairs, she heard voices coming from the kitchen.

- She can't just stay in her room all day. You know that better than I do. You saw her in the city today; she couldn't handle it. -

- I know. We will figure something out - said the voice that she recognized as her friend's.

To the surprise of both interlocutors, she entered the kitchen.

- Is everything all right? - she asked.

Her best friend said, - Yes, everything is just fine. We were just discussing your stay here and planning some more things for you to see. We hope you're going to have a really great time. -

- Oh, I'm having a good time so far, and when I have time to rest I feel much better. -

The friend looked at the other person, who unhappily grinned and said, -

Goodnight - and then left.

- What's going on? - she asked with a glass of water in her hand.

- Nothing, really. It's just like I said, everybody is worried about you. You're a very special guest and hospitality is important to us. -

- I understand, and I'm very honored that your treating me in such a special way, but rest is also important to me. I can't just skip over my bodily needs and tell myself not to sleep or be tired. I may be famous, but my body is as ordinary as everyone else's. -

- Yes, of course. Speaking of which, let's just go to bed now, and in a few hours we'll start another good day together.

The friend smiled and took her hand, then they said goodnight and left the kitchen.

The next morning, the painter was late for breakfast. She still had a headache when she woke up, but she also had an interesting dream on her mind. When she went into the kitchen, three people were cleaning the dishes and some food sitting on the table. The two men and the lady were very nice, and they explained that the food had been left for her, but that if she wanted more or even something else, they would be happy to prepare it for her. She was more than happy with what had been left for her, and besides, it was much better than what she usually ate at home.

Just after sitting down at the table, her best friend and the unhappy person from late last night entered the kitchen with big smiles on their faces.

- Hi there - the painter said first.

- Hi, how are you? Did you sleep well? - her friend asked.

- Not really, but the breakfast compensates for everything - she said with a smile.

The other person asked if anyone would like some coffee, and everybody agreed that they would. The painter didn't usually walk around telling people her dreams, but for some reason, when there was a short moment of silence in the room, she said:

- I had an interesting dream last night – then looked down at her coffee. - I dreamed that I was alone and couldn't reach anyone. There was no communication or contact with anyone whatsoever. Isn't it a strange dream? -

She looked up and saw everyone staring at her as if she were a ghost.

- Well, it was just a dream - her friend said.

- What do you mean it was *just* a dream? – asked the painter - Dreams have a specific purpose, and they always carry important messages. You know about that, and you know my attitude towards dreams. -

- You don't really believe that, do you? - said the person sitting next to the friend.

- Oh yes, I do and . . . -

- Hey, - the friend interrupted - I forgot to ask you, is there a specific place that you would like to see in the city? -

She was surprised to be pushed of course like this, but she already felt a little uncomfortable about the change of atmosphere that happened after mentioning the dream, so she answered:

- Yes, you know me. I would like to see your Academy of Fine Arts. -

- Ok, we'll try to do that this afternoon, but first you have to see what I've planned

for you, all right? - she asked with her sparkling eyes.

- Sure, sweetie. You're the host. -

This cheered everybody up a little, and people started getting up from the table. The painter went out of the house with her friend, and they waited by the car for the two gardeners, who wanted to come along with them. The friend quietly spoke into the painter's ear, - Please don't talk about dreams any more, some people around here don't like it. -

- What do you mean? I don't understand. We can disagree but still talk about something, can't we? -

- Please, no, just don't talk about it. Do it for me, ok? -

- If it's really that important. -

- Thanks - the friend said as the two gardeners came out to join them.

As they drove on the highway, she noticed that two of the three highway lanes had signs that read: "Restricted lanes, only for more than one passenger, at all times." Before she had a chance to say anything about this, it suddenly occurred to her that this was the same highway they had taken from the airport.

- Is it the same road that we took from the airport? - she asked.

- Yes - said one of the gardeners.

- Can you tell me where we're going now, or is your plan still a secret? -

- I want to show you our Congress. I think you're going to like it. -

- I've heard about it. It's a new, very modern building, right? -

- That's right. It's a great building surrounded by a whole town of restaurants, hotels, bars, etc. And there is a very funny trolley that goes around in the streets,

which you can ride it for free while sightseeing. There are parks, gardens, recreation areas, and playgrounds, but the most magnificent thing of all is the architecture. People call it 3T or The Transparent Town. -

- It's almost like 3D for 3 dimensions, or like Time-Temperature-Transformation, which is the TTT diagram in metallurgy – the painter added in.

The friend continued - It's because glass was the main material used to build it. -

When the town first began to emerge on the horizon, people could see that it was indeed astonishing, but the closer they got, the more unbelievable it seemed. None of the buildings were higher than ten or fifteen stories, but the glass walls shone in the sun, throwing their reflections in all directions, so that the structures seemed to float in the air like a mirage in the desert.

They left the car and took the trolley to the Parliament House. Standing on the marble stairs, which were so polished that they looked like mirrors, she noticed all of the shoes knocking on this perfect surface and all of the eyes throwing their looks over the million windows, or rather, the one huge window that this place was. A sign made of a thousand little pieces of a broken glass hung above the revolving door and announced:

“We are together and we govern together.”

Suddenly, they heard police sirens, and they turned their attention to a spacious green area on the other side of the street, where groups of people were picnicking and walking around. In the midst of this scene, an older man was walking alone with a big transparent sheet that read: “I am alone and I govern myself.” The police arrested him very quickly and efficiently; the man couldn't

have been there for more than three minutes.

- Why did they arrest him? - the painter asked her companions.

- Organizing a protest is prohibited here - said the red haired gardener.

- But where should people protest, if not in front of the government building? And what was he protesting against anyway? -

- There are special places - said the other gardener.

If she had not been on vacation and trying to relax her mind, she probably would have asked more about this, but she decided to let it pass.

They walked into the Parliament House and saw a huge conference hall that looked like an upside down dome of The Pantheon. At the very end of the hall, a circular area was lit up and someone was giving a speech. They couldn't hear what the person was saying, because the perfect circle was enclosed by soundproof glass. The ceiling of the hall was also very impressive. It was made out of different sized glass circular shapes, which overlapped and created a wonderful game of shades and light throughout the hall. She was staring at how light traveled through that ceiling when a small group of tourists recognized her and asked for an autograph. She gave it to them as quickly as possible so she could get back to the amazing view in front of her eyes.

- I knew you were going to like this - said the friend.

- You know me too well - she said with a look of admiration for the architecture.

After a few hours of walking around with her jaw hanging down, they had lunch in a restaurant called "Just One Glass," and then they looked around some more. They drove back towards the city with the intention of visiting the Academy

of Fine Arts.

- It's a huge building - she said, as they parked across the street from the Academy.

- This whole place used to belong to the Academy, but now the Academy only inhabits this part of it - the red haired gardener with her freckled face pointed to a small area in the corner of the building.

- How come? - the painter asked with surprise and a deep frown.

- Simply not enough students - answered the same gardener.

- Oh, wow. That sounds like a disaster for the Academy but also for the whole community. Nobody wants to be an artist anymore. That is the strangest thing to me. -

They walked up a nice old wooden flight of stairs. Paintings were squeezed onto every possible inch of wall space. The first room that they came to had a sign on the door - Exhibition - so they entered. Inside, there were about fifteen people, who turned out to be art students. An older woman approached the guests in a slow but resolute way and introduced herself as the Dean of the Academy of Fine Arts. When the Dean turned to the painter, she studied her face for a moment and said:

- Oh, it's a great honor to have you here. If we had known that such a great guest would be arriving, we would have prepared for your visit. -

- Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. I didn't want anyone to know that I was coming; it's a private visit. -

- I understand, but would you mind talking with my students just for a moment? It

will be such a thrill for them to meet you. -

- I would be delighted - the painter smiled gently.

As she approached the group of students, they were loudly discussing the celebrity's presence, and they all moved toward her with interest in their faces. Together, they excitedly talked about painting and the process of creation, which seemed to be the topic students were most interested in. They also discussed the process of bringing paintings out of the studio and into the world of competition and business, which was a topic the Dean seemed more interested in. They showed the painter around, and she was very impressed with some of the young students' works, especially with their studies of facial expressions made in charcoal.

In the meantime, the two gardeners had excused themselves to the restroom, and it had been a while since they disappeared. The painter wasn't even aware of their absence until, just by coincidence, she looked through a window facing the street and saw the women putting a large package of what looked like canvas into the trunk of the car. The painter decided not to inquire about it, since it was none of her business after all.

When the visit came to an end, the painter made arrangements to have dinner with the Dean the following week, and then the four of them walked to the car. The painter was feeling almost frivolous. She had no responsibilities, great food to eat, new people to connect with, and no troubles to worry about at all. Even if there were a few uncomfortable moments and some misunderstandings about certain rules and behaviors, she didn't want to focus on them, because, for

once, she was on vacation.

Personal History and The Relativity Of Time and Space

The days were passing in a light atmosphere of eating, sightseeing, music, and numerous long conversations with people in the house. They tried to take her into the city a few more times, just for a little bit, but it never quite worked out. It was just too intense for the painter.

One evening she was admiring her friend's energetic nature, but then later that night she overheard a conversation between two men and they were being sarcastic and laughing at her friend, saying:

- Yes, she is very energetic, probably took one pill too many again. -

The next time she had a chance to be alone with her friend (and there were not many chances like that), she said:

- I wanted to ask you something a little personal. Is this a good moment? -

The friend nodded her head.

- What kind of pills do you take? -

- How do you know about that? - the friend asked with some surprise.

- I just know. Are you sick? -

- No. Yes. Well, I'm on antidepressants. -

- I didn't know that you have been depressed. Why didn't you tell me? -

- I was afraid that you would criticize me. I know that you're not a fan of those kinds of medications. -

- Well, then you should also know that I support solutions that work for people,

and if that works out well for you, then I definitely support your choice. It's true that I do often question the necessity of antidepressant and psychotropic medications, but that's just because I believe that they're very overused these days. I also read some statistics not too long ago that said your country has the highest rate of people taking psychiatric medications in the world. I'm not sure what to think about that. However, I am certain that in some cases medications are absolutely necessary and they're a blessing for people, but . . . -

The friend interrupted her. She had a strange intensity painted on her face as she said, - That's exactly what I was afraid of: your "but" -

The painter froze in her place.

- I'm sorry if you feel like I'm not supporting your choices enough, but please believe that my friendship with you is deeper than any of my criticisms or doubts. They are different story. -

- I know - she said more gently now.

- How are you feeling, now? - the painter asked while taking her hand.

- I'm good, I think. I am up and running most of the time – and the friend took her hand away with a little irritation.

- Most of the time? - The painter questioned, not understanding the situation.

- I break down from time to time, cry into my pillow, and occasionally suicide flickers through my mind. Then I go to the doctor, and he usually just bumps the dose of my meds up. So now, when I feel it coming, I just take an extra pill myself and start to feel better right away without having to stand in line at the psychiatry office. -

The friend said all of this so quickly and lightly, almost friskily.

The painter's hands covered her mouth, and through teary eyes she looked at her friend, who suddenly appeared much younger than before.

- I know you understand – the friend added, but she didn't seem to realize how incongruent her tone was with what she was saying.

The painter just looked at her again unable to push a word through her clenched teeth. Now she knew that her friend's behaviors were not entirely her and that they were partially influenced by the drugs. The friend put a cutting board on the table and started chopping some carrots.

- Changing the dose of your medication without your doctor's knowledge is very dangerous - she said, but her friend didn't look away from the big, reddish carrots for even a split second.

- Do you go to therapy at all? - the painter continued, trying to get her friend's attention.

- No, - she said - I would like to, but I don't have enough time or money. You know the story, life is too busy. -

The painter couldn't handle it anymore and began to raise her voice slightly.

- But what could be more important than your life? More important than you and how you are living? - The painter heard her strong tone and quickly said,

- Ok, I'm sorry. I don't quite know how to react or show you how much I care about you. I think I'm terrified right now because . . . - she took a big breath - I do know how you're feeling, and you know very well that I have also been depressed for a long time. -

A tear fell down her cheek, and then she continued, - You supported me during my difficulties, and yet you didn't share your own difficulties with me. I guess I'm hurt that you didn't tell me, that you didn't seek my support and advise. -

The friend stopped chopping for a moment and said - I didn't want to go down that route. I didn't want to tell you, because it was already too late. I was in very bad shape, feeling very isolated and withdrawn into my mood. I couldn't get out of bed, couldn't call a friend, and couldn't even move my head or little finger without crying and digging myself deeper and deeper underground. -

The painter closed her eyes.

