

# MARU



*a novel by*

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MAX Q LIVE  
Vancouver, British Columbia Canada

*To Kerry, my stalwart husband, friend  
and lifelong partner on this Journey.*

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*. . . and to the Light that persists in illuminating the  
follies of we earthly creatures.*



It isn't that Maru is ugly. In fact, she has a sensuality about her that oozes into your pores and suddenly you become aware of her secret invasion. Everyone who knows her is her victim. It's simply a matter of her choice and her timing when to pick at your bones. She comes at you out of nowhere. She ravages the senses. Then, like a wood nymph fairy, she'll disappear leaving you in an anticipated state of jellied ooze for her return.

I know her well. I'm her best friend.

Now that it's finally time to expose her after all these years, I begin to awaken to feelings that have long since been buried. The bare truth, of course, is that she disturbs me. And she always has. The emotions I feel are so strong and conflicted that I can almost materialize them into a rare exotic object. A touchable breathable thing that can be put on display in the lobby of the Lincoln Center there to be oohed and awed over by those who have the sensibilities to appreciate such objects. Because the reality is, the depth of my experience with Maru is now so rooted in my being that it's become an objective, well rounded, articulate substance. I can see it. I can touch it. I can smell it.

My Tribeca loft in New York City is filled with Afghani kilims. I live in lots of chaos and disorder. Though it's my disorder, I find it intimidating. You always imagine successful writers living in white walled New York apartments with hardwood floors polished ready for

the next roller derby. After all, we somehow associate a well ordered sense of words with polished floors. But it isn't so. Writers live smothered in their own messes. I actually think they enjoy the smell of chaos. Its skin bracing effect keeps their insanities alive and well, spurring them on to a daily attack with their laptops.

Thanks to my publisher, I managed through his office to sublet my loft to a middle-aged poet. His only request was that he be allowed to keep his five parrots. He'd taught all five to recite his most recent book on command. I declined his invitation to witness this most remarkable feat but I had to promise an interview with my agent including all five birds.

My bags are in the hallway clumped together like little elves. My tickets, passport, cell phone are huddled safely in the depths of my carry-on luggage. My last act is the key in the keyhole. And like a vulture swooping down for that cold taste of fresh blood, Maru calls me.

"Guess what?"

"What."

"I can meet you in Zurich."

"What do you mean?" knowing perfectly well what she means.

"Joe and I are on our way to Italy and Greece. Naturally, we're going through Switzerland. How about *Denine's* on the 11<sup>th</sup>?"

What is it about being a victim? What deep inner thrill is aroused when you know that this kind of encounter will only end up hurting. But pain has its own curiosity. It's own lure.

"Can't wait!" And so the details are locked in.

My last duty before leaving New York is to my publisher. He finds cocktails at Kennedy thrilling because, as he puts it, at airports you're "always in anticipation". It's better than actual doing because doing is pain. Anticipation is an altered state and so it can never touch an uncalled for reality. He's strongly of the philosophy that hurting is for writers just like punching bags make good fighters. I once asked him what equipment publishers need to be good. He replied, "teeth".

George arranges these Kennedy clambakes because he can't allow one of his flock to escape his tutelage without disgorging his 'final instructions'.

"Sharon, why must you go off like this? Can't you fly your son here for the summer? You can use our place in Maine. We won't be using it – only weekends. Besides, Italian summers are too hot for writing."

He always starts this way. Pleadingly direct. What he really means is you have a deadline on your next novel and horrid little things like 14-year-old boys can distract and derail.

"George, you know I have to attend Lewis' graduation. He's seen me twice this year and that for just a short time. Besides, would you be the one to deny a son the warmth and protection of his mother's arms?"

"Let's leave the vaudevillian emotions out of this. I gave you a deadline and you've already extended it. What's going to happen with this second one?"

"You've always had a unique way of getting to the bottom line George. Now listen. We have an agreement that by October 15<sup>th</sup> I'll have the final draft in your hands. I promise you that I'll complete this one in Italy. No question. Absolutely none. No problem."

"Believing that is like believing a river can flow up hill. Now listen Sharon. Do you think I take time like this with lesser writers? I leave that to my editors."

Here it comes. The pleading transforms itself into a very fervent evangelist stabbing his flock with the TRUTH. Only he knows what's good for me. Only he can guide my path to the 'Promised Land'. His face reddens a bit (I've always wondered was it the margaritas?) and his jugular vein pounds out so wide that it seems to have its own zip code!"

"You know I appreciate all you've done for me. But I must go my own way. And like a good publisher and friend you must allow me that."

"But look who you're spending your summer with. That German Italian guy!"

"George! For God's sake! Will you please try and relax. Dieter is a wonderful person! Stereotypes are not helpful."

I have him. He's desperate. Now I can walk into the flight lounge free and clear.

"I'm, I'm sorry Sharon. Things are piling up at the office and my wife is trying to file for . . ."

"So she finally found out did she? You're so meticulous with your writers George. You really should try to put a bit of that into your own personal life."

He sits for a moment turning his drink around and around blankly staring into the bottom of the glass. It could be a crystal ball forming small clouds of smoke with the future buried in its mists. But he can't see. Nor can I.

I put my hand on his. "I'm sorry George. But please believe me. October 15<sup>th</sup>. No problem." I grab my bags, leap up, kiss his bald head and flee to the safety of the flight lounge.



I love being on planes. I love the ceremony of it. When I fly I put myself into another world . . . another time. My triumphant escape from George creates a strange desire to go into a state of suspended animation. Flying always manages to give the feeling that time is out of reach 30,000 feet above the earth's surface and so it has no jurisdiction to lunge at your throat. It never works being at war with the time gods or so George has told me for the past five years.

But up here I never choose to worry about these lesser matters. Dinner is served with great ceremonial precision. The privileges of Business Class. It helps to further my meditative state that nothing of what is happening below really has any true connection with me. And so I'm free to consider all such affairs without the remotest possibility of being emotionally rearranged.

The woman across from me breaks my trance asking me what movie would be a good choice. She then takes the opportunity to introduce

herself and her forty year old son. They're an unusual pair. A twilight specter of another world and just part of the altered reality of flight.

I order The Balvenie. Single malt whiskey is a luxury I allow myself in conditions of suspended time. Somehow it gives me the feeling that I'm the right person in the right place at the right time.

I begin to think about my son Lewis. Or 'Wiz' as I call him. The older he gets the more he looks like his father. My mother strongly advised 'an alternate route' when she learned I was pregnant. But I turned down any thoughts of abortion and went ahead with the birthing. "At least you didn't marry him," my mother said on one of her infrequent excursions to New York. She feels that musicians are basically a shiftless lot. And though a fatherless child is a tragedy, a musician for a father is starting ten steps behind the eight ball.

I allow my parents very few glimpses of my life with Wiz. I loathe the influence a family brings to bear on its young. It's not fair. It's not ventilated.

Wiz rarely gets a chance to see his father. Jeff and I both agreed that the baby is my responsibility and in payment for that rite, he promised to bow out of my life completely. But Wiz is an intensely inquisitive child and he wants to know the full data on his other side. "How can I fully put the pieces together unless I have all the information?" he would say. And so Wiz and Jeff met in London about a year ago. It was the first time he'd seen his father when Jeff was on tour.

Wiz has that rare ability to cut information into many valuable pieces like a skilled butcher with a strip of ribs on his block. He finds Jeff's musical ability useful to him. It's important. It means he can pursue these areas with safety and success since he has the logical genetic background to do so. At the moment, he's conquering his father's old electric guitar but only after he'd taken it apart and then reassembled it so that he could 'understand' it, as he put it.

Perhaps I'm secretly jealous of this development in Wiz's life. Somehow I didn't want him to have a father. I see myself providing the singular interface of parenthood. I have done it alone. I don't have to share. Perhaps I finally agree with my mother. But his recent interest in

his father shows a developing fascination for the disordered and uncontrolled. Perhaps it's simply the strict order of a Swiss boys academy he's reacting against. But nonetheless it worries me. No, the truth is, it threatens me.

*Denine's*. Did she say *Denine's*? Of course. She would pick *Denine's*. How am I going to get through this one without my emotions lurching up and grabbing me?

Maru is such a child. She really is. Yet it's that child-like nature that greases the passage of her other sides which unfold, piece by piece, like infinite layers of skin. I haven't seen her in almost a year. The last time was in Chicago. I was on a lecture tour and she thought it would be 'symbolic' if we got together at our alma mater. 'Recharging the battery' I think was the expression she used.

"The magic is still here Ming!" She christened me with that name our first year together at residence. Maru was the nickname I gave her.

"Oh Baby, it's wonderful to see you. But honestly Ming that lecture tour thing. You do insist on burying yourself in still waters. I mean really. After all our talks together. You make me feel like such a failure!"

If I pursue her meaning I will subtly be reduced to rubber. Whatever I say, I fall short of the true inner workings of her order of things. She will simply have to restructure . . . again!

"How's Joe?" I'm hoping to move to more neutral ground.

"Oh fine." She's bored easily by questions not directly involving herself.

"What's he doing?"

"Oh he's working for some insurance company. Those companies are a disease. I hate them. I really wish he was somebody else sometimes. But we're saving to go to Europe next year. Rent a car or something and drive through. I've got a job at a hospital. Cleaning."

It always amazes me about her. She drops out of university because she needs the 'FREEDOM' to explore herself. Her mother and father were anxious for her to marry a 'good earner'. And so she rebelled by freeing herself from the protectiveness of university only to leap into a

marriage with the boy she first started dating at the University of Chicago. Somehow this was the tool she needed to ‘explore herself’, Joe had yet to complete his six years of higher mathematics and so Maru went out into the world and supported them both. It was cheaper for them to live outside the city so they commuted everyday with one of her father’s old cars.

These were years when I got to know them both well. I would regularly be asked out for the weekend and I welcomed the fresh air and sanity of a country setting. Sometimes I would bring along a current ‘friend’, ripe carrion for Maru who invariably responded like a starving jungle beast.

The evenings were always the most telling. Sitting around on the floor with bottles of the cheapest Italian red. The wine was for me. The joints were for Joe, Maru and frequently my friends. Smoking weed was a mind catalyst for Maru to begin her rape. Her provocative conversation would attack all the crinkles in your grey matter. Then the rape would begin and God help anyone who disagreed with her! Her face would flush easily with the altering effects of the weed. Her long blonde hair would display itself like the glowing halo of a firefly and so the ‘attack’ was that much more effective. How do you feel when your extremities are being chewed at by an angelic form? Inevitably, she would extend her body forcefully across the floor then roll over and stare grabblingly at me and my friend. It was an odd sexual encounter. I could almost feel her body rubbing inside my skull. Men, at least the ones I knew, found this sensual licking very arousing. The ‘look all you want Baby but only touch if you dare’ signal gave it that extra ripe flavor.

I particularly remember a dance we all went to one night at the local community hall. I recall the current friend was Bob Lindsay, a journalism major who was very taken with Maru. The band was hot and heavy and the hall was filled with pulsing sweaty human forms. Maru and Bob began to dance and before long the energies built to a deep physical writhing. I could see Bob was aroused and Maru manipulated her body to cheer him on. The band was strictly heavy metal and the

pounding of basic rhythms had captured the hall. If Bob was going to make his move this was the time with their bodies, though never touching, moved and gyrated back and forth like two flexible rubber dolls. Bob began to rub his thighs as he threw his head back. "I'm coming! I'm coming!" His voice was tight as Maru grabbed his pants with her eyes.

I watched fascinated. Not jealous. But totally captured by Maru. Her joy at this total victory! She'd reduced her subject to a crawling weakened animal. He was a victim not a partner . . . a male! When it was over she slowly came off the dance floor. Bob was limping towards the men's facilities. Small beads of sweat sat on the rim of her mouth. She licked them slowly.

"Where's Joe?"

Had he watched? Had he seen her triumph? Witnessed her effortless display of power? But then, caring was beneath her. A contemptuous act. She only danced for herself.

The still tones of the pilot's voice bring me back to my present state. Apparently, we're twenty minutes out of Zurich. And all is well.



Wiz sees me first. "Ming! Ming! Over here!"

He's the only other person in the world who calls me that. We push through the crowd towards each other both nervous about this visit.

"Wiz! You've . . . grown!"

"Two inches since Christmas," he gloats. He blushes a little and looks away.

There's no doubt about it. He's the living breathing image of his father. But I think he'll be taller and stronger featured.

"What happened to your glasses? Aren't you wearing them anymore?"

"Naw. The doc says puberty's taking care of that."

Puberty? Surely not yet. I thought boys were sluggish in that department. My brother certainly was. But perhaps Jeff once again has contributed unknown elements of his genius.

“Let’s get a taxi and we’ll talk at the apartment.”

“I’ve already done that.” He waves his iPhone and proceeds to lead me through the smothering early summer crowds to the proper exit.

