

# Part 2

*He who looks at the woman only with eyes of vulgar lust  
hasn't yet surpassed the level of rudeness.  
Only he who sees in her the Mother has raised  
from the animal and human condition to the Divine plane.  
Only the eyes of a man who is pure can see in a woman,  
through transfiguration, the Eternal Mother.  
And only then She spontaneously overflows  
Her happiness and grace over onto him.*

Paramahansa Ramakrsna

## IV. In Darkness Dreams Arise

“Please stand clear of the closing doors!” the loudspeakers announced, and the crowd sucked Sera like metal to a magnet through the train doors.

She found a seat easily between two crew cut women dressed in identical navy blue outfits, their faces and eyes absorbed in worldly thoughts. They both held a black briefcase in their lap. She looked at the other faces around her, searching desperately for some friendliness in one of them. She wanted to talk to someone, but hesitated, encircled by what seemed a hostile silence. She had woken up from a strange, melancholic dream that morning. She was still in the world of dreams. Not quite walking with steady feet. She had been left with an unforgettable sadness that she couldn't shake off, though the dream itself had evaporated like dew from her memory, when she opened her eyes.

She looked out the window and into the darkness on the other side of the glass, faintly illuminated by an occasional light. She studied the reflection of her eyes as they appeared in the glass and couldn't recognize the color in the blackness of the dark background. A strong beam of sunlight would have made her eyes bluer, but here where she never felt the stings of its rays, the blue dulled. She didn't even know if it was rain or sunshine outside. There was one way she could know though, if she tore down the protective curtains that were glued to the frame of the windows. She hadn't found time to do it in Inwood, but when she and Selma lived in another apartment closer to the city center, they had done it. It was hard work to take them down. She knew Selma would never do it on her own. It was prohibited. The total blackout stood as a reminder to them of why they had had to go under the grounds. They said that the sun would burn the skin to shreds, if you went up there and was exposed to it. The bombs of the Final War had caused a lot of damage to the sky. But Sera came from a place with those same conditions, and it was merely a matter of taking certain precautions. She didn't believe that it required a twenty-four hour blackout. She would do it soon. She longed to watch the sky. Life was just not the same without a sky.

Selma was probably still in bed. She hadn't left her room at all that morning, and Sera left for school on her own. They had come home late last night and Selma had gone straight to bed. Sera had given up trying to cheer her up. There was nothing she could do now. Selma would need some time on her own.

*Everything seems so heavy, as if roots in the earth are pulling us down, further and further. I wish things would change, become lighter, easier to carry. Flow like water, bring energy and passion to us. There's too much earth and not enough air or water,* she thought to herself. She missed the feel of the ocean breeze on her

skin and the walks along the wavy, energetic element.

<You can change everything....>

Sera jumped startled and looked up from the page, which she had been staring at blankly since she pulled it out of her bag. She was sure she heard a voice this time. It wasn't an image like the ones that came to her often. She looked up. Three rows down, a tall, slender man was looking at her with a warm, shy smile. His skin was golden, and his eyes and hair dark gathered in a small ponytail. He was wearing a red jacket and dark blue jeans. The red puzzled her eyes as if it was only she who could see the color. A trick of her eyes. Was he another dream? He too had a book in his lap. She quickly looked away, but knew she was unable to hide her confusion, and felt the whole world staring at her, as if they could read her thoughts. She kept glancing at the page, focusing on not to look up, until it was her stop. She half expected to find him still sitting on the third row, looking at her, but when she looked toward his seat, the man was gone.

The day dragged on. Sera didn't pay much attention to the professors, not even her favorite professor, Mr. Ummy with the cute dimples, who listened to his students as if they knew something that he didn't. Instead of paying attention, she found herself drawing circles in her notebook. The circles slowly developed into suns or stars that shone on a vast sky or rising waves somewhere at the end of the world. She thought of home, the ocean and living with her mother, Mia and their cat, Ea who had been named after Grandma Ea. She remembered life with Michael, her first boyfriend. They used to sneak away to make love in the old huts on the beach. The brittle, wooden benches cracked under their weight and made them giggle, so that they had to stop moving for a while. There had been others after him, and even when they were still together. They could never quite get along outside those huts. He was popular in school, she wasn't. They had kept their relationship secret for months. In her memory of him, he still seemed to be the only one who had ever moved her; those afternoons and evenings in the hut, listening to the break of the waves and holding onto his strong arms, which longed most of all to catch the ocean and fly over its depths.