- You know, I just had a flashback of sitting alone in the corner of my attic, looking at paintbrushes and not being able to hold any of them in my hand. I was hiding for hours, days, and weeks until I finally decided that I'm just extremely sensitive. That's right, there is no depression, there is only sensitivity that we're afraid to follow. I decided to respect that sensitive part of me and to only take very small steps. First, I learned how to breathe. That took me about two years, I think. I was already going out and meeting with people, but really I was just learning how to breathe; that was my only task and focus. Then, I learned how to walk, or maybe I'm still learning that one. I learned how to hear things and how to not hear things that I didn't like. I opened my eyes in the morning as slowly as possible to see if I could bear the world for another day, and then I would close them again. I would do that thousands of times before I could get up. Then, I gave each day the name of a color. I used to say to myself: this is an azure day, this is an indigo day, this is an ultramarine day, this is a blue day, and so on. It

made me think that every day had some kind of a meaning, just as each color in a painting contributes something to the whole picture. I have started to mix my days, in whichever colors they were, and put them onto a canvas. That's how I transformed: by seeing the importance of every detail and using my depression to create. It took a long time, a tremendous amount of pain, and lots of mistakes and stupid decisions, but it was all needed for me to grow and be who I am now. It makes me wonder, what if I had taken antidepressants during that time? I was tempted many times, but I think there is just one answer to this question: I think I would still be depressed. -

The friend quietly said - You don't realize that I'm not as strong as you. –

She was crying her eyes out, and the tears were falling on the pieces of carrots beneath her small hands.

- But that's exactly it! That's what I am talking about! You don't have to be strong. You don't have to push yourself to do anything, and you don't have to be any particular or fixed way. Don't go out if you don't feel like it, don't smile out of politeness, don't dress the way you are supposed to (according to whomever), and don't even listen to me right now. I'm blind and stupid, and I don't even know what I am saying.

The friend smiled slightly after that.

- Please, don't be strong. Let yourself be who you are: weird, angry, confused, unfriendly, wild, and beautiful!

A group of people entered the kitchen with a rumble. Her friend immediately stood up from the table and put the cut carrots into a bowl. One of

the people cheerily said:

- We made it! We got the reservation! - he looked at the painter and added - For everyone! -

- What reservation? - the painter wrinkled her forehead.

- The most amazing place in the country! It's right by the river, the mountains, the forest. -

She didn't need to hear anything else. She was already in for it. After the last few days of constantly being with people and going to the city, her endurance and tolerance for the human species had been pushed to its limit.

In the meantime, the friend slipped away and gave the painter an almost invisible look as she closed the French door in the kitchen. She understood that her friend needed to go and that she was ok.

They arrived at the mountain resort later that afternoon, and she was feeling overwhelmed by everybody. They probably felt overwhelmed by her as well. She wasn't someone who enjoyed a lot of company, but they were nonetheless always trying to engage her in the conversation. She didn't care, got upset with their obtrusiveness, and told them to leave her alone. For herself, she decided that she was not going to do the very thing that she usually did: she would not meditate during her stay at the retreat. In fact, she had even decided to go to a party and promised herself that she was going to try something new. She was on vacation, after all, and trying out a different kind of lifestyle would be interesting.

In the bathroom, she turned on some loud music, painted her fingernails,

and took a shower. As she danced and shook her body, she answered questions from the voice inside her head.

- Yes, that's right, I'm going to be superficial as much as possible tonight. Just small talk, dancing, laughing, and enjoying myself. - She smiled into the mirror and put on some lipstick.

At the party, a woman from the house in the city asked - Can I join you? - and sat down next to her. She was breathing hard after an hour or two on the dance floor, so she just nodded her head with a polite smile.

- I do not know you very well - the person began. - You seem a little lost. -

- Well, that's a strange way to start a conversation. What do you mean I seem lost? Don't you like how I dance? - she almost laughed out loud.

- It's not about your dancing. I mean, I noticed that back at the house and on the journey here you seemed lost or confused. -

- I am confused about many things in this world, and now I'm also confused about you. I don't understand what you're trying to tell me. -

- Are you a little lost? -

She couldn't stand this person any more.

- Yes, I am lost. What is your problem? Did you want to ask me something other than if I feel lost? What is it you really want to know? It feels like you already have a theory, and you just want to confirm it with this conversation. If so, then nothing I say is important, and maybe we should just stop the conversation right here. -

- Yes, I already have an idea of who you are. I think you got stuck. You lost your

self in your meditation, in your deep thinking, and in your attempts to try to understand everything. I think you have no clue what you are doing here, other than trying to avoid being alone.

The painter's eyes got wide.

- Yes, you heard me - the person continued. - Your loneliness is almost pouring out of you. So maybe you should try to stop acting like a little girl and show more respect for our rules. Think of it as one of your damn meditations if you want, I don't care. But don't act like you know everything, just because you're the great artist, the individualist, and the biggest loner. -

By this point, the painter was infuriated by this woman's arrogance, and, above all, she still didn't really understand the content of what the woman was saying. All that she could say in response was:

- Look who's talking, miss party girl! -

- Listen - the strange person continued - this place is about community, relationships, and society. You can't just not talk to people the way that you did in the car on the way here. -

Still angry, the painter commented - Yes, I've noticed how this conversation is about creating a good relationship between us. -

The person got very upset about her sarcasm.

- I don't know how long you were going to stay here, but maybe you should leave sooner than you planned. -

- Oh, so that's what you do in this *community*-oriented place? If you don't like somebody's point of view, you just get rid of the person? What great relationship

building that is. -

The woman reacted in a way that was hard to grasp. Her whole face suddenly changed and she burst into tears and yelled:

- You don't have any idea what you're saying! -

She left and slammed the door.

Her perceptions must have been right, because the painter truly didn't have a clue as to what that whole thing had been about, and she didn't understand the other woman's reaction, which definitely seemed bigger than she could have anticipated. So the painter just figured that she must have pushed one of the woman's buttons or something like that. She admitted to herself though, that she didn't feel good about her own angry reactions. On the other hand, what did that woman expect after attacking her like that, being so strange, and basically asking her to leave the country?

After a moment, the painter thought to herself - Oh, I am so stupid sometimes. All of the things that I'm saying she did to me, I also did to her. I attacked her and made her cry. I even made her leave, although she only left the room and not the country. -

Suddenly someone grabbed her hand and kidnapped her into a fast dance along with everybody else on the dance floor. They danced until 3am, and as much as she enjoyed the party, she also felt exhausted that night, so she sneaked away and fell onto her bed like a bag of potatoes.

Her bed was a mattress placed in the middle of a medium sized room. It was a nice space with a big stone fireplace that sat opposite to the entrance.

There were about ten other mattresses spread out on the floor. It all looked very neat and simple, and there were no dirty socks lying around or undone sleeping bags. The wooden beams suspended on the ceiling created a cozy feeling even though there was nothing else in the room, not even furniture. But there was one lampion on the wall that was decorated with a flowery pattern, and even from a distance you could smell the kitsch.

She woke up late the next day with a strange dream sitting at the end of her tongue. She was trying to feel her body moving from one side to the other, when the cold hand of her best friend touched her warm shoulder. She opened her eyes slowly and saw her friend's smiling, gentle face looking at her from above. The friend knew that she would need something special to entice the painter to get up so early, otherwise there would be no will to do so at all.

- I have a surprise for you - the friend said.

Returning her friend's smile, she got up without a word. Her lovely friend led her to the kitchen, where one could see a beautiful dining room overlooking the valley and river below. Everybody was already there and looked toward them as they entered. The "cry, leave, and slam the door person" was there too, but she did not look up at them. Once they sat down at the table, it wasn't difficult to guess what the surprise was. The painter's favorite breakfast, which everyone thought was the strangest breakfast they have ever seen, was laid out before her. There was a small bowl of white rice, a tall glass of orange juice, warm scones, boiled eggs with salt, pepper, and green onion, and fresh strawberries.

- This is a nice surprise - she thought to herself. She hadn't had her favorite

breakfast for a long time; in fact, it had been years since she had it. She gave her friend a hug and a kiss on the cheek and said:

- You made my day. -

People's conversations became a little louder now, and they began to eat. Someone asked about the choice of her favorite breakfast, but she just gave an evasive answer. She was thinking about last night's interaction with the person who was sitting near the front of the dining room and trying to look in a different direction. It felt very uncomfortable. When they finished up with the food and people began to leave, she managed to catch the woman's eye contact and said:

- I'm sorry about yesterday. That's not how I wanted our conversation to be. -

The woman looked straight ahead now, and it was possible to notice her teary eyes. At this point, the rest of the people at the table left. They were trying to be polite by giving the two women some room to talk. With a sliding gesture, the long fingers of the painter moved a little plate with two strawberries on it in the direction of her quiet interlocutor. The woman took one strawberry, and she took the other. They ate quietly, and then the "slam the door person" said:

- You know, my brother is very sick. He has a severe depression, and after they took him to the psychiatric unit two weeks ago, he tried to commit suicide. Yesterday, when you said that we get rid of people we don't like, I burst into tears because I sometimes feel that if they could just leave my brother alone, he would be fine and would find his way. I also understand that the psychiatric unit is trying to help him, and that he needs all of the support, community, and group therapy that they offer there. But I'm just not so sure about it any more; something feels

wrong. -

- I am so sorry about your brother, and please forgive me, but can I ask why you are you telling me about that? We hardly know each other. -

- I'm sorry. It's because you are from another country, and I can't trust anyone here. -

The painter was even more puzzled than before.

- I don't understand. -

- I just need to talk to someone, please - she said with the same tension in her face as last night.

- OK, let's talk. I'm sorry about what you're going through. Did your brother ever try to commit suicide before? -

- No, never. That was the first time. -

- How old is he? -

- He's 22. -

- How severe was his depression prior to the hospitalization? -

- He always wanted to be alone. He spent lots of time at home, didn't want to go out with friends, threw away his phone, and just didn't want to connect with anyone. One time the police arrested him for wandering at night by himself, and then they transferred him to the hospital. -

- What do you mean they arrested him for wandering by himself at night? Was he doing something inappropriate?

- Well, not that I know of, but you know, it's not ok to wander at night on you own. It's like looking for trouble. -

- Wait a second. Do you mean that you can get arrested for walking alone on the street at night?

Someone came into the kitchen.

- No, no! That's not what I meant - she said while getting up from the table. - All I meant was that we should stick together and resolve our problems as a community. That's the best way. -

She hurried away to catch up with the person in the kitchen, but then turned back and handed the painter a very modern type of a cell phone.

- It was my brother's - she said very quietly. - Please use it. - She left in a split second, but she didn't slam the door this time.

The painter sat there with the taste of strawberry in her mouth and the cell phone in her hand, and she was thinking about walking down the street alone.

- Since I arrived in this country, I haven't really been alone even for a moment - she thought to herself. Then she remembered how back at home she used to take long walks by herself just so she could observe other people and her own inner experiences. There is such a big difference between walking the street by yourself and walking it with someone else.

She had noticed, of course, that since the cell phone generation had arrived, people were always walking "with" someone, because they were always on the phone, even in restaurants, bars, and cars. She had felt uncomfortable being by alone many times. If you sat in a coffee shop just drinking coffee without a computer in front of you, people would ask, are you waiting for someone? If you go alone to a concert or the cinema, people might think you're a total loser

and not want to hang out with you. If you don't go out with friends, people might think you're weird and wonder if something is wrong with you.

Another person walked into the dining room. - Oh, hi. What are you doing sitting here alone? Are you ok? Is everything all right? -

- That's exactly what I mean - she thought to herself, and then said aloud:

- Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. I'm just trying to call a friend. -

She shook her hand with the cell phone in it and suddenly understood why the woman had given it to her: it's a great excuse.

- But why would I need an excuse to be alone? - she wondered.