Wiz is truly an incredible person. From the very moment of his birth he’s carried an unshakeable sense of competence. Everything he does is super considered and weighed with the final decision inevitably taken from the evidence on both sides. I admire this quality about him but I feel a little uncomfortable at moments like this when I’ve had nothing to do with those decisions. Does he really need me?

“The graduation program is going to be special for me this year.”

“How come?” We’re competently nestled in his taxi.

He interrupts me for the address of the apartment and then relays instructions to the driver in perfect German.

“Your German has improved.”

“It’s necessary here. But I still feel uncomfortable with it. Let me tell you about tomorrow’s ceremony.”

His eyes search for my interested response and I give it.

“I’m the youngest foreign student to complete Level A and the trustees have decided to create a special award for future foreign students attending *Berndorf*. Since my mother is such a distinguished author they want you to dedicate the new award.”

I’m shocked! This is the first I’ve heard of it! He looks at me with mixed emotions. He’s an odd mixture of little boy controlled by his innate sense of order.

“What would I have to say?” I don’t like stepping on his territory.

“Oh, just a few words. Nothing over four minutes.”

So he feels it too. The signal has been given. My orders are clear I can see that. My image of successful author is helpful but balanced in minutes so that his image won’t not be challenged. Oddly enough, I’m proud of him for that. It shows he has a keen sense of survival.

“Anything you say Wiz.”

The apartment has undergone frequent renovations. But the lofty gilt-edged ceilings give the distinct impression of the intricate measured cadence of the eighteenth century. Not my favorite, but impressive to those who choose to be impressed. George had made the arrangements as usual. His brother Paul is one of the numerous prexies at Citibank New York. They do a lot of business for clients in Zurich. So naturally, the top execs need a roof to cover them as well as a show place for entertaining. I use the apartment twice or three times a year. The best part of it is the location. The balcony over looks the Zurich See and its busy promenade.

Wiz and I have become very familiar with this neighborhood. In fact, he made his first stabs at swimming in the See. He made instant friends with the water and went on to become team leader in *Berndorf's* rather rigorous swim program. Wiz takes great pride in this part of his life especially, since I've never been a water enthusiast and as far as I know Jeff is of the same persuasion.

I cancelled the maid service. After all, we're only going to be here for two nights. Wiz is good at making beds, *Berndorf* made sure of that. And I don't feel like having foreign elements about.

We settle in together, Wiz taking over the floor. I always step back from him allowing him to share the events of preceding months. We text or email each other with a monthly Zoom but nothing is ever revealed in the printed word. Wiz feels out of his element at *Berndorf*. And since he prefers to 'save it all 'til I come', I go along with his wishes.

Our favorite restaurant is just five blocks from the apartment so I suggest we change and walk over taking in some of the familiar landmarks. There's something truly absurd about having Chinese food in Zurich but Wiz and I love it. He says that it's important to remember where your roots are, and to him, Chinese food is rooted in the American way. I've tried to point out that perhaps that's a slightly obtuse thought but secretly it's very appealing. Besides, it's the best Chinese food anywhere.

After dinner, we walk slowly back to the apartment. The night is warm and clear and the moored sailboats clack their harnessings against the mastheads.

“I forgot to tell you. Jeff sent me another guitar – an acoustic in case I can’t plug in the electric one. I’ve already learned a few songs. Wanna hear me?”

“Love to.” I have mixed emotions about this. Why is Wiz now becoming so attracted to this music thing? It causes me pain. It hurts.

Wiz disappears to his bedroom at the end of the marbled hallway to get his guitar. The rosewood bar holds a large stock of the very best so I take advantage of the interlude to fix myself a drink. The apartment has recently been ‘re-interiorized’ by George’s New York decorator. Everything has been thrown out. The new look is ‘blanc bourgeois’ but it’s not unpleasant in the least. The blending of glass tables, natural linen furniture interfaced with German efficient chrome and white lighting paints a mood of reflective opulence.

Wiz chooses to play his new guitar outside on the balcony so I sink into the cushioned wicker furniture to better hear his performance. The strange thing is that he plays very well. He’s precise without tedium. And though I strongly favor jazz, Wiz’s rock ‘n roll balladeering is warm even inviting. The most surprising thing is his expression as he plays. The look of competence leaves him and in its place a reckless abandon. A desiring. A deep emotion.

He continues to play one song blending into the next not waiting for my words of praise. The more he plays the more removed from me he becomes. He’s left me for his father’s world and I feel an intense loneliness.

When he finally stops he’s not looking for my response. It didn’t matter but I give it anyway.

“It seems we’ve got something going here doesn’t it?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t turn into a musician like Jeff.” Is there bitterness in that? “I just like the guitar.”

“Maybe you should be a musician?” I choke as I say it. But after this performance I can’t help feeling guilty that I’m somehow denying him his inheritance.

“How could you stand me being a musician?”

“You’d be surprised what your old mother can do.”

I keep telling myself that he’s still young and perhaps this is nothing more than a canker in the long passage of growing up. But I shudder anyway. A car backfires on the street below shaking us out of our uncomfortable dream. Wiz looks down but the car has apparently passed by.

“Maybe we can go for a swim tomorrow in the See. Like we used to? I mean after the graduation is over.” Wiz is trying to make me feel a little less lonely. Children can be so perceptive . . . especially my Wiz.

“I’d like that. By the way, Maru and Joe will be in town Wednesday. I’m supposed to meet them at *Denine’s*. Wanna come?”

“Sure. Charlie’s leaving for New York Wednesday so I want to be sure to say goodbye. But otherwise it’s cool.”

Charlie is George’s nephew, Paul’s only son from his second marriage. Charlie is an important part of Wiz’s life. They’d both started at *Berndorf* together and share their common grief of being ‘the only child.’

“What time does the ceremony start?”

“At two. I thought just to be safe we should have an early lunch here and take a taxi.”

I’m being competently organized again. The intensity of his arranging is always in direct relationship to its importance to him. Obviously, tomorrow is very important.

It’s getting late. He takes his guitar and walks back into the living room. The case is open on the glass coffee table and I notice Jeff’s embroidered signature on the interior. It now belongs to Wiz. And he adores it.

He heads to his bedroom and changes into his pajamas. I stay up for a while and begin making a few notes. Suddenly Wiz appears.

“Good night Ming.” He saunters over and kisses me on the cheek. “And don’t forget. No more than four minutes.”



We’re late for *Denine’s* but I did it on purpose. Wiz’s graduation had been formal and true to the ceremonial style that *Berndorf* adheres to. If anything, they’re hopelessly stuffy. And the heat of an early summer afternoon on glaring if sumptuous lawns created a suitable backdrop for the dedication of the new award. My four minutes had passed successfully. Wiz was pleased. I was relieved.

Charlie and Wiz decide to have breakfast together at *Berndorf*. ‘One last time ‘til next fall.’ *Berndorf* is a half hour drive southwest of the city so Wiz had ordered Uber the night before for seven thirty sharp. I told him we had to be at *Denine’s* by one and I knew he’d be back right on time.

“How’s Charlie today? Excited to be going home?”

“Yeah, I guess so. His mother’s worried about his flying back alone but somehow he persuaded her he was old enough.”

“I guess you’ve played your guitar for Charlie lots of times.”

I know I’m stomping on super private territory but I want to get some feedback other than my own. I put it down to Wiz’s compulsion to compartmentalize everything. But after hearing him play I realize it might be something else. Maybe he’s afraid I’ll spoil things somehow. Maybe he thinks I’ll offend Charlie in a disgusting motherly way. I remember keeping my friends away from my own mother because she always asked the wrong questions. And to me, asking the right questions is a primal necessity.

“Sure. Charlie wants to be my manager . . . I mean . . . he was just kidding of course.”

“What do you mean he wants to be your manager!” The lead ball in my stomach flies into my throat and I’m fast becoming shrill. “Is it that serious Wiz . . . ? Well is it?”

Wiz knows he's lit the bomb and now he has to try to manipulate a situation that's nothing short of a red alert.

"Gosh Ming. Why do you jump every time I mention music? Don't you want me to be musical? Doesn't it broaden a person? I mean, you've always wanted me to be a well-educated, broadened person . . . haven't you?"

"Of course I have. But only as a pastime. I don't want you to end up like your father."

"How could that happen? My instructors say I'm a perfect candidate for a consulting engineer. You've heard them say that haven't you?"

I'm beginning to calm down. But only a little. Wiz is excellent at derailing me. He finds me weak and churlish at moments like this. He always takes the superior ground. And he's right. Of course I want him to be conversant in the arts. Music is an essential part of the full spectrum of a well-educated person. But I don't consider the guitar or rock 'n roll to be a part of that picture. That's Jeff's picture.

"I'm sorry Wiz. Of course you've got to have interests other than math and science. It's just that you seem so keen on this guitar business. Naturally, I want you to have all the benefits life can offer but you don't know what it's like out there. You simply don't know. And if I had a choice I'd never let you know." He glances over at me with a strange hurt look.

"Now, why would you ever want something like that for me?"

I might as well have said that I only want him to wear blue for the rest of his life. How could I be so foolish . . . so childish! My desires for his future are always set in some lofty ivory tower. And at moments like these when they expose their true nature he's always ready to shoot them full of holes.

This particular encounter however is different. I've always been able to approach him as his mother and protector. But obviously, something big has happened to him since I was last here. He's taken a very large step at least it seems that way to me. He's moved into a world of independent thought. That's a frightening moment for a mother. I feel numb. My eyes begin to water a little and I look away.

“Don’t be like this Ming. C’mon, let’s go to *Denine’s*.”

He puts his arm around me. I love him for that. Maybe I’m just upset to be seeing Maru. She always has a way of upsetting things even when she’s not actually physically around. I give him a big hug and smile as I muss his hair.

“OK. Just let me freshen up a bit. Are you going to wear those sneakers to *Denine’s*? I think they’re a bit casual don’t you?”

“Charlie says you can wear anything you like to *Denine’s* now. Even jeans.”

“Oh alright. Let’s just leave it the way it is.”

It’s been a while since I’ve eaten at *Denine’s*. I try to go at least once a year for old time’s sake but these last two years I’ve let things slip. It’s the only place in Switzerland you can get escargot with a sauce that would float every hair off your head. Jeff introduced me to *Denine’s* but that was a long time ago.

*Denine’s* is located in the expensive part of town but not on any main street. It’s tucked away down a narrow cobbled alley not far from the opera. Even its hidden location creates an air of mystery and exclusiveness. And behind the four inch thick hand carved oak doors is a surprisingly light décor. Andre is still the maître d’ and he’s surprised and delighted to see us. We chat for a moment about the new management and he confides to me in an aside that they were ‘Italians’.

“Can you imagine! Italians!”

He’s terrified that his beautiful beer garden and the solarium style décor will soon be replaced by plastic flowers and little water fountains encircled by pink and gold cherubs.

“Surely not Andre! *Denine’s* customers will never stand for that!”

“I certainly hope not Madame Martin!” He always calls me ‘Madame’ because of Wiz. It shows a caring and respect for my 14 years of motherhood. He knew Jeff well but Maru and Joe only slightly.

“We are guests of the Harris’. Have they arrived yet?”

“Ah oui! I have put them in the dining room but I did not know you would be with them. S.V.P.! Let me change.”

The interior courtyard is absolutely enchanting. I used this garden several times in my novels and Andre has religiously read my books and recognizes the glorious description of his garden. He makes sure that I'm always seated there. He scolds me harshly for ignoring him these past two years but I manage to pacify him with stories of high pressure New York publishers who demand all my time and energies.

He clicks his fingers high in the air and beckons one of the stewards. At once, the whole thing is set into motion and we're ushered away into the inner sanctum. *Denine's*. How I love it! The garden and Maru what a choice combination.

My stomach begins to flip as the steward leads us into the garden. It's not until sometime later that I will begin to realize how strong my reactions are to Maru. She threatens me. She charges me. She horrifies me. But most of all she intrigues me. And here she is.

"Maru!" She sprints into the garden like a rabbit under hot pursuit and we hug each other.

"Joe!" I shout a little too loud. Joe embraces me like a sister he hasn't seen for ten years and then he quickly takes his place at the glass table. A short silence swallows us as if under siege we've all stepped into a black and white photograph for a quiet refuge before the real encounter begins. All I can hear is the trickling of water over Andre's rock garden, collecting in the small pool embraced by goldfish flickering here and there. It's a glass paperweight of memories. Wiz, bless him, breaks the silence.

"What do you want to eat?"

"For goodness sake Wiz give us time to breathe." Maru is grumpy today.

"Well maybe that's not a bad idea," I counter.

A little time to collect. Nothing wrong with that! We all grope with the menu but I already know what I'm going to have.