- I see, but you can make the call on the way. It's a mobile phone after all. -

- On the way to where? - asked the painter.

- The flower festival down by the river. That's the reason for this trip! -

Things seemed to be moving very fast. She just flew into this country and found out that her best friend has been hiding a severe depression from her for a long time. Now she had just had this strange conversation with the woman who gave her the cell phone, and she wasn't even by herself for more than a minute before someone interrupted her again. People here come and go, talk all the time, have lots of energy, get up early, and go to sleep late. Even stranger than the fact that she hadn't had time to be alone, was the fact that she hadn't seen anyone else alone, not anywhere. Now she was supposed to go to the flower festival with even more crowds of people. She was not much of a flower person, but she was definitely interested in the variety of shades and colors that would be on display. That's what the festival would be about for her, or at least that's what

she thought it would be about.

Relationships and The Authority Of The Unknown

The flower festival. That's when she saw him for the first time. They took their places on the tribunes, which were on the other side of the street from where he and all the rest of the important guys were. Although, she was not a very politically involved person, she could recognize that he was the president of a country.

He was conversing with a bunch of people gathered around him. She couldn't see him very clearly because of the distance and flower parade interfering with her view, but she could still somehow find his sharp facial features, impeccable posture, and luxuriant brown hair through all of the busyness. She felt that most presidents of countries were unattractive, but he was definitely an exception. From what she could remember from the news, he was not only an exception because of his appearance but also because he was single. He was also the most "pro family" president ever, which she thought was grotesque. She assumed that his pro children, pro family acts and regulations were either a compensation for his own lack of a family, or a purely political move to mitigate the opposition that criticized him for being alone. Or perhaps it was both.

She went with her friend and a few others to buy some refreshments, and they admired the colorful decorations all around. To their surprise, they saw one of their housemates in the VIP section for politicians. She gave her friend a

grinning look, but her friend wasn't very surprised.

- What is she doing over there? - the painter asked her friend.

- She has always been very politically active, although I didn't know that her connections reached that high. Besides - the friend said with a stone face - she works for the Department of Interior. -

They watched the housemate talking with those high up people, and then it looked like she was being introduced to the president, and she shyly gave him her hand. They exchanged a few words, after which the head of the country looked at her with a bit of astonishment and then asked about something. In response to his question, she pointed to the other side of the street and straight at the painter and her friend. He directed a little smile their way, which they reciprocated. This time the friend looked somewhat more surprised, and they both had uncertainty painted on their faces for a few minutes.

They watched the parade, and even though it was magnificent and absolutely colorful and extraordinary, nothing really made as big of an impression on them as the scene on the other side of the parade. Especially since, from that point on, the president had been giving them brief looks every now and then. Even though they were trying to enjoy the flower festival and pretending that everything was normal, it was pretty obvious that the painter and her friend were sitting on pins and needles just waiting to ask the housemate about her conversation with the president. It was impossible to guess if the conversation had been positive or negative, and if it had concerned the painter or the friend. As all good politicians can, the president knew how to put on a diplomatic face

and not give away any clues whatsoever about his thoughts.

At first, the painter thought that he was probably interested in her friend because she is extremely attractive (absolutely one of the most beautiful woman that she has ever seen) and also very classy. On that day, her friend was wearing a hat with a broad brim, a long dress with a gentle gloss only visible in the sun, and high heel shoes that made her move with an undeniable grace. The famous painter knew that she was not the ugliest of people, but she also knew that by her friend's side almost everyone looked like a broomstick.

Than next thing that came to her mind was that maybe he knew of her paintings and was interested in them. Although, it seemed to her that not many politicians were truly interested in fine arts. Of course, many of them went to auctions and charitable events, but she hadn't seen many politicians in art galleries. Or maybe this was just a generalization that she came up with, because she believed people in politics had bad taste and not much sensitivity for art.

Another option was that they were both just pretty girls that he could potentially invite to one of his party's. As she later found out, he was well known for hosting different kinds of parties and inviting lots of single women. The press, of course, always had a field day with that story, and reporters referred to the gatherings as "Bachelor Parties" and tried to infer that the president was intensely looking for a wife.

After the parade, they went down to the river to let of some garlands, and she hardly noticed as the whole day passed by. When they got back to their

lodgings, it was late but the evening was warm. She was sitting with her friend on the balcony, drinking iced tea, and looking at the valley that spread before them like a rug of abundance. They were enjoying the silence, until it was suddenly broken by somebody's footsteps and then a voice.

- Hello ladies. How was your day at the parade? - it was the one person who they didn't mind being interrupted by, at least not at that moment.

- Oh, hi - said the painter. - How was your day? Must have been exciting to meet the president. -

- Yes, it was. He is an unbelievably nice man. I imagine that you're probably dying from curiosity, wanting to know why I pointed to you when I was talking with him - the woman said with a jeering note.

- Sure we are. Who wouldn't be? - the friend added.

- I told him that we have the honor of hosting a famous artist in our house, and that's why I pointed you out to him. He expressed his hope that you'll have a great visit here while you're here and asked how long you will be staying. -

- What did you tell him? -

- That you're not sure yet, but maybe until after New Year's. -

- Ok, and by the way, I didn't know that you work for the Department of Interior. -

- Yes, I've been there for the past three years. -

- What is your position there? -

- I'm an administrative director in the department of creative solutions for families.

- You have a special department for that? - she asked, surprised.

- It's a small department that was established only five years ago, but we've had

some great successes. -

- Why is it a part of the Department of Interior? -

- Because we monitor population growth, cooperate with medical and mental health institutions around domestic violence, stimulate and promote adoption agencies, provide education about abortion . . . -

- I thought abortion is illegal in your country? - she said.

- Yes, and for good reasons, so we educate people on why it's illegal. -

- It sounds like you only inform people about abortion from the opponent point of view. -

- That's the only true point of view - the women said.

The painter's eyes widened, and she took a deep breath. She didn't know this person very well and wasn't sure if she wanted to know her at all after what she just said. It wasn't because this woman was against abortion, it was because she didn't seem open to having a diverse conversation on the matter. Fortunately, they changed the subject.

- Well, we also implemented new regulations for financial bonuses for every new baby born – the woman dragged the conversation on.

- That's right - the friend suddenly spoke up - you get a lot of money if you have a baby and a bonus package for buying a family house. -

The woman smiled proudly and continued – Yes, we've also started a support program for couples who are thinking about divorce. -

- Now it's almost impossible to divorce – the friend said and then looked as if she immediately regretted her comment.

- But you did. You are divorced - the painter commented innocently.

When the painter noticed that her friend looked at the other woman and blushed a little, she quickly added:

- I think you should be proud of yourself for having had the strength and courage to leave a person who was treating you so badly. -

The other woman straightened up her back and said superiorly, - No, I don't think that a divorce is something to be proud of at all. Actually, I think that people who get a divorce should be ashamed of themselves, because they didn't succeed in the most basic level of society and in their relationship. They didn't achieve a normal family. -

The painter was trying hard to listen to the woman's harsh words and almost couldn't stand it.

- You are very critical of people's vulnerabilities and imperfections. Of course, people do make mistakes, and sometimes that mistake is a marriage. What if one person is abusive towards the other, do you think they should still stay together? - The painter noticed how the redness of her blood traveled faster with every word.

- They should definitely work on it! There's therapy, support groups, medications, and other treatments. -

- I absolutely support working on the relationship and trying every possible way to make it work, but sometimes it just still doesn't work. What then? What if they have tried everything and nothing works? What about when the cycle of abuse is too strong to overcome? -

- They should still stay together and learn how to live with it. Learn how to appreciate what they have, not what they don't like about each other. They should have children and focus on being parents instead of focusing on their egoistical need for happiness. -

- Let me get this straight. Are you saying that if the husband beats the hell out of his wife, you think she should not focus on his negative side and just be thankful for the flowers that he brings the next day? Is that what you are saying? -

- I think you exaggerate - she said.

- Maybe I do, but not that much. If you've been working with domestic violence, you should know that I just described a classic example of the honeymoon pattern. I used it to try to show you the message behind your words. You're not open to the possibility that people change and need different things at different times of their lives. Nobody should have to tolerate abuse, no matter what their family bounds are. -

- Are you saying that I am not open to the possibility of people failing in their relationships? -

- I don't even call that a failure. I call it life, a choice, or a destiny. I call it growth. Don't get me wrong, I'm not into glorifying divorce, but people should have a choice. And your comments just add to the stigma still present in many societies that suggests a divorced person has failed or is somehow less of a person. I am thinking especially about women. -

- Well, it's usually the woman's fault anyway. They are either too sensitive or too demanding. -

That comment made the painter squeeze the handle of her chair so hard that her sweaty hand slipped down. She had a few things on her mind. She was either going to have a fight with this woman (which had already sort of started), or just let it go and admit that they have very different ideas about marriage. She decided on a third option:

- Can I ask you a question? - she somehow managed to calm down a little.

- Yes - said the government person seriously.

- How do your personal opinions influence your work for the government?

- Hugely! - she said. - That's why, I'm so good in this position, because I believe in what I am doing. -

- And does it matter that you're one-sided and only reflect one part of society's needs? - she wasn't calm at all as she asked this.

- It does matter. I'm telling you that's exactly why I have this position. I am on that one side of our beautiful society that wants to help the other side, the side that got lost. -

- Don't you think that's a very patronizing approach to potential opposition? You could inspire a revolution with comments like that. - She wasn't sure why she said that last sentence, but she didn't have to wait long for an answer.

- Opposition in this country doesn't exist, because what I am saying is simply right and true. -

- That's ridiculous! There's always the mainstream and there's always an opposing alternative side. -

- Not here - the friend interfered with a hoarse voice.

- Well, then there is now! - the painter almost shouted. - I do not agree with your one-sided, closed-minded, and insensitive politics. I am pro choice, not pro dictatorship. -

The friend stood up from her chair, and the other woman squinted her eyes and said:

- You're not a citizen of this country. -

- We should go - said the friend. - It's late and everybody is tired. Could you help me, please? - She lifted her hand in a motion that indicated she was so tired that she needed help walking. Of course, this was just an excuse to get them both out of there. The painter didn't mind leaving and followed her friend, but she was still very irritated and agitated.

Her friend took her by the hand, led her into the upstairs bathroom, and closed the door. She looked very awake and agitated now.

- Please - her friend said. - You don't understand the situation here. You can get into so much trouble. You have to stay away from that woman, and you can't say things like that in public. - Her friend was speaking very fast.

- What are you talking about? -

- I'm just asking you to be smart and to get to know people before you share your ideas with them. I'm asking you to stay in someone's presence at all times, and I'm asking you to engage in small talk with people. I'm also asking you not to be a social activist while you're here. -

- I don't quite understand. I can say whatever I want. - Just then she noticed something that looked like fear in her friend's eyes. - I'm not sure I can do what

you are asking of me. -

- Then leave . . . Please don't misunderstand me; I'm just trying to protect you. -

- Protect me from what? -

- Listen, there are some unwritten rules here that you have to obey. -

- Ok, what are the rules? Tell me, maybe I am going to like them. -

- I don't think so. -

- Come on, try me. -

- I already told you a few. You cannot be alone at any time. That's the most important rule. You have to get along with people, talk with them, and be happy with them. Being a lonely weirdo is suspect. -

- That's ridiculous! What will they do if I just want to go for a walk in the park by myself? -

- You don't want to find out - she said in a tone that made the painter feel scared too. Just then she finally understood that her friend was being deadly serious. They heard some steps in the corridor on the other side of the door.

- Maybe we will get a chance to talk later, perhaps tomorrow before we head back home. This is not the best time. We have to go now. - She opened the door and they went to bed.

The painter didn't feel like a painter anymore; she felt like an alien who had been thrown into an unknown world. She couldn't sleep for half of the night, and the other half she had nightmares. She got up to see the sunrise and meet with the two gardeners. They were used to getting up early to work in the garden, so they couldn't sleep either.

- We heard some gossip about your conversation on the balcony last night - said one of the gardeners, and the other one immediately gave her a wedgie.

- Things spread fast here - said the tired painter with a hoarse morning voice.

- Well the truth is that almost everybody knows, because we could hear you perfectly well in the upstairs bedroom. There's a window above the balcony that was open the whole time. -

- So what's on your mind? - asked the painter fiercely.

They both looked uncertain.

- Wait a moment - said one of them as she took the other gardener to the side.

They argued about something, then one of them went out and waited by the glass door, and the other walked back to where the painter stood.

- I just want to let you know, in secret, that there is opposition in this country. Even though it's small, it does exist. -

- I am sure it does. Why is it a secret? I think I still don't understand the whole thing. -

The gardener quickly moved away from her to join her red haired friend by the door. The increasingly puzzled painter just remembered that she shouldn't be seen alone, so she went back to her bedroom, took out the cell phone that she got the other day, and went back downstairs with it to watch the sunrise.

After ten minutes of blissful piece at the beginning of the day, her friend walked in fully dressed and with car keys in her hand.

- Good morning - she said to her friend while still watching the rising sun out of the tail of her eye.

- It's not very good, but maybe we can avoid making it any worse. We have to leave right now. - Her friend's lips were moving fast, but her eyes were still very sleepy and her hair was undone.

- I'll get my things - the painter responded.

The Brutality Of Unconsciousness Within A Crowd Of Dreaming

They left the resort so early that when they got back to the city it was still morning. They didn't exchange a single word throughout the whole trip. It felt good to be quiet for so long, but of course, after last night, the silence was also filled with a mixture of unformulated emotions.

When they walked into the house, the friend started looking around and opening every door. She was peeking in every room and finally said:

- I think we're alone. -

That made the painter's face even grimmer. She wasn't surprised, rather she was sad about being in a place and a situation that made her feel disconnected from a friend she once knew so well. Now, she only felt distance and confusion between them. Plus she had never seen her friend act so strange or frightened before.

- Can we talk? - she asked.

With a big look and a frown on her lips, the friend pointed to the bathroom.

- In there? – the painter asked with slightly surprised eyes and a tone of annoyance.

- Yes - the friend answered shortly, intransigently.

They went into the bathroom and the famous painter sat down on the covered toilet bowl while her friend closed the door very precisely and sat down on the edge of the claw footed bathtub. The ferruginous accessories against the

background of light orange walls created a cozy atmosphere, even though the bathroom was very spacious. It had roof windows covered by a dark flowery motif that perfectly matched the rest of the décor; the overall feeling was pleasant and restful.

- First of all, I think I need to apologize to you - started the friend. - I see now, that inviting you here without explaining the current situation in this country was a mistake. I don't know what I was thinking. -

- Maybe we should catch up right now. Maybe you can explain to me what is happening here? I'm very eager to know - she said with a sarcastic note. She pulled her legs up, placed her feet on the toilet cover, and moved her knees close to her small-breasted chest.

The friend moved her chin to the side, looked down, and took a few big breaths. She looked like a goddess sitting on the edge of that beautiful bathtub. Her profile was perfectly silhouetted and her toes were pointed.

- There's one other choice: I could tell you nothing, and you could leave today and go back to your own country. -

She gave her friend a disapproving look, slightly shaking her head from side to side.

- I didn't think you would accept that - she commented, now looking superior. The friend held her hands together in front of her like she was trying to disagree with herself, perhaps because of the situation or maybe for the sake of their friendship.

- Why are we talking in a bathroom? Maybe we could leave here? - She

swooshed her feet in a circular way, then lowered them onto the floor and directed an impatient look at her friend.

- All right, I feel like I have to take at least partial responsibility for bringing you into this situation, but I also see that I have to tell you now because you will not let me get away with not telling you. We're in this bathroom because I am hoping it's not bugged like the rest of the house. Let me give you a few facts first; maybe they will shine some light on the situation for you. These days, all foreigners visiting this country have someone tailing them, especially if they have any rank or importance. So you can imagine that with your fame, they're watching very closely. The house is wired, we've been followed every day, and, most important of all, the woman who lives with us and works for the government moved in only a month before you came. She arrived just after you called and agreed to visit, and the only reason she's living here is to spy on you. -

- What are you talking about? Why would anyone spy on me or any other tourist that's here? -

The friend stopped her questions with a hand gesture and then continued.

- About three years ago, when the new president was elected, the government started to implement societal changes that have recently taken an unexpected turn. Well, at least for me it was unexpected. In the beginning, we all thought that the changes were great and that they were serving our society in so many ways. I still think that the ideas of the president and his government are good, but over the last few months they have been turning more and more extreme. People have been arrested for no reason. The psychiatry units all over the country are

overflowing. An official rule has been made, for your own safety, that you're not allowed to go out of the house on your own. They explain it in terms of crime reduction and safety, but the truth is, it's complete bullshit. If you're found alone on the street, they either lock you up in prison for conspiring to commit a criminal action or commit you to a hospital for having mental health issues. If it's your first offense, they let you go after 48 hours and give you a lecture on the new law. If it's your second offense, they have the right to keep you for 30 days in a crowded cell. After the third offense, people usually don't return, and even if they do, they come out heavily medicated. That's why we have the highest rate of psychotropic medications use in the world. A whole system has been created to monitor who's single, who's in a relationship, who has children, and so on. All countries do some monitoring like that, but here the government actually makes use of that information in a negative way. They hide everything behind a pro family political front, and now it's gone so far that there are no freedoms left. I got divorced three and a half years ago when it was still possible to do so, but since then the divorce rate has dropped from 45% to 0.5%. Can you imagine that? And of course, the government says that this drop in the divorce rate is a huge success, and that our society is learning how to live together, have relationships, have kids, and create communities. In reality, however, it's all just a huge propaganda scheme. Besides, even if the law didn't make it so difficult to get a divorce, the stigma of getting one has become so unbearable that no one even considers it as a possibility anymore. Subsequently, abusive relationships aren't talked about. People are silent because they're afraid or because they've been forced into

silence. There are even specific regulations for people who work individually. For example, if you're a translator who works alone on your computer, you need to do your work in a public place like a coffee shop. Coffee shops all over the country have turned into workstations. The whole system seems to be built on people's fears of being lonely or abandoned. Of course, some people willingly choose these accepted lifestyles; they fall in love, marry, have children, care for the elderly, and stay closely connected to their community. However, the more people follow this subscribed path, the less people realize that they have no choice, that this lifestyle has become mandatory. Our society has become so conforming that individuals have no space to breath anymore.

- I'm overwhelmed - she said with her jaw hanging open from what the friend had said. - I don't even know how to react or what to say, not to mention, what to do. -

All of the sudden, they heard a door slam and cheerful voices coming down the hall. They had both expected to spend the whole day discussing that barely started conversation, but the friend rushed out of the bathroom and loudly said:

- Are you already here? Great, you can help us with brunch. We were planning on preparing everything before you arrived, but since you're here now you'll have to help. -

- Perfect, will do - said a voice, which they easily recognized as the government woman's. Her voice was of a medium pitch, but she was making an intonation of the last syllables that was a little annoying.

Left alone in the bathroom, the painter knew she should go out as soon as possible and help with the food, but her stream of thoughts were too strong and

confusing at that moment. It took some time and a few splashes of cold water on her face before she could join the others in the kitchen.

When she entered the kitchen, she made herself busy with chopping, washing, and grinding just to try to release some of the tension she was still holding from the conversation. It was difficult. Her mind kept going over her friend's every word. During the meal, she did her best to pretend she was present. She put a smile on her face that every now and then she had to remember to fix into a more natural one, while engaging in lousy, superficial conversations. The two women quietly communicated with each other with quick, almost unnoticeable looks. They both knew that they would have to stay with the others until the end of the day, no matter how much they wanted to finish their conversation.

Late in the evening, the friend was standing by the kitchen counter looking very worn out, when she quietly asked the two gardeners if she and the painter could help them in the garden early the next morning. She asked as secretly as possible, and the gardeners quietly agreed.

The painter was a bit surprised because her friend looked like she wouldn't be able to get out of bed for a few days not mention a few hours from now to work in the garden. In some ways, nothing seemed surprising anymore, but she was worried about her friend whose beautiful face now looked like a boxer dog with skin hanging down, wrinkles that were more visible than ever, and watery sad eyes.

The government lady put her head through the doorway with an angry

expression, which, once she saw them, immediately changed into a big unnatural smile that displayed her shiny unnatural teeth.

- Can I kidnap you for a moment? - she asked the friend.

- Certainly - the friend replied in a gracious way while taking off an apron.

That night must have been dragging like blood from the nose for everyone in the house. One could hear conversations, steps, closing doors, squeaking floorboards, and strumming glass. The house got quite around 3 am, and the painter's artistic mind finally fell asleep, but then she woke up around 4:30 am, sweating. For a moment, she thought she saw her friend walking slowly next to her bed. Half dreaming and half awake, she stayed under the covers until she heard a commotion in the house and an ambulance siren outside her window. She stood up, peeked through the glass, and saw an ambulance parked outside the house. In her too long pajama pants rustling at her feet, she slowly walked to her bedroom door and reached for the knob. She heard whispers on the other side of the door, and for a moment she hesitated about whether she should come out or not. She protruded her head through a small opening in the doorway and saw two other heads doing the exact thing. It was the two gardeners, and when they noticed her, she softly asked:

- What's going on? -

- Everybody is advised to stay in their rooms - one of the heads said.

- No explanations? - she asked even softer than before.

- None at all - answered the other head.

- I'm coming out then. - Her torso entered into the doorway as she put on her

black chiffon slippers. When she reached the stairs, she noticed that the two gardeners had followed her, which made her feel supported enough to cease the wobbling in her knees. When they saw the bright lights in corridor on the main floor, she realized the seriousness of the situation. Streams of people were coming in through the front door; there were people from the fire department, police officers in the uniforms and civil clothes, ambulance drivers, and people in strange, dark coveralls that she could not identify.

- She used to take long baths before, so we didn't suspect anything - said a voice coming from the kitchen. The voice had that same annoying intonation as the government lady, but it sounded deeper and lower.

Through the open kitchen door, the three women in pajamas saw the government lady sitting at the table. She was leaning back and her arms were hanging down as she spoke to a policeman, who, in contrast to her, was standing up straight with his back to the door. When she gazed at the trinity in the doorway, she immediately stood up and said to them:

- You're not supposed to be here. Please go back to your bedrooms. -

- We're not schoolgirls that you can send back to bed, for God's sake! What's going on here? - demanded the painter.

The police officer stood up, and in a fast and determined way he moved so close to the painter's smallish body that she could easily smell his breath, and he could probably smell the sweat on her forehead. He approached her in a manner that scared the hell out of her, and she realized that the Police Academy must teach them how to do that.

- You must be the guest of the house - he said.

- Yes, I am. Can you please tell me what is going on here? -

He took a step back, looked into his notebook, and then, very formally and without a glitch, said:

- I'm very sorry to inform you that your friend has committed suicide and was pronounced dead at 4:25 am this morning. -

Altered States Of Consciousness:

Reaching The Bottom and Depth Of Experience

This was not another night. The grief swiftly engulfed her body like the molecules of a nuclear weapon. One could almost hear the molecules chanting, see them marching in lines to weaken her body with every breath. Her head hung from the neck without meaning. She tried to focus on a pale, dusty nightstand, but in the very next second it suddenly dissolved into a different dimension.

- I am not as strong as you - her friend once told her, and the memory of those words stabbed her heart continuously with their dull prick. She was lying alone in her double bed beneath sheets containing a motif of two bright red flowers with long stems. The two flower heads were turned towards each other like lovers amused with themselves, caught in a deep stare, without ever noticing the jealous observer. She felt like corpuscles of pulped seashells, crushed into tiny pieces and left limply on the beach by a cruel wave. She tried to focus on her heartbeat, which reminded her that she was still alive and that not everything had been lost. Immediately, like a meteor shooting from one place in the universe to another, the thought of death was again on her mind.

- Oh, my friend - she whispered to herself in a quiet voice that broke through her tears. She wept again and again until the end of her water, until the end of 55% of the self. Left on a dry desert of nothingness, she remembered her friends' smile greeting her at the airport, and the countless times the body remembered its moisture, the well of life.