I look over at her. Maru hasn't changed a bit. In the fifteen years I've known her, she has maintained that angelic form, her body a reflection in a deep forest lake. Not that her body is round and ripe and full. On the contrary, it's flighty and nymph-like. Her limbs never seem quite

joined together giving the impression of constant motion like a hummingbird jabbing from flower to flower. Her movements are jerky and awkward as if the joints are suffering from a lack of solid contact with her torso. But put all together it translates into an odd almost sexual encounter, a native dance enveloping all the senses in her web of desire. It's hypnotic. It's captivating. Few people I have met can resist the pull of her wild animal sensations lapsing into a timeless zone realizing its effect only after the spell has worn off.

Joe is always a surprise as Maru's chosen mate. He simply doesn't fit. He's oversized. He's balding. In appearance with his disheveled bulk, he's a wild man from Borneo. Yet my reactions to him are always less defined. He's large it's true. Obese even. But after overcoming the visual shock of his rumpled over abundance, you gradually accept it's all part of Joe. And once the conversation begins his size totally diminishes as an issue. It embellishes the 'experience' of Joe rather than detracting. Somehow, the layers of his body pretend to embrace you as a compatriot and friend. The sloppiness of his physique, however, is in total contrast to his precise nature. As a mathematician, he is very particular about the detailing of minutia. Maru hates this quality about Joe but as a writer I find it intriguing.

This is their third trip to Europe since we'd met in Chicago. Money is saved religiously and Joe calculates each penny and its necessary placement. He even carries a small black notebook jotting down each and every expenditure no matter how small or insignificant. A bus ride. A package of gum. A chocolate bar. It drives Maru to distraction. She fights back by deliberately spending more than she should prodding Joe into shrieks at her carelessness. This makes his daily tallying and financial balancing nothing short of a nightmare.

I've suffered through many of Joe's complaints about Maru's downright disregard for his money management. I'm convinced that *Denine's* is Maru's idea. This is going to cost Joe much more than he wants it to but I know that Maru has stomped and pushed to get her way. If the bill is a visible record for his little black book, it's also a tangible

accounting of Maru's flagrant behavior. And so his recording of it is little consolation for him.

The things that Maru hates about Joe I've learned to appreciate. He's a great story teller. His creative sense of detail combined with his mathematical pacing lends a particular flavor to his tales that I've never encountered anywhere else. Over many a weekend in Chicago or on their occasional visits to New York, we'd stay up the entire night going over his latest tale, usually small events rendered from their trips to Europe like meat drippings attentively nurtured under the watchful eye of a master chef. I too am a passionate lover of detail. So we would bathe each other in the self reflective rays of our common passion. For the most part, I would encourage him to ever greater raptures the more thoroughly to capture and express those seemingly unimportant moments. We're like two zealots engulfed in a world that refuses to appreciate or understand.

Maru is part of that world. What is the cost of a meal or a bus ride to her? 'The important thing is to be FREE!' she would shriek, throwing those arms high into the air her eyes wild with frustration.

The atmosphere between the two of them is always strange. Definitely, it's three minutes off. Somehow they cannot or will not gear together. And with Joe, the visual environment is completely altering. Maru never lets on that Joe's size bothers her. She simply acts as if it's not there.

The lack of gearing together is much more than Joe's size. Her desires are quite extraordinary, her star born fantasies ENORMOUS. Joe's in comparison are common, almost pedestrian. And so Maru is always a few steps ahead of him, goading him, daring him on. And if he doesn't perform he's less than a worm. A nobody! "Your trouble Joe," she would sneer "is that you simply don't want to be FREE!" But Joe is crazy about her. And he never tires of trying to reach out and touch her concept of freedom.

For over a decade now Joe has tried to balance the two forces his own steady plodding with her erratic, irascible drive. But it's taken its toll. Today at *Denine's* he's nervous, constantly shifting his bulk.

Squirming. His eyes are like two black flies taking off and landing without pattern or thought. What's going on?

"I think I'll have a plain omelette." Maru closes the menu. Joe looks relieved. It's the cheapest thing on the carte. "No . . . make that lobster tail with . . . let me see . . . yes, Caesar salad à table."

The bill just tripled. She looks over at me and smiles. "I want to get in the mood for 'our Greek Island' Ming. Remember?" Then she turns scornfully to Joe. "No Mexican food here Joe. You'll just have to eat like the rest of us."

Joe reddens a little. He tries to grin. But his eyes shift wildly like a helpless trapped animal. He hates spending money but Maru has set the dare. Perform or succumb to your smallness. Which is it going to be?

Joe looks briefly over at me. He isn't making it and he knows it. He has the smell about him of fresh kill.

"I guess I'll have . . ." He pauses too long.

"What do you want Wiz?" Maru snaps.

"Burger and fries would be nice. But I guess I'll have to settle for roast beef."

That was unexpected. Why the sudden Americana? Is it a reaction to *Berndorf* or to Maru? Is it Jeff? I break away from the unappealing list of possibilities and quickly order.

"I'll have the escargot. Don't forget the sauce. Chef's salad. Vinaigrette."

It's Joe's turn. The sound of silence is pure torment. "The roast beef. Could I have some dill pickles on the side?"

Maru chooses to ignore Joe's commonness. She's on to other things. "Well, don't you want to hear about our plans, Ming?"

What can I say? She continues uninterrupted.

"This is a very important trip for us. We're in search and we're going to let the wind blow us to FREEDOM!"

I can't help myself. I'm intrigued already.

"We've been saving the last two and a half years for this. We're going to spend the next few months in Greece and then we're going to take the train to India!"

The concept of 'taking a train to India' is mind boggling. Can it really be that simple? Does one train really go all the way? Maru's hand lands on my arm.

"Isn't that fanta-a-a-a-astic!"

It is 'fanta-a-a-a-astic.' So fantastic I seem to glaze over. I sip my chilled Chablis and look over at Joe. How does she get him into these things. Our meal appears out of the gathering mist. I did manage to notice that it's served with customary dignity.

"This sounds really intriguing. How long will you be there?"

"Fore-e-e-ever!" exclaims Maru. "We're never coming back. And if India doesn't suit us there's always Bangkok or Bali or Sarawak . . ."

"Or Sydney," adds Joe practically.

"Gee. That sounds super!" Wiz is getting really excited.

"Betcha you'd like it there Wiz. Think of all the wonderful new experiences. Think of it!" Her eyes flex in semi muscular fashion as a morsel of lobster meets her lips.

A rainbow of images rises before me. Of course, it will be a whole new playground for Maru with a limitless horizon of potential victims. By now, her rapture is so thick she barely notices there's anyone else at the table. Joe breaks in.

"We've always wanted to go and it seems now is the right time. I've read a lot about the Far East and I've mapped out a pretty fair itinerary."

There's no question in my mind that his plans will be in perfect order. And the two together will be an interesting sight weaving in and out of India's heaving masses.

"Don's coming too!" Maru discovers her plate and in goes the lobster. Joe shoots me a nervous glance.

"Of course we won't travel together all the time. Just some of the time."

"But how did all this happen?" My curiosity is now at a fevered pitch.

"Well, Don left for Europe six months ago and stopped off to see us in Chicago on the way. His mother died out on the coast a year ago and left her life insurance policy to him. His father was kind of upset

especially since Don hasn't turned out to be the lawyer he'd planned. He calls him a bum. Can you imagine? Well anyway, we discussed our plans with him and he got really really excited. He's always wanted to go to India and China and places like that so he said he'd think it over. We met him last week in London and he wanted to know if we're still interested. And of course, we said yes!"

What is it about trouble? It has a certain smell to it. A textured face. The popping sound of a plate hitting the floor, a rarity at *Denine's*, punctuates the moment.

Don Draper is Joe's best friend. They grew up together in a university town outside Chicago. I'd met him years ago on one of my weekend visits but had managed to keep an observer's distance. Not that Don hadn't seen his attractiveness wrapped around my body. He had and very much so. But he put me off. I wasn't into being conquered for a brief interlude, a quick lay on a slow weekend . . . or at least that was the way I'd interpreted his approach. He's the type of male who has to experience it . . . anything and everything.

In fact, he and Maru are very much alike. And perhaps it was that instinct that prompted me to keep out of arms reach. Maru had always spoken of him warmly and Joe has recounted countless stories of shared boyhood experiences. Had I not known Don personally I would have imagined him to be a strong, stalwart and faithful knight. Joe has the considerable talent of creating in his stories a fairy tale world. All his characters are friends or people he'd met on their trips. He would produce such a complete image of them that they became vibrant caricatures of themselves.

I'd heard about Don many many times before I actually met him. And when I finally did it took a lot longer for me to separate fact from fiction. But I kept my real feelings to myself. On that score, Joe and I are absolutely at different ends of the spectrum.

"But tell us, what are your plans Ming?"

Whenever Maru makes this level of inquiry it's for politeness and necessary social grace. It means in twentyfive words or less state your name, rank and serial number and reason for breathing.

“Wiz and I are spending the summer at a friend’s villa on Lago di Como. I have a novel I must finish by the fall and Wiz can use a good holiday after two semesters at *Berndorf*.”

“Who’s the friend?” She would have to ask!

“An artist I met here in Zurich. Dieter Böckhauer. Have you heard of him?”

Of course they hadn’t. Art lacks the visceral quality to attract either one of them. And my plans are certainly less interesting than a ‘train ride to India’. By now, Joe has eaten all his roast beef while Maru has left a third of her lobster on her plate. It’s annoying Joe immensely especially since he hates lobster so he can’t finish it himself.

“What’s Dieter like?” Maru leans forward on the table and looks right through me.

“Oh, he’s one of the better ones!” Wiz pipes in.

I’m mortified. Humiliated. My face flushes and the last three escargot become untouched orphans.

“Wiz! What are you saying! There haven’t been that many and you know it.”

Wiz shrugs his shoulders. He’s trying to upset me and he’s doing an extraordinarily good job. I fleetingly remember his unexpected desire for a hamburger and start worrying again.

“Seems like it sometimes though.” He yawns.

“Yes but what’s this Dieter like?” Maru persists.

“He’s charming, intelligent and a fabulous lay.”

I’m now out of control but somehow I want to relay to Maru that my life has its moments of ‘freedom’ too. Joe laughs nervously. Maru looks over at me. Her doorbell has just been rung.

“Say. I’ve got a great idea! Aren’t we driving through Italy via the Lake District Joe?” It’s coming and there’s nothing I can do to stop it! “We could stop in for a few days and stay with you guys. What d’you say? Wouldn’t that be fanta-a-a-astic!”

Andre suddenly appears from behind the rock garden. “Would ze company care to try something from our pastry cart? A cognac perhaps. Or does monsieur wish to have ze check?”

What did Wiz mean . . . one of the better ones?



We decide to stay on an extra day. Wiz is tired and I need to stabilize after our luncheon with Maru. His comment keeps coming back on me like a bad piece of onion. What on earth does he mean? But I decide that I'd better get myself in order for tomorrow. We'll be meeting Dieter at the Milan stazione and then his mother, who according to Dieter is looking forward to meeting us. I call him to let him know we'll be staying on another day and arriving early the next afternoon. Oddly enough, Dieter's slow paced response is the ticket to re-establishing my equilibrium. I suddenly feel a strong urge to climb under the sheets and prove to myself what I'd already blurted out to Maru and Joe. Dieter is a fabulous lay! His tall square build and his wild passionate thrusts move all my fantasies into perfect completion. Maru can only dream of such moments. Or is she about to bring her dreams into full fledged reality?

Wiz is shaking me. "Get up Ming!" I come out of a deep restless sleep. I was dreaming about Jeff. Now why ever would I do that?

"Don't make us late again! Try! Just this once!"

"What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty. We should be at the station by ten-thirty at the absolute latest."

There he goes again. A whole summer of my being packaged and posted. I sometimes reach into an imaginary family album and try to find the relative whose genes give him his intense sense of order. But to be honest, I always scuttle thoughts like that because I really don't want to know.

"OK Wiz! You get the coffee and call the maid service. I'll get dressed and pack. Have you got your passport? What about changing some money? I guess we'd better do that at the station." He's already down the hall, his Nikes bouncing on the marble floor.

“I got my passport. The money’s your department.”

It takes only forty-five minutes to accomplish what would take three hours in New York. Dear old Wiz. His demands are never really as much spoken as implied through his finely ordered nature. I can rarely keep up. We’re total opposites. Where I’m exacting he’s frivolous. And where he’s exacting I’m hopeless.

“Now Ming, have you got everything? Remember what I went through the last time.”

The last time! That was two years ago! He remembers everything! I’d sent him off to Grenoble with Charlie because *Berndorf* had organized a skiing holiday for Easter break. Unfortunately, I was under the mistaken notion that all his documents were in order. When they arrived at the airport the customs officer quickly informed Wiz of my error. Though he was only twelve, he showed his true stuff. Somehow, he managed to convince the officer that his visa was not really that important. They were so overwhelmed by his precocious nature that they allowed him to stay. He then reached into his duffle bag and presented the astonished officer with an official *Berndorf* sweatshirt. A little gift for his totally reasonable decision, he told me over the phone. But he didn’t hesitate to tell me that I’d put Charlie, two *Berndorf* instructors, the other guys and himself through unnecessary turmoil!

“Well Wiz I hope someday you can forget that incident. I’m not perfect all the time. Just most of the time. An important fact for you to remember . . . and yes, I have it all together. Now, let’s get into your taxi.”

He picks up his pack. And then his guitar. He looks over at me a little hesitantly then waves me through the door.

On board the Express, he places his guitar reverently on the luggage rack. The train is on time. Of course it is. This is Switzerland. I squirm a little and wonder what is ahead for Wiz, myself and his music. Our compartment is tucked away at the rear of the car. Thank God the toilets are at the other end. We avoid the inevitable lineups. I was fortunate to have got the booking at all especially with the last minute change in reservations. The *Tenitalia Express* is usually teaming with les turistas

on their Eurail holidays at this time of year but a last minute cancellation allowed us to slip in between the seams.

I only tolerate a train ride if it is one, short, and two, there's a decent dining car. In this case, both qualifications are being filled admirably. In three and a half short hours, we'll be in Milan and in one hour the first luncheon will be served. I'm hoping for cold salmon but suspect I'm reaching higher than I have a right to expect.

Our seats are not beside each other. Wiz immediately takes the one by the window and I take the one on the opposite side next to the door. A very large Italian lady occupies half of my seat in addition to the space normally allotted for one human so I'm left squeezed and sweating. Wiz, seeing my predicament, quickly leaps up and tells me to take his seat by the window.

"At least you can look out. Besides, I want to explore the train." Second and third class are a terrific lure. "I want to see if people really bring goats and chickens . . . like you see in the movies. Watch my guitar will ya?"

The door slams and off he goes. No use telling him about lunch. The smell of garlic sausage and vino will either repel him back to first class or so intrigue his senses that he'll be adopted by a family and forced to eat everything.

"Americano?"

The small sleeping Italian looking gentleman beside me has suddenly awakened. I hate starting conversations while I'm travelling. It's a time I use to reflect, to organize and articulate events. I'm very jealous of this time . . . my time. Wiz finds me a complete bore. Travelling with his mother is like travelling with a submerged buffalo cooling its thick skin in a mud hole. I guess that's why he escaped so quickly.

"Si."

I hope the brevity of my reply will end it. It does but the look in his eye is typical of European men. I'm a woman. Therefore, I'm vulnerable, a ready mark for a quick screw. I choose to ignore this ridiculous specimen but I've already fallen victim to his itchy elbow.

To combat the situation, I edge my briefcase between his elbow and my ribs.

I pull down the small built-in table and it snaps into position. The countryside is now beginning to breeze by. The majestic mountains tower over us, with green meadows salt and peppered with herds of sheep and goats. I begin to review some of my former chapters. This novel is not coming easily. I have to grunt it out. October looms over me like some horrible creeping reptile.

Luckily, I'm rescued by thoughts of Dieter which keep flitting through my brain. We met quietly just over a year ago. He was having a major showing in Zurich at a gallery belonging to an old friend of mine, Daniel Brille. Daniel called me at the apartment and told me I must come to Dieter Böckhauer's new opening. I'd just flown in from New York for a few days to see Wiz on his mid-term break.

"Does it have to be tonight Daniel? The showing's going to go on for several weeks isn't it? . . . Well then how 'bout tomorrow night?"

Daniel was most persistent. Typical of art dealers, they think anyone who's famous is rich. I knew he was angling for me to buy a Böckhauer but I was not in the mood to be pushed. Daniel agonized at the other end of the line. Mr. Böckhauer would only be there that evening and I had to promise him I wouldn't be late.

"If I can Daniel. I'm really bushed. New York is not twenty kilometers from here you know."

"Mr. Böckhauer is worth 20,000 kilometers Sharon! You've simply got to come."

"I'll do what I can. Now ring off. I'm going to take a long hot bath."

I did go. In fact, I was cornered like a rat caught in a sudden down pour. Daniel had pushed too hard and Dieter Böckhauer would now be the recipient of my heated rebellion.

"What do Germans know about art anyway? Daniel, this better have been worth the trip or I'm going to rearrange that toupee of yours."

He took my coat and hustled me to an awaiting attendant.

“Wonderful to see you again Sharon. And you look beautiful tonight.” Stepping back a full meter, he took me in like he would a Renoir or a Gauguin. “You really are a wonderful looking woman.”

He had me. My defenses came rippling down. How long could I remain angry with Daniel Brille? He was a worm but such an effective one. My hand in his, he wedged through the crowd of buyers, dealers and honored guests.

“Mr. Böckhauer will be arriving shortly. At least . . . I hope he will. He said he would. But you never know with these artists . . . not like writers I’m sure.” He was fussing. After all this build up, he was now required to come through with the goods. He poured me a glass of chilled Chablis and then sent me sailing through his three large show rooms.

I escaped to the farthest corner and sat fuming on one of Daniel’s puffed square linen seats. There was an eight foot canvas directly in front of me of a very large attacking wave, frothed and steaming. Mr. Böckhauer was beginning to displace my fury through the altering effect of his distinctive style. It wasn’t a photograph but rather an unusual blending of light and color producing an effect of sheer levitation. I was transformed.

“Ah there you are Cherie. Dieter Böckhauer, I’d like you to meet one of America’s top selling authors and a very good friend of mine, Sharon Martin.” He broke in so suddenly that I flew to my feet spilling the Chablis on his lovely carpet. I was flustered and dripping. But Dieter simply stretched out his rough square hand and gently ignored the wetness below.

“We finally meet Ms. Martin. Daniel has been gossiping about you for days.”

He wasn’t anything like I’d expected although I really don’t know that I expected anything. He wasn’t small like most artists – a husky hockey player perhaps though it would have been hard to believe that he’d ever played such a wild and vicious sport. His brown hair thatched itself uncontrollably over his skull, but his deep brown eyes took me in directly.

“Why I thought you’d be German! But your accent is . . . is American?”

“Oh that’s a long family story. Can I get you another drink?”

He took the glass from my hand and went for a refill. His slow easy pace was out of sync with the vibrant emotions his paintings revealed. His clothes were definitely those of an artist. Corduroy trousers. I’ve never known an artist who didn’t own whole closets of corduroy. And of course, the turtleneck fashioned from artisan wool. Standard creative fair! But despite the fact that his dress imaged true to the profile, he had a forbidding directness which chilled me. Excited me. His quiet shuffle contrasted sharply with his perceptible cutting edge. I was aroused. And so was he.

We drank Chablis together. I tried to direct the conversation around his work and his recent sales. But the physical attraction grew wildly in us both. I followed him towards the exit easing my way out of the crowd. It happened that fast. And to this day I can’t remember actually leaving Brille’s or what vehicle it was that transported us to his studio. The lights never went on. We undressed each other searching out the new territory with each layer that was removed. Under the skylight we stroked, pressed, licked. Then the daylight darted through. And we both fell into a warm gentle sleep.

Dieter convinced me to stay on a few days. Wiz was curious but he kept silent. One day turned into two and then three. A week went by and then another. I hadn’t felt this physical since . . . Jeff. That’s a painful comparison because Jeff and I were true lovers in every sense of the word. No one should ever lose what we had together. But youth and ambition stood its ground. And won.

Our passionate interplay eventually had to stop. My upcoming lecture tour of America was only days away and I’d made little preparation for the ordeal. I remember vividly, it was a cold day in March and the mist had risen off the Zurich See like a half awakened Valkyrie. My flight was booked. I was to leave the next morning.

We walked. Dieter was telling me about his family. I tried to listen attentively but I felt like the formless slush pushing at my feet. It was

chilling. The northern wind wound up its fist and belted us both a gasping blow. He had to repeat whole portions of his story until finally pieces of it came together. His father had been a young flight lieutenant in the German Luftwaffe, his mother, an Italian, the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Milan. I also remember him saying that after his formal education in Italy, he was sent to New York to study economics at Columbia. So that was why he seemed so American. Obviously, the experience had suited him.

By now, we had walked away from the lake and found ourselves near a small cluster of shops. A hot cup of coffee seemed to be the next step but before we went in I told him about my flight the next day. He didn't say anything. He just pushed harder against the March wind and dug his hands deeper into his pockets. The coffee seemed unimportant then and so we walked on.

I couldn't say anything more. This whole relationship had surprised me like a meteor darting across the heavens hopelessly searching for an end to its flight. I wasn't ready for commitment. And neither was he. But somehow there dwelled within us both a spark of hope.

His arm enclosed me and it gave us both the courage we were searching for. Daniel was planning a possible New York showing in the fall. There was promise in his voice when he told me. My ears perked. That small ray of light from within emerged glowing.

"Madam, you wish to order?" The dining steward's voice rockets into my thoughts.

"Oh yes . . . tell me steward, do you have salmon on the menu today?"

"Oh no madam. My regrets. We have plaice only. But it is quite good I believe."

Plaice will simply have to do.



“There’s Dieter!”

Wiz has returned from his extended safari. The place was surprisingly excellent and the service timed to perfection.

Northern Italy is a stranger to both of us. In fact, most of Italy, short of Rome remains that way. Wiz had gone to Rome on one of *Berndorf’s* Christmas excursions. And I’d once spent a memorable week with Jeff but that was far too long ago. Now the beauty of Lombardy spreads before us and I’m captivated. I need a summer of comforting.

This past year has certainly presented its complications. From that cold day in Zurich, my relationship with Dieter began to slowly flourish. The return to my loft had been extremely lonely but the lecture tour thank heavens had been a welcome distraction. George was relieved to have me back and called the moment I got in the door.

“For God’s sake where have you been? Do you realize how much work has to be done before you leave? What kept you over there so long? You were supposed to be back here two weeks ago! I tried to contact you at the apartment but you never answered the phone! What’s going on . . . !” And so it went. I let him rail. I didn’t feel this was the right time to discuss Dieter with him so I left it alone.

“I’ll be over within the hour. I want to discuss all the details with you. By the way, we’ve decided to call the tour *American Woman*. What do you think?” I knew perfectly well it mattered little what I thought.

“Nice George. Very nice. But give me a couple of hours. I want to wind down a bit after the flight.”

*Duncan March* had made all the arrangements but it was George who conceived the idea. He was like that, always after that one key spark of imaging that would raise him to publishing stardom. He’d started out in life a farmer’s son from a small dirt Colorado town not far from the Nebraska line. He’d crawled and scratched his way up the publishing totem pole starting as a traveling salesman pushing his wares from one dusty prairie town to the next. His moment came when, having

made some favorable investments through his brother Paul, he was in a position to buy his portion of the Duncan empire. They were happy to have his money as the company found itself floundering with the weight of being second largest in America but without any recent high volume sales. George insisted that his name be added to the company and after several months of negotiations the Duncan family finally agreed. They were good men of business.

But that wasn't enough for George. A name on the front of the building was one thing, but he had yet to make his mark. He had to achieve that intangible something which would raise his stature irrevocably above his peers. He wanted his thumb sticking high up into the proverbial sphincter. That's how I came into the picture. I was George's discovery and I would fulfill his dream by becoming America's leading female author . . . an American Joan of Arc. George more than once had told me that the feminist cause was good sales material and he would never hesitate to repeat the inevitable 'there are dollars in that one Sharon' to my face.

After five years of knowing him, I'd come to accept him for what he was, at least, to a certain extent. I was thrilled to have finally made the breakthrough I thirsted after. The cost was insignificant to me back then. My first two books were a surprising success. I was capturing the true image of womanhood, appealing widely to women everywhere who seemed to respond to my characters by saying, 'I know just how you feel'. But the books had an added surprising feature to them. Men found them totally absorbing as well. The presentation of womanhood through my characterizations created a bridging between the sexes despite the fact that the female was highly profiled and was the true strength in my characters. I was shocked at these developments simply because I hadn't intentionally written my revelations to appeal specifically to one side or the other. They were just what they were.

The media, on the other hand, picked up on this new male awareness and began to image me as one of America's 'important' young authors. My face began to appear everywhere. *Cosmopolitan*. *Vogue*. *Time*. *People*. *Vanity Fair*. The literary world was aghast at the coverage I was

beginning to receive. George, however, was insufferable in victory. He was the proud father, the founder of the feast. His publisher's 'teeth' were showing.

My good looks and distinctive dress gave my image an even greater boost. Somehow, there was a great appeal there and America was ready to toast its new female literary star.

As it turned out, *American Woman* was a wonderful success but after it was all over I returned to New York tired and drained. About ten days later, Dieter called me from Zurich. He was excited. Daniel had just completed signing contracts with a large New York gallery for a major showing of his work. Soon he would be coming to New York to prepare for the ordeal.

The thought of the two of us together shot feelings of instant panic and delight through me. I was missing him desperately. He felt the same. Apparently our feelings for each other had not diminished with the passage of time or the vast distance that separated us.