She was in the curve of space-time, sliding down the funnel just like Alice fell into the rabbit hole. With her fingertips she touched the sound of an old French song emerging from the radio. She negligently turned to the window to look for signs of movement in the street, but faced with stillness she slumped on the bed, which produced a squeak in the mattress. She glanced at objects and images with confusion and a kind of determination that made her feel like a meditation novice who constantly looks for important signs and misses the moment.

The curly haired woman from down the hall came into her room after ten minutes of loud knocking. She was holding a small bowl of soup that was probably still warm when she started knocking but wasn't anymore. The woman started talking as soon as her squinted eyes reached the nameless body on the bed. There was no point in speaking because nobody was listening, but somewhere beneath those curly hairs there was an idea that the woman just had to say: - You should go out and talk with people. It's been a few days now and you can't grieve forever. Everybody is worried about you - and so on.

After about two weeks of not leaving her room, not even for the funeral, they sent a psychiatrist to see her. The psychiatrist was an older woman who blankly asked lots of questions and didn't seem to care about the lack of answers. She left a prescription on the table and didn't even shut the door after leaving. The next morning, the mailman delivered a nice envelope addressed to the painter. This was unexpected and strange since no one knew the address of where the painter was staying in this country. When she went to open the

envelope, another envelope slipped out from beneath. It was an exact replica and it even had the same address on it, but the addressee was different. Seeing the name of her friend on that pretty piece of paper made her hands shake. She opened her envelope and inside was an invitation to a charity event at the president's palace. She placed both invitations under her pillow and hardly had a thought as she fell into a heavy sleep. It was *hardly* a thought, because the one thought that actually came into her mind was too scary to follow.

A few days later, in the very early morning hours, she slowly put her clothes on and went out to the garden. She sat down on the bare ground and inhaled all of the plants' miraculous smells. When the gardeners came down and saw her sitting there between tomatoes, they immediately sat down too, as if they were hiding from something. They looked her in the face and tried to make eye contact.

- Listen, do you still have your passport? There's a bug in your room and everywhere else in the house, so we couldn't talk to you, but we're so glad you came outside this morning. Listen, we can help you to get out of this country, or at least we can try, if you still have your passport. We need to organize a few people and . . . -

- I'm not leaving. - Those were the first words she had spoken since that tragic night, and it surprised the two women greatly.

- You are not? - asked the red haired gardener.

- No, not yet at least - she added in a low voice that sounded like she hadn't spoken for years instead of only weeks.

- If you wait to leave, it might be too late. Do you realize that? - the red haired woman asked. - Sorry to be so harsh, but I have to say this. If you keep sitting in your room, they will take you to the hospital, give you meds, and you'll probably never come out. Plus, as far as I know, you don't have any family that would ask about you or try to find you. You might be a famous painter, but that won't mean much when you're up against the huge propaganda of this country. They have everything set and ready to keep you quiet till the end of your days. We can't do much, but maybe, just maybe, we can organize your flight out of the country. -

- Don't worry. I can handle this. I'm staying here, and I don't plan on sitting in my room anymore. I very much appreciate your offer of help, and I may need it in a different form later on. You can't imagine how grateful I feel that there's someone here I can trust - she said this all in one breath.

- What are you planning on doing? - asked the other gardener with her long nose in the air. The rising sun was shining directly on her bony face creating an impression that she was much more awake than she really was. This gardener had very short hair and a sharp, almost angry look in her eyes, which went perfectly with the rest of her skinny body. She looked fierce with character, one might say, and she was the kind of woman that most men would be afraid of, for whatever reasons. She was a powerful type of person that didn't give a damn about stereotypical gender roles.

That was the moment when it occurred to the painter that the two gardeners might be a couple. Just then, all three women noticed a movement by one of the windows in the house. Instead of replying to the gardener's question,

the painter asked a question of her own:

- Are you two a couple? -

They first looked at each other, and then the skinny one blinked her eyes while nodding slightly. The acknowledgment happened quickly because they needed to rush over to a bed of plants so they could appear to be working.

- I am so glad you came out - said the voice of a person coming fast from the house. - I'm the new roommate. I just moved in a couple of days ago, and I was very anxious to meet you. -

- Hello - the painter greeted her. - It's nice to meet you. Are you a gardener too? Maybe you can join us in our work. Gardening has always been my hobby. -

The two gardeners were quite shocked by the painter's sudden shift in behavior. She seemed so present and open to conversation, almost light.

With a big smile the new roommate said - Oh, I am not a gardener at all but thanks for offering. -

- What do you do here? - asked the changed personality of the painter.

- I work for the government, but here I'm just another person living in the house. -

- So now we have two government people living in the house. -

- No, I actually came in place of the old one. -

- I see - said the painter bending down to pull another weed. Her fist squeezed around the weed much harder than necessary, and it looked like she was pulling out a well-rooted tree, not a small, ordinary weed.

- What happened to the other woman? -

- She was relocated - the new woman said seriously, and right then the painter

knew that she was not only the new roommate but also the new spy in the house.

- Oh, I see - she said blankly and then added - I would like some company at breakfast today, shall we all eat together? –

She turned her face to the gardeners who were hiding in dark green leaves, and she knew they were in shock, but their shock was not nearly as big as her own. She didn't quite believe she would be able to pull this off so fluently. She thought that she may have forgotten her own voice and how to be with people, but some things were obviously just like riding a bike.

The new roommate was almost euphoric about the breakfast invitation, and of course everybody agreed to have breakfast together, some out of joy and others out of curiosity. Everyone in the house gathered by the breakfast table, and they all tried to pretend that they weren't looking at the painter. In truth though, they were all very miserable in that theater, and it was rather evident they couldn't help but look at her. For the painter, it was an intense feeling to be in the presence of other people after all that has happened and all of the time spent in bed, but she was so alert and focused. It was a masterpiece. She was following the plan that she had carefully arranged in her mind.

Over the next few days, she drank one coffee after another and supplied herself with energy drinks and extra vitamins. She had been waking up early and only sleeping from about 12 am to 4 am each night, but it seemed enough for her right now. She was so preoccupied with her plan and so motivated to fulfill it, that in some ways she hardly even remembered life before then. People in the house still couldn't believe how suddenly she had recuperated, which was why she was

working on building trust with her housemates. She worked in the garden first thing in the morning and chatted with the gardeners about all the things they couldn't say in the "daylight". Along with everyone else, she made breakfast, ate, went shopping, played cards, made dinner, etc.

On Saturday evening, the painter came friskily down the stairs with the nice envelope in her hand. She moved towards the new government person with such confidence, that the woman straightened up in the recliner chair as if she was preparing herself for a battle. With a smile, the painter handed over the envelope and asked:

- Would you keep me company at this event? It's next Saturday? -

- Oh, with a pleasure! I know about this event of course. It happens once a year, but I've never been invited. I don't have a high enough position in the government. - She looked thrilled with the invitation.

- Great, then this year we can both go. - The painter turned quickly on her heel and walked towards the kitchen.

In the garden the next morning, the first thing that her still sleepy mind heard was an abrupt question from the red haired gardener:

- What are you doing? -

- What do you mean? - the painter asked, squinting her eyes and moving her head forward.

- I mean the party at the president's house. It's one of the most prestigious parties in the country. -

- Well, I better get a new dress then. -

- Don't joke around. How did you get an invitation? -

- I am not sure how it happened, but I think it must have something to with the flower festival and the president looking at me and my friend. - After saying the word "friend," she had to take a breath and swallow hard. - When the president found out that I was in the country, I guess he must have decided to invite us. -

- But why are you going? - asked the skinny one, very seriously.

- I want to meet him - she said while lowering her voice and looking down.

- The president? - asked the red haired gardener with a grin on her face. The painter nodded in agreement.

That night, and every other night, she slipped into her bed at midnight, and when her head was completely under the covers, she started crying and wouldn't stop until she fell asleep. Since she knew her room was wired, she tried to be as quiet as possible and felt a little like a mouse. Her plan was so difficult to put into effect that every day it almost overcame her, and every day she tried harder and harder to hide her feelings, remember her task, focus on her goal, and remember her friend. Although, she had to be careful to not remember her friend too much because the intense feelings that it brought up would make her unsafe. Besides, she had so many doubts and fears about her plan that thinking about her friend wasn't making things any easier.

She decided to take things one day at time. Thinking about the whole situation was too much, too overwhelming, and she was already at the edge of her endurance. She felt like she was at the very bottom of the world, at the bottom of her self, at the bottom of a teacup just emptied by the gulps of a

monster. Her physical body felt crushed by the power of her emotions. She drank lots of water to stay hydrated, because the intensity of this situation took so much out of her. She kept trying to stay connected to the flow, whatever direction that took her in. She tried to replenish her body, but her mind kept using her body without asking for permission, and it seemed like it was using too much. She felt like she was walking through a desert. There was no choice of a path even though the choices were countless, and she could walk in any possible direction. The wisdom of the northern star was calling.

Just then she tried to smile at a stranger walking by, but it didn't quite work. Instead, her effort left a grim look of hesitation on her face.

- Can people see how afraid I am? - she wondered.

Signs Of Death, Fear, and The “Little Things”

Right before she left for the big party, she stood in the hallway in her new dress, looked in the mirror, and turned her hips slightly from one side to the other. She smiled at one of the gardeners who was coming her way.

- If someone asks, I've just come over to say how beautiful you look (which you do), but what I really want to say is that I want you to be careful out there tonight. People will be watching you, and if you're not extremely cautious, you might get in trouble. I don't know what you're planning, but please don't do anything stupid. I'm sure your friend wouldn't want you to get hurt in any way. - As the gardener slowly walked away, she fixed her red, gorgeous hair behind her ears. The painter could hardly restrain her tears.

The painter's dress was long, slightly shining in a deep blue color, and made of silk chiffon. She definitely looked like a princess, although she didn't want to think about herself like that. She looked stunning, and when she entered the President's palace, she could no longer have any doubts about that. Everybody, absolutely everybody, stared at her. She was the star of the evening; she was the Cinderella who would turn into her real self after midnight and cry her eyes out under the covers. Even though she tried to repress her pleasure at being in the center of attention, it was inevitable.

There were many things that happened that evening, but the most important thing started when he came over to meet her. He, the president, smiled

gently while introducing himself and told her that he admired her artistic persona. She was charmed by his compliments but dismissed her feelings and stayed as cold and formal towards him as she could.

In her opinion, he was the monster, the dictator. She blamed him and his politics for the death of her friend, so no matter how charming he was she was out of his reach. However, because he was an integral part of her plan, she did need to act out a few scenes with him and keep him interested in her. She already impressed everybody with her looks, so she didn't need to be a famous painter or anyone else for that matter. All she needed to accomplish that night was a conversation with the president that would give her a chance to meet with him again in a more private setting. The easiest way for her to make a connection with him was through art. She had been asking about his personal collection of paintings, and it sounded was impressive.

The evening past and she returned home before midnight as befits Cinderella, and then only few days later, she received a dinner invitation from the president. She only had another week to prepare for her plan and there was a lot to do. Fear was mostly governing her mind now, but deep down inside she was also excited.

During her usual morning routine in the garden, she has asked the gardeners if they knew of a safe place to meet and talk with the Dean of the Fine Arts Academy. They recommended a restaurant that wasn't as fancy as one might want for a meeting with a Dean, but the gardeners expressed certainty that it was safe to talk there. They also recommended a specific table that would be

least risky if the place were wired. She was going to follow all of the safety rules recommended by the gardeners, but a part of her still couldn't believe how this country worked.

The painter was sitting in the living room playing a board game called "Building Your Community," and she started to ponder what the rest of the women in the house were doing. When she looked up, she saw that all of the women around her were sitting with their computers and connecting to their hundreds of friends on the web. She imagined a spider web that caught everyone in the room and a spider that slowly ate them up by consuming their time and by filling their lives with the unrealistic wireless relationships. She imagined the spider would eat their brains first, then their eyes and ears, and then the rest of their senses. Perhaps it would eat the legs before the senses, or maybe it would eat them simultaneously. Either way, she saw a bunch of cyborgs as she looked around at all of the people who were only indirectly connecting with others through computers and internet.

In that country the second most asked question was - How many friends do you have connected? - The painter was imagining that the first most asked question must be something like - We're looking for more roommates, would you be interested? - Or perhaps it was - Which club do you belong to? Which church? Which family? Which company or organization? Who are you with? - It could be virtually any question having to do with the group of people near you, whether they are near you in their physical bodies or near you on the net.