Dieter loved my place at first sight. Originally, it had been a horse stable and my friends thought I was totally mad when I bought it. With much effort and money spent, it took me almost two years to rebuild the interior.

I kept most of the original harnessings, wheels, and bridles for decoration and accent pieces. The interior was wide open, one room melting into the next. Afghani tribal kilims sat comfortably on the varnished wooden floors like small patches on a quilt. The brick walls admirably boasted my growing collection of oils and watercolors, Böckhauer's taking all the prominent spots.

George still knew nothing of Dieter but I knew he would have to be told soon. The success of the tour had inspired an even greater need for my next book. My plan was to commit myself to this new project which would please and pacify him. But on one condition that Dieter and I be left alone without any of his persistent meddling and nagging.

George sat in his office surrounded by his collection of Louis the XVth clocks and bounced the two elements around in his head. Watching him was like watching a pinball hitting a dozen bumpers

before it lands square in the hole. When he finally did respond it was with extreme caution. His primary concern lay with 'our image' as he put it. Would a strong relationship threaten or tarnish the Joan of Arc aura? Or, and I'd never perceived this in George before, was he secretly jealous?

He did agree to keep hands off, however. And while I knew that any verbal contract with George was worthless I accepted the fact that for the present, at least, he was sufficiently put to sleep.

Dieter arrived early in September. I'd sent Wiz off to Maine to spend some time with Charlie at their summer home. Our first few days together were a small private treasure and I, like the 'littlest angel', hoarded them ferociously. His male bulk merged with my female form, the hot muggy late summer days not diminishing in the slightest our longing for one another. And like two characters out of one of my books we became a living breathing personification of man and woman, merged in our common passion.

Then Daniel arrived from Europe and things began to change. He wanted to gain as much publicity for Dieter (or was it for himself?) as he possibly could. Artists are not a popular target of the media. Normally, the expression of what they do is too vague and obtuse and therefore generally reserved only for those with money who are particularly attracted to the medium. Daniel was keenly aware of this fact and so he plotted to use our relationship as a springboard into the substantial waters of high tech media imaging.

From that point on, our lives changed dramatically. Dieter became 'the man in Sharon Martin's life'. The male dominated media took this opportunity to prove to the women's movement that the male world still had its balls intact. We were being deluged with texts and phone calls and Dieter, totally unprepared for this sudden electrification, found it difficult to keep his customary cool.

Daniel, curse him, danced through it all like a Rumpelstiltskin with his golden haired prize imprisoned in his lonely tower. George, needless to say, was livid. The 'I told you so' syndrome took hold and our verbal contract together flew quickly out the window.

By now, Dieter was growing extremely impatient. Enough was enough. Without any consultation, he announced that we were flying that evening to Green Turtle Cay, a remote dot somewhere in the Bahamas. Dieter was a man of many responses. His strong unpredictable nature absolutely thrilled me.

Wiz had to be told. He'd heard about the furor but pointedly kept silent. I knew he was confused. Nobody likes to hear about an important family development through media gossip. But I was really at a loss to know how to handle Wiz at this stage. I could tell by his tense silences over the phone that he was in need of some reassurance.

"Why don't you come back from Maine as soon as we get back from the Bahamas? Dieter wants to spend some time with you and so do I." He was hesitant but my pleading finally yielded his agreement.

And so we spent one glorious week before Dieter's opening at a charming group of cottages owned by Mrs. Burly, widow and former barman's wife, who knew the importance of keeping her guests happy. Each day we grappled with the emotional effects of Daniel's high wire publicity stunting. We didn't have much time and we had a lot of growing to do in a hurry.

"My mother has a villa in northern Italy. After I've completed my commitments here I want the two of us to spend some time there. Wiz could come on weekends. It's only three hours from Zurich."

He was struggling for a solution but I wasn't ready for one. The warm heated sand crunched under my squirming body. The turquoise sea spread out uninterrupted from a secluded cove. But Dieter persisted.

"I've renovated the original farmhouse to suit my own requirements. There's plenty of room there for all three of us."

I sat up slowly and raised myself to my knees. The heat was arousing me and Dieter's voice blended in a haze of tropical sounds and sensations. His bronzing body formed an irresistible silhouette on the clear sands. I lifted my top over my head. My breasts bounced. Dieter stopped talking and looked up. I now had his undivided attention.

I spread my legs apart and reached down for the red draw strings that stretched across my hips. The front panel of my bikini bottom fell

forward. Tiny beads of sweat had formed between my breasts and along the edge of my bikini line. Dieter reached forward and gently placed an idle finger on one moist droplet and moved it slowly across my exposed torso. He grasped a buttock in each hand and the ecstasy of his giant embrace reached my head. He crushed me into the sand and drove me deeper into my own private world.

There would be no more discussions about the future that day. That beach, that place was enough for now.

Wiz arrived back from Maine the day Dieter and I returned from the Bahamas. Two days later the showing opened to a voluminous fever-ridden crowd.

Dieter was determined to spend some time with Wiz. He managed to get tickets to a rock concert and even a New York Rangers exhibition game. Wiz was cautious. He'd spent too many years putting together a pattern of life that matched his emotional capabilities. This was not really enough time for a young boy to make a full evaluation. But he conceded Dieter had made a good start.



Arriving in the Stazione Centrale, I look out the train window my eyes searching through the crowds of tourists and locals. There he is just as Wiz had said. A shot of adrenalin pours into my veins. I'm excited all over.

Wiz grabs his guitar and backpack and scrambles out of the compartment. I hesitate. I feel strongly that this summer will be an important time for me. An important time for Dieter.

"You look delicious," he whispers eating my ear. "God, I'm glad you're here. At last!"

Wiz puts down his guitar long enough to shake Dieter's hand.

"Glad to see you again sir."

He pulls an authentic Rangers hockey puck from his pack and hands it awkwardly to Dieter. I'm completely taken aback. How little parents

know about their kids. I'm too flummoxed to know what Wiz is trying to say. Dieter smiles and pats him on the back.

"This goes in a special place Wiz. This is the first hockey puck I've ever owned."

It's rare that my son is caught off guard. The genuine affection of this response embarrasses him. But Dieter pushes that aside and hustles us both through the station to his waiting Alfa.

Maru is on my mind. What on earth is she up to now? India is so far from her norm. Europe yes. Australia maybe. But I've known her a long time and I'm sure whatever it is there's a huge story behind it. And Don is going with them? What's that all about? Don is a guy I could never get comfortable with. His mind travels in very distant alleys and you never really know up front what he's thinking. He smokes a lot of pot . . . all day in fact. That may explain his far away responses to the simplest of questions. I wonder what Dieter will think of her? And Joe?

As we head out of the station, Dieter reveals he has an apartment and studio in Milan that he uses to escape from the family estate on Lago di Como.

"I've had it for a long time and I thought we might go to *Santa Maria delle Grazie* tomorrow morning before we head out to the Lake to see Da Vinci's *Last Supper*."

"That's a great idea! One of my teachers at *Berndorf* is from Milan and he mentions the *Last Supper* all the time. He even has a picture of it on the class wall."

I'm surprised by Wiz's enthusiasm but secretly pleased. This time together with Dieter is important to me and I'm hoping that things will go as smoothly as humanly possible. They both seem to like each other so I guess that's the important first step.

"A friend of mine owns a great restaurant not far from my place. How 'bout we have dinner there tonight?"

"Oh boy pizza!" Wiz is sure that every Italian restaurant will have pizza on the menu. "Perfect!"

Dieter's studio is located in the historic Old Towne district. It's a five story walk-up and it takes up the entire top floor. The living section

is at the far end. There are blank canvases and half painted ones everywhere. It's definitely the real McCoy.

"The bedrooms are down the far hallway at the back. Wiz your bedroom is the door on the right."

"Cool!" Wiz heads down the hall.

"Our bedroom is the door on the left." Dieter grabs my hand. It's so reassuring.

Our room is large but sparsely furnished, a wrought iron four poster bed, a chair and a small dresser. Dieter opens the louvered shutters and we step out onto the small balcony and drink in the early summer evening. Incredible! It's like a scene from a Fellini film. The small square is overflowing with life – car horns, people shouting and the familiar smells of Italians cooking wafting up from every corner. In the heat and confusion, I begin to feel that perhaps my stress load might actually begin to fall away.

"I'm getting really hungry!" Wiz joins us on the balcony.

"OK. It's only a short drive from here. Or would you prefer to walk? It's about 20 minutes." I decide that after the day we've put in a short drive is the answer. Wiz doesn't care as long as he gets his pizza!

"OK. Let's go!"

The restaurant is the quintessential Italian grotto set in a very narrow cobbled street. Dieter's friend and owner Luca spots us and approaches with a great big hug for Dieter.

"Luca, this is my dear friend Sharon and her very precocious son Wiz."

"Benvenuta signora e signore!" He surprisingly, takes my hand and kisses it with all the customary Italian charm. He hustles us to Dieter's regular table set under the only skylight in this small grotto space. He bows slightly and hands the menu to Dieter.

"I hope you've got pepperoni, peppers and sausage for my pizza!" Wiz doesn't need any menu because he definitely knows what he wants.

"Fatto! Bello scelta!" Luca celebrates his choice.

We both order Shrimp Milanese Caponata and a nice bottle of Barolo.

Dieter pours a very small glass for Wiz. It's his first taste of alcohol or at least I hope it is. He raises his glass. "Let's drink to a magical summer together!"

"This is going to be a great summer. Best ever!!" Wiz's eyes are wide open!

I'm relieved to see him so happy and enthusiastic. It seems as if some of his more anal qualities are already beginning to slip away . . . at least for now. He wants to know about the drive to the Lake and Dieter wants to know more about my book. I fill him in on my plans to write throughout the summer so my days will be split between deadlines and our time together. Dieter is in great spirits and I'm beginning to slowly come around.

I decide to tell Dieter a little about Maru and Joe. Even though it isn't my favorite subject, I didn't want this wonderful welcome to turn sour in any way.

"It'll only be for a couple of days Dieter so I hope this won't inconvenience you and your family. We had lunch with them in Zurich and they just jumped on the chance that we all might be ageeable."

"They sure are quirky people but they're entertaining as hell!"

"You've had enough wine Wiz!" I reach over to grab his glass. Dieter intervenes and encourages me to let Wiz be his own man. That's a hard one for an absentee mother.

"Besides, as long as it's only for a few days it'll be fine." He pats my hand and tops up my glass. Well at least that's over. I guess I need that second glass of wine.



*Santa Maria delle Grazie* is an extraordinary experience. Dieter comes here whenever he feels he needs inspiration. Without a doubt, this is certainly the place to be. The sheer energy that comes flying at you standing before *The Last Supper* is utterly miraculous. I'm not overly religious let alone Catholic. Dieter was brought up in a Catholic

family but he'd distanced himself back in his Columbia University days.

"I had to find my own way without the rigidity of the Catholic Church." He deliberately mentions this before we enter.

But you don't have to be Catholic to feel the energy of the message that comes from this inspired masterpiece. The message is universal. And yes, that message hit us all.

About a block down the street from *Santa Maria*, Wiz discovers some stalls selling every piece of religious paraphernalia you can possibly imagine. He finds black t-shirts with *The Last Supper* pressed front and center. He buys three – one for himself, one for Charlie and one for his teacher Mr. Rossi.

"I'm going to frame this t-shirt!" Wiz says as he climbs into the car. Dieter gets a big kick out of Wiz's youthful enthusiasm. And I'm beginning to join in too.

The hour and a half drive to Lago di Como is magnificent. The closer you get the more spectacular the scenery. The small towns and villages live up to every possible expectation. I want to stop at every one we pass but I realize we have lots of time for that! Dieter fills us in as we travel closer to the Lake. His mother's family has been in Milan and Lago di Como for generations.

"My mother's family name is Donati. Alina has always had wealth unlike the Böckhauers. The estate is about 40 acres and it's right on the Lake. My childhood summer days were spent here. We also had a house in Milan where I went to school. But the real game changer was Columbia University!" Dieter swerves to miss yet another insane Italian driver.

"Stronzo!" He leans out the window and gives the driver the finger. "It means asshole," he says apologetically. "He'll be used to that given his driving!"

"Oh boy!" Wiz is thrilled by the excitement.

Dieter goes on to say that his time in America changed him forever. He began to paint in earnest in New York and his views of Catholicism

went by the wayside much to his mother's dismay. The day he graduated with a degree in economics was the day he became an artist.

Dieter starts to slow down. Then he turns through the traffic just missing yet another crazed driver onto a small dirt road lined with very mature Cyprus trees.

"Look! I can see the water!" Wiz is ecstatic.

I catch my first sight of the Lake at the same time. First impressions? Absolutely stunning! Dieter tells us the estate is a short twenty minute drive to Bellagio which makes getting to town very easy.

"I'll show you around. You're going to love the pizza Wiz!"

Dieter takes another sharp right onto a long driveway lined by even more Cypress trees. His driveway turns off before the main house but I can see that it goes on further to a very large circular terrazzo. I'm sure there must be a large fountain in front of the house in keeping with the best of Italian estate traditions. Wiz and I get out and stand speechless as we begin to take in the splendor all around us.

"Wow! I'm going down to the water!"

Dieter quickly takes my hand and reassures me that as long as Wiz can swim he'll be just fine.

"OK Wiz. But be careful." I know he's a champion swimmer but it's the mother thing and I've had so little practice at it.

"Let's go into the garden."

Dieter leads the way past several trellises densely covered in vines. As we walk towards the back of the farmhouse Dieter fills me in on its history.

"The house was built sometime in the 1800's but as time went by it fell into disrepair. My painting career began to build but I felt I needed a much larger space than the one I have in Milan. So I put every penny into renovating it and making it my own." The back gardens are stunning. "My mother has a full time gardener so he makes sure everything is up to her standards at all times!"

"This is so different than New York Dieter! I just love where I am right now! All of it!" I spin around in a circle and point at my new universe! "Are those lemon trees? And is that a lime tree?"

I walk over to one of the trellises and stand quietly taking it all in. There's a small painted wrought iron table and several chairs set perfectly under the vines. The view from that spot is absolutely breathtaking. I can hardly control myself. I never imagined I was coming to a place of absolute perfection! Dieter had never filled me in on his life or his family.

"I didn't want to pressure you about liking it or not. I wanted you to make your own judgment."

"Well I'm completely enchanted. I feel as if I've walked into a fairy tale!"

"That would be a good fairy tale?"

"A wonderful fairy tale. The very best!" I fall into his arms and give him the biggest hug and the biggest kiss.

Dieter picks me up and walks over to the back door.

"It's not locked."

I reach down and turn the handle. My foot pushes the door open and Dieter carries me across the threshold. He puts me down and I hug him and I just can't let go.

"This is just what I need. A place to chill out and reset my bearings."

Dieter is very relieved that I'm so happy in his space. Wiz bursts through the doorway.

"Whose boat is that!!"

"Would you like to go sailing?"

"Would I!! Ming you've got to come and see Dieter's sailboat. It looks like something out of a James Bond movie!"

"Well it's a Spirit '54. And yes it's the same model that Daniel Craig used in *Casino Royale*!"

"Wow!! You're kidding!" Wiz is beyond impressed. I've rarely seen him in such an excited state.

"So . . . when can we go?"

"How about tomorrow?"

In all of this, I've barely had a moment to take in Dieter's farmhouse. The living/dining and kitchen area are all open plan. The 20' stone walls display a full gallery of Dieter's work. His evolution as an artist is

remarkable. His early work is more traditional and much of it was done while he lived as a student in New York. But as the past 10 years rolled by he jumped into more risky territory. His nudes are created through a mist so you have to look deeply into the image to understand what they are. That gives it much more depth and meaning. And his landscapes are filled with Egyptian symbolism. I hadn't seen this recent work but I truly liked it. He's going down new and unknown paths. That makes it more exciting.

The kitchen is amazing considering he's a bachelor. His designer had kept to the Italian country style but all his appliances are very expensive.

Dieter suggests we walk over to the 'big' house . . . his mother's house. She knows that Wiz and I have arrived and she wants to meet us. Dieter seems very uncomfortable when he relays this message and I ask him what's wrong?

He says he'd had a long relationship with an Italian girl from Milan but somehow it just didn't work out. His mother was very upset with him and blamed him for their split. But Dieter felt she had no curiosity and she just wanted to settle down and live an uneventful life. His life as an artist is anything but that! The final straw was that she wanted him to give up painting and go into finance. "Cazzo!" he shouts. I don't know what that means so I decide to let it go.

Like a small militia, the three of us head out to the Big House. On the way, we walk under a whole series of vine laden pergolas. To our left, the land slopes gently down to the water. To our right, there's a very healthy vineyard with vines that look as if they've been there since the Romans.

"My great grandfather planted these vines back in the early 1900's. Today they make a wonderful vintage. I'll get Alina to open a bottle for us."

We finally come out of the pergolas and the vineyard to a wide open space covered with the most perfect green grass anyone could possibly imagine. Edged to perfection. Not a weed in sight. And a very wide flag-stone walkway that goes right up to the 15' double hand-carved Italian doors. Dieter tells us that the wrought iron handles were custom made

to Alina's specs. The view of the Lake is open and absolutely breathtaking. There's a dock that stretches out into the Lake with a beautifully painted gazebo perched on the edge. Dieter's Spirit '54 is moored not far from the dock. It sways gently in the evening breeze. Wiz is right! That yacht is really something!

"See that Ming. That's the Spirit '54!" Wiz is breathing hard on this one.

Dieter grabs the huge door knocker and bangs and bangs and bangs. I don't react because I know that this event may not be as easy as he wants it to be. Suddenly the door opens.

The very large foyer is all marble. The floors, the statues, the vases and the huge wide open staircase could easily take you to heaven or to hell.

"Sophie!" He kisses her on the cheek. "I want you to meet Sharon Martin and her amazing son Wiz."

Sophie has the look of a woman who has been with the family a very long time. She's clearly uncomfortable about new people and her eyes avoid greeting us.

"Benvenuta," she says a bit too loudly.

"Is she in a good mood?" Dieter whispers. Sophie's eyes dart southward to the floor as she shakes her head. Dieter visibly winces.

"She's in the drawing room . . ." Sophie heads back to the kitchen and Dieter takes us both aside.

"This is not a good sign. When my mother is in her 'throne room' she's planning on taking over and ruling this whole event. I'm going to put you both in the wine tasting room and I'll bring her to you. That way hopefully she'll know what I expect."

Wiz and I get settled in the wine tasting room. The walls are covered with ancient vintages on one side, and more recent ones on the other. Some New York restaurants are famous for their wine cellars. But this is quite another category. Dieter grabs a recent bottle and pops it open. He has no patience for decanting. He picks up a glass and begins to pour.

"I'll be back in a minute."

The drawing room is on the other side of the foyer but within hearing distance of the wine tasting room. I take the opportunity to stand close to the doorway to see if I can catch any of their conversation.

“Alina how has your day gone?” Dieter starts off in English.

“Why should you think it went well?”

“Because I have come to visit you and I’ve brought some wonderful friends for you to meet.”

As soon as I hear their footsteps on the marble I retreat back to my seat. Alina enters stiff and upright. She’s dressed like a dowager queen. Too many diamonds. Too much gold. Too much black.

“Come va.” I do my best with Italian but I give it up quickly. “How do you do Mrs. Böckhauer?”

She clearly understands but chooses to speak Italian.

“Sto bene.”

I introduce Wiz. She stiffens even more if that’s possible.

“Alina we are speaking English now not Italian. Please Alina!”

“My son tells me you are an American. Are you Catholic?”

Dieter is appalled by his mother’s very rude behavior. “Alina! What difference does that make!”

I have written many books and met many people in my short life. In fact, people behavior is my specialty. Alina is quite clearly a woman who is very disappointed with her life and deeply filled with bitterness. I feel very sorry for Dieter because he actually wants things to go well with his mother. But that can never happen. Never!

“Dieter tells me you have never been married?” She pauses. “Then where did this child come from!”

Alina does not sit down in that room, period. She turns sharply and stomps out pausing briefly in the doorway to say “Adio.”

I’m really shaken by what she said. She all but called Wiz a ‘bastard child’. I can ride over lots of bad behavior but this strikes deep into me.

“I’m so terribly sorry Sharon. Don’t listen to her. She’s just a bitter old woman who doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

“I think we better leave!”

As we walk back to the farmhouse Wiz breaks the icy silence.

“She didn’t seem to like us did she . . .”

“She’s not very well Wiz. And most times she can’t remember the things she says. My mother had an unfortunate relationship with my father. She never got over it.” Dieter pauses for just a second. “Let’s go to town for pizza or a burger!”

Wiz and I enthusiastically agree.

“*Ristorante La Goletta* is one of the great restaurants in Bellagio. It’s right on the water and has a view spettacolare! I go there all the time.”

I’m shaken by Alina’s extraordinary greeting but I can see that if Dieter and I are to have a future together and it seems very much that we may then his family is going to be a very large issue. How can we possibly do this?

Dieter puts his arm around me and leads us to the outdoor patio. He’s right. The drive to Bellagio is very short and the view from *La Goletta*’s patio is spectacular!

I have to say Italy really knows how to create wonderful environments for eating. The added bonus is that the food is wonderful. As soon as the first bottle of wine arrives, Dieter fills my glass.

We sit watching the boats sail by. The lights twinkle on the shoreline as people stroll along the boardwalk. I find myself quickly healing. The warm evening breeze massages my face and I find myself relaxing and letting Alina drift away . . . for now.



The next day Dieter suggests that we all go for a day of sailing and picnicking. His phone rings and, of course, it’s Alina. She’s not calling to apologize but rather to inform Dieter that his sister Eva has arrived with her daughter Abriana. Dieter must come to the Big House at once and greet them. There is no suggestion that Wiz or I are welcome. But Dieter smooths things out somewhat.

“Abriana can come with us. It’ll give Wiz some company his own age.”

Wiz is more than enthusiastic. He just wants to get the day going and learn the fine art of skillfully sailing the James Bond Spirit '54!

The two kids hit it off immediately. After all, they're almost the same age. It's a perfect day for sailing so Dieter heads north towards Switzerland. The sun is shining, the kids are getting along and Dieter is behind the wheel. He knows every beach, every estate, every village along the coastline.

I'm completely at peace. The Spirit '54 is a wonderful sailing yacht. I slather myself with sunblock and lie out in the sun. I'm just about to doze off when every hair on my head stands up. My phone pings. It's not a missed call. Wrong sound. It's a text. I decide to let it go. If it's George I don't want to know. My phone keeps pinging. It does that until I open my text message. OK. I'll do it!

The message is from Maru. "We're arriving day after tomorrow. Can you meet us in Milan? Can't wait to get together and meet Dieter." I slump back onto my towel and groan. This is too soon for me. It's bad enough with Alina. But now Maru? And Joe? Am I ever going to get my book finished?

Dieter moors just off the shore where there's a beautiful private beach. "Don't worry I know the owners."

We all pile into the dinghy, picnic basket and blankets in tow. Sophie has prepared a full picnic lunch for us all. Bless her! Before lunch, the kids cool off and go for a swim. Dieter asks me about the text but I dodge the bullet. I'll tell him later. We're having a good time together and I don't want to spoil any of that.

The rest of the afternoon we sail to every beach, every spot that hits their eye. "George Clooney's estate is just over there!" Dieter points across the bay. "Not sure though. I think he sold it!"

"Wow! I didn't know he had a house around here!" Wiz is impressed.

They love the adventure of getting off the 'big boat' and into the 'little boat' and then back into the 'big boat' again. Their laughter and continual chat is a soothing wash for us both.

Dieter delivers the kids back to the Big House. He's hesitant about Wiz but Abriana insists that he has dinner together with grandma. Dieter and I walk back to the farmhouse and consider a simple pasta. As we share chores in the kitchen, Dieter prods me again about the text.

"It was Maru. She and Joe will be arriving day after tomorrow. She wants us to pick them up in Milan!" Dieter considers this news for a moment and opens his phone.

"There are daily trains from Milan to Como. We can pick them up there."

I'm relieved to hear it. "Good idea! I'll text her."



Dieter and I arrive at the Como train station a little late. As we approach the stone platform, there she is along with Joe laden down with their backpacks. But who's standing along side? Don Draper! What the hell is he doing here!?

"Dieter. I'm so sorry. She didn't tell me that Don was included in this!"

Maru sees us both first. She runs towards us and gives me the biggest hug imaginable. I suppose that's a guilt hug.

"Ming! So great to see you!" She barges in front of Dieter and gives him an even bigger hug much to his surprise. "Great to meet you Dieter!"

She's acting as if there's no problem that Don is tagging along with them and that we were expecting him too.

"I didn't know Don would be with you!" I whisper in her ear.

"Oh come on Ming. What difference does it make anyway?"

Dieter breaks in and lowers the temperature. "It's OK Sharon. It's only for a couple of days. And besides there's lots of room." I'm relieved he's adjusting so well.

"Dieter this is Joe Harris and his best friend Don Draper." They shake hands. Dieter picks up one of the backpacks and heads down the

platform to the car. The Alfa is pretty small but Maru sits on Don's lap all the way back to the farmhouse.

They're as enchanted with Lago di Como and Dieter's farmhouse estate as I had been when I first arrived. Maru makes a big show of how impressed she is with the vineyard, the gardens and Dieter's Spirit '54.

"Wow Dieter! Hope you'll take us out in that incredible sailboat. She must ride like a Kentucky stud!" I don't say a thing. Neither does Dieter.