All of the sudden, the painter felt extremely lonely. This must have been

the other side of the nation's widespread paranoia. What else could be expected? One side of the continuum brings forth the other side of that same continuum. The world has a natural tendency to balance itself, which applies to both humans and nature, although sometimes the world of nature sustains that balance at the expense of humans. At least that's how it felt to the painter. She imagined it as being similar to the way human brains have self-regulatory mechanisms, and decided it's all the same world anyways, whether it's occurring on the micro level or the big universe level. Suddenly it was her turn again in the "Build Your Community" game and she was unexpectedly winning.

That Friday at 6:30 pm she met with the Dean. She trusted the gardeners' choice of restaurant and table, but she wasn't exactly sure to what extent she should trust them. She had only known them for a few weeks after all. She needed to be cautious, but maybe she needed support even more.

- This is an interesting place you've chosen for our dinner. I thought you might prefer much fancier places - said the Dean when they entered into the "Mama's Choice" restaurant.

- I've heard they have really good food here and that we can get some privacy to talk. - The painter said the first part of that sentence in a much louder voice than the last part. It sounded too much like a conspiracy, but that's how she wanted it to sound. The Dean was the only person she had considered telling part of her plan to, but she didn't know the Dean at all, except for the one time they met at the Academy. She had to test the ground first and see how it went. The biggest difficulty, it seemed, was how to recognize whether she was trustworthy or not. If

the Dean was very open to her ideas it could be suspicious, but if she was totally not interested it wasn't going to work. What would be the fine line that would make it safe enough for the painter to trust her?

As soon as they sat down at the corner table, the Dean said off-handedly,
- I don't think we know each other well enough to have the conversation that I wish we could have today. -

The painter felt so relieved. - Lets just eat something - she said with an exhale and a meaningful smile.

- Good idea - responded the Dean as she opened the menu.

They had a wonderful conversation about the newest trend in Japanese Art Schools, the controversy around comic book illustrations, and the latest prices of expressionist artwork. By the time desert arrived the painter said:

- I need to ask you something. -

- Maybe we can meet again soon. I've enjoyed talking with you so much. - As the Dean said that, she gently tapped her right ear a few times pretending to fix her earring, but it was clear to the painter that she was trying to say there was a wire in this place. The painter realized that's what Dean was trying to say from the beginning, and she felt like was in one of those old spy movies. Did this mean that the gardeners had lied to her? Maybe the gardeners did not know about the wire, or maybe the Dean was lying to gain her trust. She needed time to think. They made plans to meet at the Academy on Sunday and have some tea together, which gave her two days to figure it out.

Over the next two days, she came down to the garden and chatted with

the two women just like before, but this time she also paid attention to details that might have escaped from her before. The gardeners looked the same, talked the same, and acted the same, but something caught the painter's eye. Something she had never noticed before. It seemed like the red haired woman didn't really want to talk with the painter. She was nice all right, but only when the painter looked her way, otherwise the gardener looked stressed and worried. Her face was sad, her eyes looking down, and her shoulders hung limply. It was subtle, and the only reason the painter noticed it at all was because she was looking for anything that might seem suspicious. Since the painter did not know how to interpret the information she saw in the faces of the gardener and the Dean, she decided at that moment not to trust anyone. Not trusting anyone in these circumstances felt smart. She also decided that it was crucial for her to pay more attention to details.

On Saturday morning, between working in the garden and eating breakfast, the painter requested an urgent visit with the psychiatrist who had visited her few weeks back. She called the hospital where the doctor worked on Saturdays, because every other day of the week, the psychiatrist conducted home visits and worked at her private office. The painter thought it would be easiest to make an appointment with someone that she had already seen before. It also meant that the psychiatrist probably already had a file on her, and if she wasn't a new client, then she might not have to wait in an endless line to come in for a visit.

When she entered the hospital, it was clearly overcrowded. There were

people waiting everywhere; they were next to the information desk, in the registration area, and in the waiting room. There was no place to sit down, and a big, empty water container had just been replaced by two workers in blue suits with the word "Aqua" printed in white on their backs.

After getting through registration, the painter was sent to the 5th floor, but after entering the elevator, she pressed the number 7 instead, which was the floor for Major Depressive Disorder patients. When she stepped out, she saw only a chair, a coffee table, and a small service window with a big lady behind it. The lady smiled widely at the painter.

- How can I help you? - she asked meretriciously.

- Yes, I'm here to see a doctor but I forgot the name. Maybe you could check by my name, please? -

- Certainly, just a moment. - She moved her obese body with a heavy sigh and walked to another room. That gave the painter a moment to check the brown book in front of her, even though she didn't yet know what she was looking for. Moving her index finger down the list of names, she was trying to memorize as many as she could. When the lady returned with a tall skinny man behind her, the painter gave them a smile that wrapped around her head and waited for what they would say. The man introduced himself and in a loud voice said:

- Miss, you should be on the 5th floor. The 7th floor is an inpatient unit. -

- Oh, thank you very much and sorry for the trouble. I must have misunderstood at the registration. - The painter turned around with a whoosh and pressed the elevator button.

- The 5th floor, right? - she confirmed with the two still staring at her from behind the glass.

- Yes, the 5th - said the man.

The painter was still smiling when the elevator door shut. Then her lips sloped down, and she noticed how much she was sweating. On the 5th floor, she immediately found a restroom and used some water and paper towels to wash her armpits before another woman entered the room.

When she met with the psychiatrist, the painter was somewhat shocked, because the doctor looked so different than how she remembered her. However, as soon as the doctor started talking, the painter knew she was the same person with the same lousy attitude.

- You must have a lot of clients these days - the painter said, but the psychiatrist didn't even raise her head from above the stack of files on her desk. She also didn't bother to answer. Instead, the psychiatrist asked the painter a few questions and made some notes in her chart. The whole meeting was flat and meaningless, and that's how the painter wanted it to be. She didn't want a conversation, she wanted to see more of the hospital and do one more thing. Knowing that the secretary's office was down the hall, the painter asked the psychiatrist for another visit, because she knew it would take the doctor about 3 to 5 minutes to set up another appointment and during that time she could look around.

After the psychiatrist left, she started to thumb through the files on the desk. She noticed right away that Major Depressive Disorder was the diagnosis

of most cases. There were also some paranoias and a few schizophrenias and antisocial behaviors here and there. She noticed a locker that had a small key sitting in the lock. The painter was sweating again but decided to turn the key and look inside the locker. It contained another stack of files just bigger. She turned her head to the side and looked more closely for a moment. All she saw were names, names, names. The painter was running out of time, and she was just about to close the locker when, and in the last moment, at the last swoosh of her eye lashes, she saw the name of her friend. She didn't have time to think. She grabbed the file along with two others that were on top of it and put them in her bag. When the psychiatrist returned, the painter still had her hands in her bag trying to hide the files, so she pulled some tissues out of her bag just to make it look natural. The doctor gave her a little note with a date and time for her next visit, and then the painter blew her nose in a tissue and left with a brief thank you. She was terrified and headed straight for the exit.

Back at the house that evening, she took the files to her room, climbed under the covers in her bed, and started reading with a sense of urgency. It was difficult to read about her friend. She found out that her friend's medication dosage was huge, and that it consisted of three different prescriptions. The diagnosis was easy to guess, and the prescribed treatment was a combination of the medications, group therapy, and living in a supervised environment due to severity of her symptoms. A second hospitalization had been postponed due to good cooperation from the patient.

The painter took a deep breath and closed the file. It was about 2 am and

she wanted to go to sleep, but she picked up the other two files and opened one. The diagnosis was the same. - Of course - she thought, but the treatment was the same. In fact, everything in that file was exactly the same as her friend's file; all of the notes, expressions, and recommendations were the same. The painter quickly opened the third file, and she was only partially surprised to find that it was also the same. She couldn't look anymore more and fell asleep.

The next afternoon, the painter met again with the Dean of the Fine Arts Academy. They met at the Academy, and the director showed her around a little. They went into a small sculpture workshop where the Dean offered her tea, and the painter accepted with a blank expression on her face. She was worn out and hadn't had a good night's sleep for days. Even when she stayed in her room right after her friend died, she wasn't able to sleep well.

- I need to talk to you about a very important and delicate matter - the director said as she put both tea cups down on a round, wooden table covered with the remains of some clay.

The painter waited for the next sentence with as much focus as she could hold at that moment.

- I'm pretty sure that there is no wire in this workshop. I check it out with a trustworthy colleague every week. Listen, I need your help. Well, we need your help. You're going to leave this country soon, and we need you to let the rest of the world know what is going on here. We'll give you as much evidence as we can. -

- I don't think so - she said sharply. - Besides, I'm not going anywhere, at least

not yet. I'm even starting to like it here. You know, my friend's death was an extremely difficult experience for me, but I'm starting to feel better and I want to take my time. -

The dean's eyes opened so wide they almost popped out like buttons from an old coat.

- Thank you for the tea, dear. Lets talk soon, ok? - the painter offered as she left.

On the way back to the house, she was thinking to herself - Thank God I saw that secret service car through the window with my peripheral vision. I'm not stupid! The Dean could have known about the car downstairs, and whoever was in the car could have been listening to our every word. Maybe it was a test for me. Maybe they wanted to see if I would talk or not. But that really only means that no matter how hard I try to prove that I'm not going to revile anything about what I've witnessed here, the suspicion and uncertainty will be more than enough reason to not let me out of the country. This situation is just getting more and more complicated and difficult. I don't have anybody to trust, and if I snoop around like this for much longer, they will certainly lock me up or make me kill myself just as my friend did. - The painter closed her eyes and took a deep, discontinues breath.

Polarizations

- Can I show you something? - The president moved his chair back slightly as if he were certain that she would agree. He was dressed in a dark brown single-breasted jacket and creased beige pants. His shirt wore thin light blue vertical lines and the last button was undone, which made her think of Cary Grant.

The planned dinner had been almost pleasant so far. The painter didn't want to admit it, but her host for that evening entertained her in a smart, joyful and very polite way. He was interested in her opinions, and he had been warmly sharing his own stories and experiences, whereas she was being rather cold and distant. It was a difficult game for her to play. On the one hand, she wanted to stay focused on her plan, but on the other hand, this man in front of her was not what she had imagined. She was prepared for an egoistic ignoramus who wanted to spend time with a famous painter for the sake of curiosity and good press. Instead . . . well, she didn't want to go there, she was confused.

They walked down a corridor to a different part of the house. He was leading the way, she was right behind him, and his personal guard walked a little to the side, keeping a distance. The president stopped by a huge door decorated with gold; he grabbed the doorknob with his left hand and waved the guard away with his right hand. Without lowering his right hand, he gestured for her to come in. While crossing the edge, she noticed a slight smile on the guard's face and felt frightened. The president must have noticed her fear, because right after he

closed the door, he said:

- Don't worry, I'm not the monster you think I am. I just brought you here to show you this room. -

By the time he finished his sentence, she was already looking around and feeling absolutely stunned by the view.

- I've heard about your collection - she said while walking rapidly through the room. It was a banquet room that could probably hold up to 150 people. The walls were filled with canvases from the most famous hands. She couldn't take her eyes off of them for some time. She walked in circles, touched the paintings, and (in his mind at least) talked gibberish. She was naming all of the colors that the artists used as well as the sorts of paint, the techniques, the light and shade, etc. Then she finally realized that he was just standing there, watching her in her ecstasy. She quickly said, a bit embarrassed:

- I apologize. This is such a treat for me, and I didn't even thank you for the delicious dinner. -

- It was my pleasure - he answered with a dignified nod.

That's when her head moved forward like a duck or a parrot and then turned to the side; that's when her pupils shined even brighter than before. The place where he stood wasn't just a spot in the room. Behind his right arm hung a painting that came from her own workshop, from her attic to be precise. It wasn't the first time she had seen her work on somebody's wall, but this particular painting was very special to her. The subject of this painting was a young woman running along an alley of trees and looking back (or through the president's left

shoulder, one could say) in a self-confident way. The atmosphere of the painting was mostly dark, heavy, and bleak, but the woman-figure was light, almost evanescent. She wasn't ghostlike though; she was very human and very alive.

- I sometimes wonder where she is running from and where she is running to - he said with his head turned halfway towards the painting.

- That has never crossed my mind - she said with a gentle smile, still a little embarrassed about her passion, which was so out and visible.

He smiled back and asked - What were you thinking when you created this piece, then? -

- I was thinking about people walking their own unique path all by themselves no matter how dark that path is. -

- It's beautiful - he said truthfully but diplomatically, which cut the conversation off as he moved slowly to the door.

She looked at him, and in her confusion thought - He looks like a solid rock in front of my thin hands. I see him as my opposite. I'm scared of his power and do not understand his actions. - Walking side by side with him, she looked at his profile from the corner of her eye and thought about his authoritarian methods. Her plan was working out so far (except for not having anyone to trust), and now she needed to make another move, even if she did not yet know what that move would be.

- Would you join me at the opera next Friday? - he asked unexpectedly and without any hesitation. - I have an international press conference beforehand, and after that I'll need some good company at the theater. What do you think? -

This gave her the next idea for her plan.

- Will that make front page news in the Saturday newspapers? - she asked.

He laughed. - Yes, certainly. It will not be the first or last time for *both* of us, I'm sure. -

- That's true - she said lightly. - I would love to, then. I always enjoy the opera. Would it be all right with you to meet here and go together? -

He looked suspicious for a split second, but then, into the light atmosphere, he replied - Sure, you might want to come to the press conference too. Is that what this is about? I'm sure some of your journalist friends will be there. -

- Yes, that's perfect. Although, there might be also be people there that I don't want to meet. - She threw this statement out quickly, grabbing an occasion that may not occur again.

- I can understand that - he said they reached a door and left the private sector of the house.

The whole next week was filled with intense preparations. She had to elaborate everything in great detail, not for the opera but also for the press conference. She didn't know who would be there or if they would be her friends or enemies; she naturally had both in the world of journalism.

She arrived very punctually at the conference and sat down in the middle between other people. She didn't want to be too close or too far from where the president would be standing. At first, she couldn't spot anyone that she knew, but then she noticed that a well-known journalist from her own country had just entered the room in a hurry. The problem was that this woman hated her; she

hated her artwork and everything about her. The good news was that this journalist was really good at her profession.

The painter decided not to wait any longer, so with her back slunk, she moved sideways between the rows of people and sneaked over to the journalist.

- I know we never liked each other - she whispered into the journalist's ear - but this is bigger than our personal differences. - The painter slipped a little piece of paper into her pocket, and made sure the journalist knew it was there by gently tapping her jacket pocket.

The conference was starting, so she went back to her original seat. The event progressed very normally; there were a few questions about the new tax reform and a light comment about the president's martial status. Then the painter stood up, and, knowing she only had a few seconds before someone else would speak, she spoke her chosen words very quickly but with strength, confidence, and eloquence.

- Mr. President, what do you think about the growing opposition against your dictatorial rules regarding personal space, committing people to mental hospitals against their will, and arresting good citizens for trivial reasons like walking the street alone? What do you think about the growing suicide rate in your country, about the astronomical rate of antidepressant medication use, about forbidding people to meditate or practice any solitary spiritual traditions, about it being against the law to live alone? -

By the time she spoke the last words, a big commotion had erupted in the room. The bodyguards, secret service agents, and journalists were all looking at

her and awaiting the president's response. Some people were more surprised than others, but the president's face was like stone, and he prepared to answer in a serious and stilted manner. She could see his anger, disappointment, and even betrayal beaming out from under the formal mask.

- You stated your questions so fluently. You must have been preparing them for some time - the president began. - Not long enough though to avoid offending a person by calling him a dictator. I would like to answer your questions anyway. - He made it sound like he was doing her a favor. - Yes, we have introduced some new solutions into our society, and there are opponents and constituents to those reforms, like there would be in every other country. As for the suicide rate, you may not have done your homework, because the latest data looks very promising. With regards to antidepressants, well, the amount of people needing this kind of treatment is grows everywhere in the world, and we are no different. Lastly, there are always people in prisons and in mental health institutions who say, "I am innocent," "I am not a harm to anyone," and that's why we have a court system. -

She was still standing and ready to retort when the journalist from her own country stood up and very loudly said:

- Mr. President, I have information from an anonymous source that the leader of your opposition in parliament has not been at home sick as you informed the public three weeks ago, but has actually been hospitalized against his will in a psychiatry unit. Is that correct? -

The painter sat down and stared at the journalist. This was not the question she

had written on the little piece of paper; this question was much better. What she had written on the paper was - Please trust me and ask this question during the conference: Why are hundreds of people being held against their will in locked psychiatry units, including the following three people? - She then listed three names that she remembered from the book on the 7th floor in the psychiatric hospital. She had no idea who those three, but it was all she had and it was worth trying. It now occurred to her that one of the names must have been the opposition leader whom the journalist asked about.

- I do not have the same information as you do - answered the president, and then he ended the press conference.

- No further comments - said an assistant.

The guards quickly directed everybody out, and the rush was quite forceful, because all of the journalists wanted to be the first to spread the news. In the meantime, the painter was part of a crowd walking through a different section of the building. Just then a big guard came and asked her a short rhetorical question:

- Will you please come with me, madam? -

- Where to? - she asked frightened.

- To the opera - he answered.

That, she didn't expect, and she followed the guard with a tangle of confusion in her head.

Gravity From Outer Space and The Woman Of All Times

A limousine with two drivers took her to the Opera House. She looked elegant but not as formal as the other people entering for the performance. She didn't expect to be there. She had assumed that the president would never want to see her again after the press conference. She wondered if maybe the guard and drivers had been instructed to take her there so the president could stand her up and leave her abandoned. She sat down in the central balcony and felt proud of what she had done, but she also felt bad in terms of her relationship with the president. As she sat in one of the two dark red chairs, she remembered her friend, and it was with watery eyes that she looked up to see him slowly entered the theatre. He was tense and almost beaming with anger. When he sat down next to her, they gazed into each other's eyes at the exact moment when a tear fell down her cheek. His muscles relaxed immediately, and she quickly turned away. She didn't want to show her feelings; not now and not to him. The lights in the theater dimmed, and he looked straight ahead as he quietly spoke to her.

- I feel something for you that I don't want to feel. I'm not even sure who you are, especially after today's press conference. You used me. You had your own motivations and you didn't care about anything else. You could have asked me those questions without the whole world hearing. What are you doing here, anyway? Who are you? -

He didn't turn towards her even for a moment. She, in deference, was looking at him the entire time and wondering how to respond to his accusations. It was true that she has used him, but from her point of view, she did something good and important. Still, in that moment, she could also see a simple person sitting in front of her; a hurt and confused person.

The lights went down and the opera started. She lowered her voice and said,

- I don't understand you or your politics, but I don't blame you for your feelings. I don't blame you for hating me right now. -

- I don't hate you - he said quietly between the voices of the opera singers.

She didn't quite hear him, but perhaps it was because she didn't want to.

- I don't believe that you can be so blind to harm you're causing people. Running around with cell phones, chatting on the internet, adding friends to your network, valuing family and community over individuals, refusing divorces, and putting people in prison if they don't like your new reforms. When you combine all of this, it's madness! What is so bad about being alone? You're alone, for pity's sake! -

- I don't want people to suffer the way that I am suffering - he answered.

- What do you mean? How are you suffering? - she asked sharply.

- I am lonely - he said, lowering his voice to a whisper.

She didn't know what to say. They were hanging in there, listening to the opera, and not speaking or looking at each other. After a long moment filled with their unspoken emotions and the opera music, she said:

- You must be able to see that what might be good for you, is not necessarily good for others? Some people *like* being by themselves. Being alone doesn't

always mean being lonely. -

- Maybe some people like to be by themselves sometimes, but all people prefer to be with others, and I'm just trying to make it easier for everybody to be happy. Everyone wants to have friends, partners, lovers, and companions. I don't believe that anyone can be happy if they're alone. - Now he looked like a bull holding his ground. - Besides, you can't tell me that children would rather have their parents divorced than together. -

- Actually, I know some kids that appreciate their parents splitting instead of constantly fighting - she returned.

- Well, I don't fully believe that. There are more options than simply choosing between conflicts and breaking up; people can also decide to work on their relationships and compromise their egoistic needs for the benefit of everybody. I will never understand how a person can choose anything over the good of their family, especially their children. I didn't have my mother when I was growing up, because she died when I was 7 years old, not because she divorced my father - he proudly this last comment, sort of on the side.

- When I was little, I would have given anything in the world to have her back. -

He squinted his eyes and wrinkled his forehead hard, and in the muted light she could see the count of winters on his face.

- You have no idea what it means to be a lonely kid. I could stay in my room all day long and no one would even notice. I didn't speak for weeks and there was nobody there to ask why. I only ate when I felt weak and on the verge of fainting. I was slowly disappearing day-by-day, and there was nobody there to see. Then I

had a dream. -

- A nighttime dream? - she asked surprised, and then she remembered how her friend asked her not to talk about dreams.

- Yes, a nighttime dream, or rather a nightmare. I hate dreams. They're so disturbing. I wish the brain could find another way to get rid of the day's random, leftover information. Anyway, in the dream, I was walking on a big, beautiful clearing in the woods, and then suddenly something stabbed me in the back. When I turned around, there was a huge group of people, and the people in the front of the group were the ones stabbing me in the back with knives. It was so real and painful. I still feel the dull pain of those knives in my back. When I woke up from that dream, I was terrified at first, but then I realized that people hate me and push me around, and that I needed to do something about it. That was the first time I felt a need for power. So I started studying mathematics and economy, because I wanted to make money. I knew that only money could give me enough power. -

- Enough power to do what? - she asked after swallowing.

- Enough to stop them from killing me or push me around. Enough to make my own rules and to make others notice me. -

- Notice you? - she shyly interrupted.

- Well, to notice a person - he said, moving his head away. He wasn't quite ready to admit that his political aspirations and policies were about him and his personal hurt.

- Did you succeed? - she asked.

He looked at her with curiosity, as if his success was obvious.

- Do you feel noticed, recognized, and loved? - she said slowly and kind of surprised herself with the last word.

She fell silent when the music became more forte. The opera was coming to an end.

- Let me show you something - he said the moment the curtain touched the stage and before everyone else got up from their seats. They went up some narrow stairs that led to a small balcony overlooking the city. Being suspended in the air and distanced from the world in this way made life feel bearable for a moment. Without the heaviness of stomping on the ground, they sat down on the balcony on a white stone bench attached to the wall of the opera house.

- Where was your father when you were growing up? - she asked.

- My father was always too busy to keep an eye on me. He wasn't a bad person, but he didn't know how to raise a child. He only knew how to make money and that's what he did during the day. At night he drank. Usually it was not too much, and he was always up and running the next morning and never late for work. But if it was Saturday or a holiday, he would drink until he passed out. He made a few good moves on the stock market and some brilliant investments, which made us rich and allowed me to go to the best schools. -

- So really, you have followed in the footsteps of your father when it comes to making money and your career - she added consciously.

- You keep surprising me by making comments and observations that I've never thought of before. The similarity with my father seems obvious now that you've

stated it so clearly, but I never thought of it that way. I thought my life story was more unique than just following somebody's footsteps, especially my fathers. -

- I guess you were wrong - she said quickly, and he looked at her from the side.

- Please don't get me wrong - she said. - I can see now that your life has been hell, and that your loneliness has left a huge and deep wound in your heart. I also know that you're probably going to get even angrier with me for what I am about to say, but I have to say it nonetheless. You are hurting a lot of people out there.

- She pointed to the city below with her chin. - You can't force happiness on to people. It's not going to work. It's already not working. -

He looked down and then, for the first time since they arrived on the balcony, he looked in her direction. In that moment, she forgot he was a president, and she felt her heart beating fast and realized how many mixed feelings she has for him. She hated him in some ways and was drawn to him in other ways. He gazed at her and said,

- Do you really mean that? How am I hurting them? I don't see it. I believe in what I do, and I only see the positive sides of my reforms, otherwise I wouldn't make them. -

She wanted to explain it to him in a rational and down to earth way, but for some reason she felt emotional and decided to follow her woman's intuition. She said,

- You're not only hurting people in this country, you're killing them. -

She took a deep breath but tears involuntarily fell from her big eyes. He turned towards her with his whole body.