"There's a community feast and dance tonight in Bellagio. Dieter has tickets for us except of course, Don. I guess we can get one at the gate assuming they're not all sold out." I'm still trying to adjust to Don rudely imposing on Dieter's hospitality.

Before they'd arrived I'd mentioned to Dieter that it wasn't necessary for him to introduce the 'gang' to his mother. She had enough on her hands with her grandchild and daughter. Dieter was pleased that I was comfortable with that arrangement. Being on the same page is important to us both during this visit.

Of course, Maru makes a huge fuss about Dieter's paintings. She's embarrassingly effusive but Dieter is adjusting very well. He can adjust much faster than I ever can. I'd filled him in on Maru's interesting character and her 'no rules' way of invading everyone's space. In fact, Dieter is enormously amused and entertained by her. He's obviously never met anyone who is so completely without filters. She says what she wants when she wants and how she wants it. And just to add to that she assumes it's all normal. Everybody else behaves like this. Right?!

That evening Wiz and Abriana will be playing video games together in the Big House. I'm hoping Alina will be on her best behavior because Abriana her only granddaughter will insist on it.

The Bellagio Street Feast is packed. Where do all these people come from? There are a variety of live bands dabbled along the boardwalk. Tables are scattered at the water's edge and we scramble to land a couple of them. Dieter knows the score in his own town so he's able to find two tables and push them together. The restaurants on the boardwalk are wide open and ready for the endless orders of pasta, grilled seafood and an assortment of salads. The wines are amazing.

Maru digs in with abandon. She's in her element and ready for action. She makes sure that her chair is right next to Dieter's. "So Dieter. Tell me all about yourself. I'm dying to hear your story."

Here we go! But Dieter is well armed for Maru's game play. I made sure of that! She suddenly grabs Dieter's arm and leads him into the dance area. She sways, jabs and rubs. Dieter stops mid-step, puts his hands on his hips and stares at her inexplicable performance. When Maru begins to understand that Dieter is immune to her spellbinding display she returns to the table and grabs Don. Joe is so busy eating from every dish and drinking endless glasses of wine he barely notices the drama that's playing out in front of him. Maybe he doesn't care.

I can't help but notice that she and Don are in each other arms dancing like nestled spoons. His hands are all over her buttocks and her face is nestled tightly into his neck. When they return to the table I lean over and whisper, "lay off Dieter. He's not yours. He's mine! And by the way, you all leave tomorrow!" Maru looks completely shocked as if she doesn't know what on earth I'm talking about and why I want her gone.

"Oh come on Ming. I was only having a little fun. Let's have lunch tomorrow just us. We can sort this out together. And besides you'll want to hear our plans and what's going on."

I'm still fuming the next day on our way to Bellagio. Our table is right next to the shoreline. The sound of the slow lapping water has a great calming effect. It's bad enough that Dieter and I have to deal with an insane embittered old woman but Maru is just one step too far.

"We'll be flying to India as it turns out. Given the difficulties in Iran and Afghanistan we've decided it'll be safer if we fly to Mumbai from Athens. We'll visit our Greek island first but only for a couple of weeks and then off we go!"

In fact, I had originally introduced them to 'their island' many years ago. The island does have a name. Kimolos. It's a wonderful place to retreat. They ended up renting a small house and staying for almost six months. It's a beautiful jewel set in the Aegean nine hours ferry ride out of Athens. The population is no more than 500. There are a couple of

restaurants on the docks. Only 5 vehicles on the island and none of them work. Joe spent his time there studying for his final math exams.

“So! You’ve got to hear about my plans for India! Have you ever heard of an Indian guru called Baba Gosh?” No time for a response. “I heard about him a couple of months ago from one of Joe’s friends. Don already knew about him. He has a Meditation Resort on the Arabian Sea just south of Mumbai. We plan to hang out at the ashram and see what happens.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Who is this guy anyway? And why is she so anxious to go to India and ‘hang out’ at a . . . what did she say . . . Meditation Resort!

“I haven’t heard good things about some of these India style gurus. Some of them encourage group marriages not to mention questionable sexual practices! Surely you can do better than that!”

Maru’s eyes dart in another direction. I catch it immediately.

“You’re kidding! Is he one of those guys?”

“But Ming. This is going to be a life changing adventure!”

She just changes the subject. It surely will be a life changing adventure especially if she and Joe dive into a community that practices group sex!

“I’ve opened a YouTube Channel and I’m going to become an online star! An Influencer!” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a small Canon digital video camera. She hands it to me and I take a good look. It’s light. It’s small. And according to Maru it has a huge memory capacity.

“You’re going to have to keep a close eye on this Maru. Theft is everywhere in a place like India.” But of course, she completely ignores me. What do I know?

She grabs the camera from my hand and hits the record button. “How’s your sex life Ming?” She points the camera directly in my face. “He’s a real stud!”

“None of your damn business Maru!” I snarl. “Do you have any idea how much work is involved in a YouTube Video Channel?” I feel I need to point out to her that a Channel with a sizeable number of followers

demands a lot of time and effort. “You have to be committed everyday all day!”

“I’ve already sent you some clips. Haven’t you viewed them?” I have to admit that I haven’t had time considering my own schedule. “Don’t you get it? India is a magical mystical place. There’s nothing but story there. And I’m going to tell it all Baby!”

I’m beginning to think that this idea might have merit. I’m already curious and the trip hasn’t even begun. That’s a big sign for a writer. Content. We’re always hungry for content.

“We can keep in constant touch through Zoom. My YouTube Channel will keep you up to date and you’ll always know what my story is. I plan to post at least 20 times a day!!”

I’m working hard to keep up with her. This sounds more and more intriguing. My imagination is beginning to race a mile a minute.

“I’ve also got a new Instagram account. Facebook is a given. We’ve friended each other for years right and I’ll absolutely include TikTok.”

The light in the room is beginning to go on and it’s blinding. “You may actually be right. This could really be something.” My writer’s ‘greed’ button is now firmly on. If anyone can get into a lot of goo it will be Maru.

“How long do you think you’ll be in India?”

Her eyes pop out of her head. “Perhaps forever! We’re going to travel everywhere . . . all over. North and South. Think of all the new stuff we’re going to learn! We’ll be the new agents of change! And we’ll get it all on my Channel.”

She had me there. A country like India can change a person forever. No question. But the mixture of Maru and a crazy lunatic Indian guru? Whew!

“Do you have a map?” I foolishly ask.

“Who needs a map? They’re so confining!”

“What about Don? Is he going to travel with you guys the whole time?”

“Oh no. We’re going to Delhi from Mumbai together but then he’s going in a different direction. He’s going to spend time in Varanasi on

the Ganges. There's a music school or something like that he wants to visit. Joe wants to get out of Delhi as soon as possible so we'll be going north. He mentioned the place but I can't remember it right now."

"What about Baba Gosh?" Her plans seem so disconnected but who am I?

"We're going to meet up with Don again in Mumbai and then off to the *Baba Gosh Meditation Resort*. It's just down the coast." She says that as if it's some kind of command and distances are irrelevant. "I've already made reservations for our stay there. Can't wait!"

She's so excited she almost drops the Canon on the ground. I reach out and catch it just in time.

"Well I'm sure you'll have an interesting trip . . . it sounds pretty busy especially with your YouTube Channel!" As I hand her the camera, I wonder what clips she's talking about. I guess I'll have to check my mailbox more often.

The next day we all gather in the kitchen for breakfast. The gang of three are gobbling up the last bits of their eggs, pancetta and hash browns. Their packs are crowded at the door waiting to be transported to Dieter's Alfa. Joe had given up their rented car when they were in Zurich. "It costs too much." So now they're totally dependent on buses and trains.

"Thanks so much Dieter for a fa-a-a-bulous time." Maru is stroking him with her eyes. The two guys chime in and agree that Lago di Como is a great place for summer time play. Dieter lies like a trooper and tells them it was great having them.

"We should head out soon. The train leaves Como in about an hour."

Joe grabs the last of Maru's toast and shoves it into his mouth. "OK. We're off!"

The ride to Como is as beautiful as ever but on this occasion it's filled with Maru's chatter and her excitement over their new adventure.

"This is going to be the greatest thing that's ever happened to any of us isn't it Joe!" Don and Joe instantly agree. They know the drill.

“Thanks a ton.” Joe gives me a big hug. Don steps up and gives me a limp non-committal hug. “Thanks.” His only word. The guys grab their packs and head towards the platform.

“I’ll email you from Kimolos. Keep an eye out for them. Let’s get this dialogue going for real. And don’t forget to view the clips I sent you!”

“I will for sure. I’m looking forward to hearing about the next chapter . . .”

The train is now in the station and the gang of three scramble on board to find a seat. As it pulls away, Maru sticks her head out the door and shouts “This is gonna be big! Very big!”



We’re relieved to see them finally go but we find ourselves unusually tired after their visit. That’s Maru. You never really know why you’re so tired after being with her. She’s the vulture feeding on the energies of others.

Since Wiz and I arrived in Italy I haven’t had any time for my book. But that’s got to end. George has been texting me daily for updates and my latest draft. I keep putting him off but I know there’s a limit to that. So I’m finally sitting down and getting to work. I feel so full after Maru’s visit. I just feel that this whole new adventure has a long and detailed story ahead.

Wiz is loving everything about Italy. The Lake. The people. The food. This is a brand new experience for him. Lots of different things to do. And he’s convinced Dieter to teach him how to sail the Spirit ‘54. The two of them have quickly become fast partners and Wiz is easily learning how to sail. For some reason, he’s found the whole exercise a welcome challenge.

“Maybe I was a sailor in a former life!”

“I can believe it!” I give him a big hug.

The summer begins to fall into an easy relaxed routine. When Dieter and Wiz aren't sailing Wiz visits Abriana which means that Alina is also included. It seems that Abriana has done a good job on her grandmother. Alina has begun to ease up on her attitudes towards Wiz. He tells me that he's suggested to Alina that they both take a walk in her vineyard. He now knows some Italian phrases he can spring on her just to make her happy. Alina begins to enjoy his company because he asks lots of questions about the varieties of her vines and the best way to grow them. This keeps the conversation going for some time because as a youngster Alina used to help her father in the vineyard. She never stops talking about the first plantings of the Chiavennasca, Merlot and Pinot Grigio. Fortunately, Wiz is interested in a lot of things and that now includes viticulture.

Dieter is relieved that his mother is finally coming around and eternally grateful to Wiz for his good deeds with her. She even begins to include us in family dinners and activities. I find myself beginning to relax more and more with Alina and she and I have begun to at least tolerate each other. Our conversations are mostly about her family and how her grandfather had bought the estate and built the Big House. The planting of the vineyard is always a good topic of conversation. She can go on forever about that one. But Wiz never seems to tire hearing about it and he'll always find new questions to ask her.

As the summer rolls on, Dieter and I grow closer together. We begin to tell each other about our respective lives. He has so many stories about his grandfather and his passion for his vineyard. He's also filling me in on his painting. There's a place artists go inside themselves where there is a 'room of expression.' That 'room' is the place that gives him his inspiration and is his guideline on how to deliver his art.

Writers have that place too. It may be a little different than an artist but it's the same idea. I fill him in on Jeff and my family. Not much to tell about my mother and father, midwest people who live their life quietly in a small city on the open prairie west of Chicago. My father is an insurance broker and my mother volunteers at the local hospital. She wanted to be a doctor but as always, life steps in and takes another path.

My two brothers and my sister are both living lives within a fifty mile radius of our home town. I'm the only one with a completely different path. None of my siblings will come to visit me in New York. "Too big. Too scary." My mother on the other hand comes when she can. She loves the big city and she's very proud of her famous daughter.



Within two days of Maru's departure, my mailbox is being pinged 20 times a day. Yup. There's another email from Maru video clip attached but I have no time to download. I manage to read Maru's descriptions though. 'See me in front of the Vatican'. 'See me in front of the Coliseum'. They've arrived in Rome and they'll spend only a few days to 'look around'. Good grief! Rome is much more than a place to just 'look around'.

They'll be taking the ferry from Brindisi to Greece and then bus it to Athens. "Kimolos is waiting for us Ming!" Don seems to be forever in tow and I wonder how long that's going to last. She suggests that before they leave for Kimolos she and I have a Zoom call. The island has limited wifi so the call will have to happen before they leave Athens. I agree and suggest she send me a timeline when this might actually happen.

"Hi George! How are you?" I answer my phone too quickly and here I am caught with Mr. Anxiety. Before he can even begin the conversation I give him everything he needs to hear. Yes, I'm chilling out. Yes, Wiz is having a wonderful time and has found some new friends. And yes, I'm on target for a final draft mid October.

"Are you sure Sharon? I don't want to be disappointed again!"

"Trust me George. I've given you my word." This seems to calm him a little and the conversation ends.

My mailbox is filling daily with dozens of emails and downloads from Maru with full descriptions of their journey to the Italian port of Brindisi and their arrival in Athens. One of them suggests we Zoom on

the weekend. I gather my wits and try to figure out if that's going to work for me. I come to my senses and realize that if I delay this call I'll be hounded by her robo email technique.