- What are you saying? - He threw out with anger.

She had to take another deep breath to find her voice again.

- I came to your country to visit my best friend, and she killed herself few weeks ago because she couldn't bare your wonderful reforms any more. She killed herself because she couldn't take everyone telling her how to live, telling her what time to get up and go to sleep, and telling her she should have stayed with her husband and had a family. She couldn't stand others telling her what's right and what's wrong, what's appropriate and what's forbidden. And most of all, she killed herself out of loneliness, because no one understood her or was interested in her feelings. Your reforms have put so much pressure on people to be happy that everyone is manic to be together, to create community, to write text messages, or play football on a team. They've forgotten how to listen to themselves. You can't understand anybody if you don't understand yourself, it's that simple. What were you expecting to build the relationships on? Virtual connections? - Her sarcasm was an indication of her hurt and her need to stop for a moment. She gently wiped her tears away and then added,

- Listen, I know you might not have had this experience yourself, but sometimes people can feel happier and more connected to the world while sitting alone in an empty room, than they can while chatting with acquaintances who don't really care about them. There is nothing worse then being surrounded people and feel lonely. -

- I think I have that experience more than you can imagine - he said in a low, sad voice. - I'm not sure what else I can say right now, and I think I would prefer to end this conversation here. I'm sorry. -

She nodded and they both stood up to leave.

After the next two days, which she allowed herself to spend crying, he called and asked to meet her again. A limousine took her to the president's palace, where he was waiting for her. He was sitting behind a beautiful oak desk and reading through some papers.

- I'm just checking the newest statistics on our suicide rate - he said without turning his head away from the papers.

She stood there for a moment without saying a word, and he looked up and took his glasses off.

- You look beautiful - he said gently.

She didn't respond, and still stood in the same spot.

- Please, lets sit down. -

They sat down by an antique coffee table, and he didn't wait even a moment before saying,

- You are opening my eyes somehow, I must admit. I feel like I've failed. I've failed to meet my own my high expectations, and I've failed because I turned out to be a person that I never wanted to be. I've ended up treating people in the very same way that I was treated, and I hated them for treating me like that. How disgustingly typical: I was a victim who has now become an oppressor. -

She was still silent, and he added,

- I'm just starting to see some of my mistakes. Do you think you could ever forgive me? Do you think anyone can forgive me? -

She looked at him curiously.

- Do you think you can forgive yourself? - she asked.

- I don't know. But I want to make changes and encourage a more balanced society. -

She almost whispered to him - I sometimes hate the concept of balance, you know; the yin and yang, good and bad, truth and lie, plus and minus, forward and backward, past and future, matter and antimatter, here and not here, me and you. All of those differentials are both not important and hugely important at the same time. Deep down beyond time and space, beyond life and death, there is emptiness, and there is energy, and there is the something, and there is the missing element, and there is God. God is the one who bares all of the faces without even having a face, who bares all of the heart without having a heart, who exists simultaneously in both the past and in the future, who exists without existing. Isn't this the most pure form of balance? -

She felt intimate with him right then and let herself fall into a philosophic debate. She continued with a slightly hoarse voice - Is God the highest form of balance, the one that reaches all possible levels? Is it a complete and absolute balance of energy, matter and spirit, love and ambivalence, existence and not existence? If so, then the absence of balance would have to be included, and one-sidedness would have to be an aspect of God too. After all, there is no depth without superficiality, no me without you, no good without bad, etc. Who would be God then, if complete balance required an equally complete imbalance? What is the third option? If you have equal amounts of balance and imbalance, then what does it equal? Is that balanced again? What is the one outcome? And what is

the fourth option? And the fifth, and the sixth, and the infinity of all the options? -

They were sitting very close to each other and at that moment she felt his warm hand gently touching hers. She was quite shocked but she didn't move her hand away. He slowly stretched across the table to kiss her. Their warm lips met for a magical moment in time and space, and they were suspended without thoughts in a vacuum of pheromones. Without opening her eyes, she whispered - I can't - and then left the room.

Throughout that night and the next days, she thought about all that had happened. News about the president's reversal of his controversial reforms was being broadcast on TV, in newspapers and magazines, and especially in media from abroad. After a few days, the president gave a public address from his summerhouse at the coast. He said many things. Most of his comments were very diplomatic statements about adapting to the changes and reversals, but there was also something distinctly different about him. Like before, he looked deeply thoughtful, focused, and powerful, but these energies seemed to come from a different place inside of him. The painter saw his openness growing right in front of camera.

In one of the interviews he said: - We can't force people to be happy. Everyone needs to find their own way. - He said this directly into the camera, as if he were remembering and repeating their conversation. She was proud that she had encourage this humongous political machine towards change, but this pride was overshadowed by her personal thoughts and feelings about him. She could not forget his words, his brown eyes, the touch of his hand, the look on his

face, the closeness of his lips, and the sensation of his cheek against her face. She could remember every detail and recalled them all thousands of times.

Some of the people who lived in the house thanked the painter for what she said at the press conference, while others avoided her. One woman started staying alone in her room for long periods of time, and whenever the painter passed her in the hallway, the woman would just smile and say “hi” with sleepy eyes. On another occasion, one of the gardeners approached the painter and apologized for recommending the wired restaurant and table for her meeting with the Dean. She explained that she did it because government officials were threatening to commit her to a mental hospital if she did not cooperate. The officials had found out about her intimate relationship with the other gardener, and being homosexual was enough to put someone into a locked facility. She cried and begged the painter for forgiveness, and the painter was happy that the gardener had the courage to confess to her. They ended up talking all night about the many things happening in the country, especially those things that they were not allowed to talk about before.

One afternoon, the Dean of the Fine Arts Academy unexpectedly knocked on the door. She came to say thank you and ask why the painter didn't agree to help her that day when she asked. The painter told her about the secret service car she had seen downstairs and explained how she wasn't sure if she could trust anybody. The Dean wasn't surprised, of course. She invited the painter to give a speech at the Academy for the opening of the new academic year. The Dean was especially excited about this opening because so many new students

had signed up for the program, and because so many prior students would be returning to the Academy once they were released from the hospitals and prisons. As the Dean was leaving the house that day, she hesitated in the doorway she also asked:

- So when are you planning to go back home? -

- I'm not sure, yet. I have one more thing to do before I go. - She said this with a smile that indicated she wasn't going to say what that one thing was.

Tears Of Acceptance

She tried calling the president a few times, but she was only allowed to leave a message once, and she doubted the message ever reached him. On Thursday morning, he called her back, apologized for the delay, and explained that he had just then gotten her message. She was so pleased to hear his voice. There was no small talk or chatting whatsoever. He simply asked:

- Will you come to my summerhouse for the weekend? -

Without a moment of hesitation, she responded - Yes. -

When they hung up the phone, she couldn't refrain from expressing her joy, and early Friday morning, she took a train to the coast. The same driver who took her home from the opera was waiting for her in the small train station, and he drove her to the president's beach residency. The weather that day was a gorgeous 75 degrees Fahrenheit with a light wind, but the forecast for Saturday and Sunday was not so promising.

The painter and the president ate lunch together alfresco. Even though the view of the ocean was stunning, they mostly only looked at each other. He had to work that the afternoon, so she spent the day on the beach enjoying nature's good company. After a delicious dinner together, they sat on the terrace and drank some good wine. At one point, the conversation turned towards food, so she told him about her favorite breakfast, and they joked, laughed, and had a good time. Later, he walked her to her room, and they spent the night together.

It was an unbelievable gentleness that barely touched her arm, but it made a big impact on her whole body, moving all of her cells in a way they never had before. The grip of the atmosphere wouldn't let go of her, and she moved her head to look up at his face. In the light of the fireplace, his skin took on a warm color, almost brown, and she thought of Jupiter's combination of rose, red, orange, yellow and black; the brown planet showing its great red spot, its vulnerability and power. She couldn't let go of that image. She furrowed her forehead trying to think of a question to ask him, but he spoke before she could think of anything. This time, looking straight into her eyes and speaking with the softest voice, he said - I could easily fall in love with you. -

She stopped breathing for a moment and then moved closer so she could gently rub her nose against his cheek and lightly rest her forehead on his temple.

The rest of the weekend was rainy, so they stayed in the bedroom for two days. On Sunday, he organized her favorite breakfast, and they talked as they enjoyed the food.

- I've been looking for the right relationship my whole life - he said while playing with her hair. - I kept jumping from one relationship to another, always looking for something I couldn't find. Because of you and the chain of recent events, I can now see that I need to have a relationship with myself first. I need to know who I am before I can be with anybody else. I don't know myself. Right now, all I know is that for years I've been terrified of being lonely, and I've been looking for solution in the arms of others. When I first had that thought, I didn't quite believe

it, because I assumed I would find one person and stay with her until the end of my days, no matter what. I thought that because I was so scared of being lonely, I would never let go of a relationship. But the opposite was actually true: I was breaking off my relationships precisely because of my fear. I was so afraid of abandonment, that I always left my girlfriends so they couldn't leave me, and I pretended to take responsibility for my actions. It wouldn't be fair to the other person if I didn't love them, and I didn't want to lie. There were a couple of times when I thought I was in love, but the relationships were a disaster. They were full of bad communication, misunderstandings, constant fights, and lots of disappointments. On a cognitive level, I knew that you're supposed to love your self (especially since all of the magazines advise it), but I never felt it, and I thought that maybe it was a woman's thing because of the feelings and all of that. I was always trying to be more reasonable and logical, not more emotional. But you know, I had everything I could possibly want, and I still wasn't happy. There was no logic in that. Most people think that when you have money and power, you have everything. But wise people know it's not true and laugh at us. No one seems to listen to such wisdom in today's materialistic world. I didn't listen or believe it either. I'm the head of this country, and I'm no better. -

- Being in power doesn't make anyone a better person. It's usually the opposite, so you should be proud of yourself for having the strength and courage to change after making mistakes. -

They talked for hours, and the more he said, the more she fell in love.

It was still dark on Monday morning, and the ocean breeze was cold and strong. The painter stood in the open window, and she was wrapped in a big quilt. She watched him pack his baggage, and then he walked towards her and held her in his arms for a moment. He said:

- You've taught me so much, but most of all you've made me realize the importance of listening to myself. In some ways, I'm just at the beginning of my road, but I'm ready to be by myself, and I don't want to be a tyrant anymore. -

She lay her head down on his shoulder and whispered,

- Now I would rather teach you how to be with me. -

He moved his head rapidly from side to side and looked straight in her eyes. She was crying.

- You've changed me. I have to try and be a better person now, for me and for this country. I have to try to be alone. I need to face my demons. -

More tears fell down her face and mixed with the ocean breeze.

- I've finally started to understand something about life - he continued. - Please believe me that I have to get to know who I am. I have to try. If I let myself fall in love with you now, it will only end as another bad relationship. I can't do that to you or to me, not any more. There has been too much hurt already. I don't yet have the skills to be in a relationship, I just can't handle it. I think I've always been unconsciously self-centered, but I need to do it consciously for a change. This way I can at least be honest. Isn't that what you wanted from me in a first place?

- Yes, but that was when I didn't know you. And yes, it will be better for you and

for the country, but I'm not so sure it will be better for me. I guess now I need to learn how to conform and give up my personal needs for others. - She said this without crying.

- I can assure you, it is as difficult for me, as it is for you. - He sat down in a recliner and cuddled her quilted body in his arms. Light from the rising sun began interrupting the darkness, and they sat quietly for a moment. He wasn't ready for a relationship, and once again the painter faced an unknown future. With their thoughts mingling and mixing in the field around them, they breathed in the airfield with love for each other.

- Another part of me just wants to give up on this solitary journey and stay with you - he said, almost excitedly.

She touched the side of his face with a slow, comforting move.

- I guess the problem is that I love you so much, that I don't want you to abandon yourself for me. I know that our love is not enough to love each other.

The painter looked through the window of the airplane flying back home. She let herself feel her heartbeat and dive into memories. At first she tried to remember, then she tried to forget.