"OK. How about Saturday afternoon 3:15 your time." She writes back almost immediately.

"That works!" I'm unavoidably committed.

"Here I am in Athens Ming!" The conversation begins. "We're having a great time together. It's great to be back in Athens. It's really been too long!"

"When are you leaving for Kimolos?" She looks quite tanned and almost beautiful. Her long blonde hair is bleached by the sun her skin is a glowing honey brown. She shows me her new nails.

"They look a little like cat claws Maru." I'm teasing her of course but those claws really do look a little cat like. I always find women talking about their nails really annoying.

"Had to have them done before we sail tomorrow. No such thing as nail salons on Kimolos! We'll be on the island about 5. We've rented our old cottage and Don's got his tent so we're pretty well set up."

"How long will you be on the island?" I wonder if Joe will try and delay the trip to India. He loves Kimolos so much and once you get him on the island it's almost impossible to pry him away.

"Just a couple of weeks. Remember I told you we have reservations at the Baba Gosh Resort so we have to keep moving. I don't want to reschedule because it's very hard to get a booking as it is."

Wow! She really is on about this guru thing. I've done a little research on Baba Gosh. Turns out there's more than a dozen of them. But he's the only Baba Gosh located south of Mumbai with a five star Meditation Resort. And he's the one who's a great proponent of group sex as a spiritual therapy.

"There's a lot of chat online about Baba Gosh and his group sex message. I think you should be careful and keep your eyes wide open."

"Well Joe and I are already familiar with group sex of a kind. Didn't you view the clips I sent you?"

"Sorry. I've been buried with George and his eternal deadlines."

“I’m not going to discuss any of this until you take some time to review my clips.” That was a direct command. “I’ll resend you the videos. I thought I’d already sent them to you! Joe likes to get this all on camera.”

The pinging in my mailbox is deafening.

“Maru, I’ve got to go. George is all over me about finishing my book. I already know you’re going to keep busy on the island.”

“I can only send emails from Kimolos so keep a look out.”

We sign off with air hugs and kisses. Don and Joe suddenly appear and poke in on the conversation.

“Hi Ming,” they say in unison.

“Have a great time on the island you guys. Let me know when you leave for India.” With that I close off the session.

“Dieter get me a drink please!”

Maru continues to send emails from Kimolos. Mostly they’re descriptions of daily events on the island. Stavros took them out for an early morning fishing trip which started at 4 a.m. He only caught about 20 fish but most of them were so small he threw them back into the sea. Tassos has enlarged the restaurant and his deep fried calamari is as wonderful as always. Surprisingly, I enjoy hearing about all the islanders I know and love.

More than 2 weeks have passed since our Zoom session. In today’s email, Maru announces that they’re on their way back to Athens and they’ll be flying on Tuesday to Mumbai. A strange energy comes over me after reading this email. Maru is probably right. This is going to be big!

I debate how long it will take me to check in on Maru’s journeys. I have to fit them in somehow otherwise I won’t be able to respond to her. And that will produce a very noisy Maru.

I think I should start with the clips she’d originally sent. The first one that catches my eye is a clip entitled *3 Together*. To say that I’m still in shock as I write this is putting it mildly. Maru and Don are laced out on a bed completely naked. Where are they? A hotel room? Joe is talking into the mic.

“Come on you two. Let me see you do it!”

Don rolls over and begins a very forceful foreplay. Maru heatedly responds as he climbs on top of her. He sucks her breasts and pushes her hips into his very erect penis. Joe is egging them on to do more and more from behind the camera. They happily comply. Maru grabs Don’s penis ferociously and she bends over to suck him to his climax. Don screams with ecstasy and as soon as it’s over he leaps back on top of Maru and enters her. She lifts her hips up and down in rhythm with him. She screams out “Again. Again.” Joe is breathing hard into the mic by this time and as Maru is climaxing so does Joe! The sessions continue to go on for at least another half hour. I close down the clip and sit in stunned silence. Is this some kind of terrible joke? What does Maru think she’s doing? Does she even know what she’s doing?

I have to gather my senses . . . somehow. It’s clear that the three of them have consented to sharing each other with each other. From Joe’s voice-over, it seems to be more than just in total agreement. Is he the mastermind? Maru and Don always had a thing for each other so that part is no surprise. But she sent me this clip wanting me to see it. She wants me to know that the three of them are ‘in relationship’. The Baba Gosh push now makes sense. Knowing her as I do she’s probably relishing the prospect of engaging in sex with a huge crowd. Why stop at just three? Oh my God!!

After that, I debate whether I should have a Zoom session with her or simply keep our exchanges to email. I have to get some kind of response together because she knows I’ll be viewing *3 Together* and she’ll want to know what I think.

What do I think? It’s one thing to engage in a three way sexual relationship. Ménage à trois is not new. But it’s a dangerous game to play. Her need to broadcast it and to be so insistent that I watch her ‘performance’ is nothing short of . . . what is the word? This all leaves me utterly speechless.

“Are you planning on posting all of your group sex clips? If so you’d better check out YouTube’s rules. They may pull you off their site altogether!” I figure that email will get her thinking because she’s

helpless without having access to her audience. For her, that's her lifeline.

"Thanks for bringing up this issue. I hadn't thought about that!" She responds immediately. "I'll send them all to you for safe keeping first. Let's give it a little time and maybe we can find a way to get them posted."

'WE?' There is no 'we' on this one. She's entirely out there on her own. *3 Together* has been on line for 2 days and she already has 500,000 viewers!

"I'll have a million viewers in no time!" She gloats.

The next post is *India Begins*. Maru is speaking into the camera from her seat on Air India.

"We're 15 minutes from touch down and we're so-o-o-o filled with anticipation. I hope we like India. Actually now that I think about it, this is the first time that thought has ever crossed my mind. But what's not to like? Right?"

Joe records the landing and he manages to capture the skyline of Mumbai through the very dense smog. Impressive!

"We'll only be here for a few days and then we're off to Delhi. Isn't that right Don?" She pulls Don in front of the camera and demands that he say a few words.

"Looks that way." Don never did have much to say. Then Maru is back on camera running the show.

"Ming I hope you'll be seeing this clip very soon because there's going to be so many of them. I don't want you to fall behind!"

Of course, now I'm the invisible personality that Maru has chosen to fill her performance stage. Her chat room will be filled with "Who the hell is Ming?" Sadly, I'm in it now. Right up to my neck!

Several hours later Maru posts yet another clip. This time the gang of three are walking along a busy street in Mumbai. The noise is deafening! The shops are little holes in the wall filled with everything from wildly colorful textiles to ones that are lined with huge open sacks of ground spices. I'm completely hooked! This place looks incredibly different from our world in the West and now I'm incredibly curious.

“Everything about India is amazing Ming. The people. The food. The buildings. The smell!”

I can really believe it because I’m not only seeing an environment I’ve never seen before, I’m actually participating in this journey. The women are dressed in saris, some of the men in skirts down to their ankles. Joe is surrounded by a large crowd of kids who all want him to give them money. “Are you BBC?” They shout at him.

Her Instagram page is filled with stills of Mumbai airport. Joe is recording the streets and the interior of their hotel on the Canon. The hotel is modest to say the least!

I begin to visit Maru’s YouTube Channel. This is a completely different experience. I find myself sitting for a couple of hours watching Maru dialogue and video her way to stardom!

“We’ve just arrived in Delhi Ming and we’re exhausted! The ‘express train’ took a day and a half to get here from Mumbai! I’ve sent you some amazing clips. The people want to talk to you all the time. They’re so curious about us. 3E Class is a real trip. More and more people push in at every stop and some of them actually pile onto the baggage racks! They’re so sweet Ming. They love to touch my beautiful blond hair!”

Joe is recording as she speaks with a huge gang of kids pulling away at his sleeves. He finally turns the Canon to the crowd around him. It’s early morning in the Delhi train station and the floor of the station is an ocean of people sleeping on grass mats and bed rolls.

“This is amazing! Do all these people live here? On the floor? Are they waiting for a train?” Maru is totally dismayed.

“Hard to say.” Even Don is amazed.

“We discover an ‘Old Town’ district not far from the hotel called ‘Chandni Chowk’. It’s the coolest place in the world! It’s a bazaar that dates back to the 1600’s. Apparently, it was built by a Raja so his wife could shop to her hearts content! Now isn’t that romantic!”

I’m taking notes as the video plays on, sometimes pausing the stream to do a Google search for the names she’s spitting out.

“I discover that the ‘Chowk’ was a hangout for all the 60’s hippies. In fact, we met one of them at a wood carving stall and Baba Johnny, that’s his name, is going to show us around our next destination which is a holy city on the holiest of rivers . . . the mighty Ganges!” She reaches into her bag and pulls out a wood carving of a cross legged elephant and puts it exactly in front of the camera. “See Ming. This little guy is called *Ganesh*. Apparently, he removes all obstacles that come before you. At least that’s what Baba Johnny told us.”

I’m now on pause. She’s rolling out her story as if everything she says is perfectly normal. India is not normal! India is completely not normal! But she has made India her world and Maru has always been of the opinion that her world is normal. And did she say Baba Johnny?

Back on play, Maru continues her speak. “Let me tell you about Baba Johnny. He’s from Chicago and came to India back in the 70’s . . . or something like that. His goal was to become a wandering sadhu which means monk. For two years, he sat meditating in a cave in the Himalayan foothills living and eating only on the offerings of his growing followers. He lives in Rishikesh which is where we’re going tomorrow.” She suddenly stops speaking and grabs the camera lens and sticks it in her face. “Joe did you get that?” She then turns her face directly back to her former position and continues as if nothing has happened. “Baba Johnny is going to take us to a Shivananda Ashram. Swami Shivananda died in the early ‘60’s but today’s guru is supposed to be really something. Can’t wait. Right Joe?”

I can hear him say something even though the camera has no time for him. Maru is the only act in town. Like all things Maru does in her life, it’s done with a crackling chaotic scramble. So the things she takes in and understands are always a mystery. Perhaps Rishikesh will be a good preparation for her upcoming visit to the Baba Gosh Resort. I’m now so curious about what she’s going to do and say next that I immediately click open her Rishikesh video.

“Here I am with Baba Johnny. Say hello to my fans BJ!”

Baba Johnny is an aging hippie with hair matted almost down to his knees. His skin is a deep brown encrusted by the incessant Indian sun.

He wears white robes and sandals made from rubber tires. Needless to say, Joe is still the cameraman so I can't get a take on how he's doing. But I can pretty well imagine it. Baba Johnny puts his hands together in a prayerful way and into the camera he smiles a toothless smile and says, "Namaste."

"Thanks BJ!" Maru takes over from there.

"We're about to enter this very large Shivananda Ashram for our meditation class and to meet the very great and wise Baba Kapoor. He's the most holy guy in the whole ashram. Maybe all of Rishikesh! We got permission to video our time here so even though I can't talk you can meditate along with us and experience an actual authentic Indian practice!"

Joe's camera then takes us up the very extended stairway and into an enormous marble floored room supported by twenty foot white marble columns. The room is filled with cross-legged devotees, men on the right, women on the left. Everyone's in white. In fact, Maru is wearing white Indian pajamas and I presume that Joe is draped in white cloth as well. Much to my surprise, Joe keeps the camera rolling even though the entire room is in meditative silence. I fast forward the video which must be at least a half hour. I'm now seeing a white robed sadhu sitting on a huge pillow at the front of the room. Maru leans over towards Joe and whispers into the mic "That's Baba Kapoor!" He begins speaking in both English and I assume Hindi? In English, he's reading all the ashram rules along with all the rules for aspiring monks to follow. There appear to be hundreds of them. The camera is suddenly filled with a close up of Maru's face.

"This is really boring. We're outta here!" She grabs the camera from Joe's hand and zooms in on Joe. "Whisper agreement Joe!"

Joe is a very large person and for him to sit cross-legged for even 15 minutes on a marble floor is nothing short of extreme torture. He coughs and grunts, "Let's get outta here. "

They're all standing outside the huge white marble temple. The camera is still running. Maru and Baba Johnny are in animated conversation about how 'boring and unentertaining' that session was.

“Take us to someone who’s more interesting. I want to be entertained while I’m meditating!” I can see that Baba Johnny has a twinkle in his eye.

“I know just the guy. But he lives in Kulu Valley about 300 miles from here. He’s a really cool dude.” Now Maru is getting excited.

“Let’s do it!”

I can’t believe I just spent two hours watching Maru. I’ve got my own work to finish. But I know that I’ll be back at it every chance I can get. What a journey! And it’s barely begun.

Wiz is just coming through the door with Abriana. “Let’s go for a sail! Can we Dieter?”

A sail? That’s a good idea. I need to clear my head after all that Maru.

“Can we make it just an hour? I need a break but I’ve really got to finish this chapter.”