The auditorium was crowded with students, just before the beginning of another class with Ms. Poole. She hadn't seen Selma all that morning and started to worry, wondering if she should call her. She wanted most of all to see her happy and by her side at school like before. Sera missed their companionship. She didn't know if she could make it through another year of school, alone.

"Hi Sera!"

She turned around to the voice. Two rows further up, Frank was sitting.

"Hi," she mumbled and smiled.

"How are you? I haven't seen you for ages."

"I've been home on vacation."

“They permit you to go home on vacation?”

“It's part of the agreement of the scholarship,” Sera answered, knowing that she had been lucky.

Very few people in the city got a chance to go overseas or even beyond the borders of the city. Means were very scarce, since most energy resources had been used up in most parts of the world. Transport over long distances was one of the first things they had cut down on. She imagined when it had been easy to travel, before the Final War, when most places in the world had good living conditions and going to far away places was only a matter of saving up money. Then people could visit three different countries in three days if they wanted.

“Was it good?” Frank had moved down the steps in the middle toward her.

“Yeah,” she said reluctantly, hoping that he wouldn't stay. But Frank went straight to the seat beside her and sat down.

"What did you do there?"

She looked at him briefly. Frank had big, brown eyes and heavy eyelids. Sometimes, she thought he would hypnotize her with his strong stare and his deep voice. She was afraid of those eyes without knowing why.

"I saw my mother, my cat and my friends."

"What do you do out there? There can't be much to do?"

"Plenty," she said and paused.

There was so much more to do there, because time and living wasn't compressed into one single space. Suddenly, she felt the sadness inside again. She held back her words from him and kept her gaze elsewhere than with him.

“It's so great to see you.”

He paused and she felt his wild gaze again. It made her uncomfortable. He dug into her, searching and waiting.

“Have you been writing anything lately? We're having a reading night on Friday at the club, if you are interested? I'd be really happy if you'd come.”

This time, it was irritation she felt. He always tried to pull her into his writer's club ever since she showed him an old poem she wrote when she was younger.

“I don't write anymore, and I am not interested. I am with Selma on Friday.”

She hadn't meant for her voice to sound so distant and unkind. But it had an effect, Frank moved uncomfortably in his seat.

“Well, I just thought...it is your choice, of course. We could need more supporters, you know. It is really great to see you though.”

She shrugged her shoulders and gazed at her book. She wanted him to leave. She always wanted them to leave, she realized. After a moment of awkward silence, Frank spotted someone further up.

“Rich...I'll talk to you later, Sera.”

He gave her a little kiss on her cheek and disappeared. She felt the softness of his lips like a bee's sting.

Five minutes later, professor Poole arrived and the class started. They were discussing different theories of counseling. Today's subject was about the cognitive behavioral theories of Albert Ellis, a 20th century rational-emotive psychotherapist. Poole was a tall, thin woman with a stern, frigid face, not emanating the ‘positivity’ Ellis argued for in his theories. She had a distinct voice, which went into Sera's ears and stayed as a whizzing sensation in her. She thought of her protective curtains and tried to imagine the view from her window. Maybe she could see the medieval building.

o o o o o

Soledad opened her eyes carefully and adjusted to the light that was flooding through the uncovered windows. It filled her with a sting of sadness in her heart. How many more years of this life? He was still sitting on the floor meditating. He looked like a little boy with his eyes closed and his face in deep concentration. His lean and slender body full of vibration and vigor. Her heart let go of the pain for a moment, and she felt it opening up, taking in the energy. There were unlimited resources available. It was just a matter of opening up to them, while letting go of the body and darkness of the world. She took her bag and put on her jacket. She felt better at ease now.

The door gave off a little click when she closed it quietly after her. She took the stairs down; she wanted to avoid the monitors and ID-slits. She panted heavily, and realized how much out of shape she was. She rarely came to see him now, but last night she had had the impulse to go see him. She knew his touch could do wonders. They hadn't made love. She had been too worn out. The magic was still there lying in his arms. He held her closely all through the night and fed her with his energy and absorbed her pain, which he could do so easily without consequence.

She would go to see George, tell him of the progress she was making in her practice, and that she managed to get the job with the Ustodians with Doru's help. It had taken them a long time to get to a way to enter their domain. They were very close to the people sitting on the power now. They were one step closer to making changes by their subtle influences. She walked through the Underground street tunnels with a feeling of lightness. She passed people whom she smiled to, one of them, an elderly man with gray hair and a big belly, smiled back.

She found her train with ease and boarded it. The car was full of sleepy looking people, some already asleep, others with a dreamy look on their faces. They were going home from the night shifts, she guessed; all eager to crawl back to sleep where there were no trains, no tunnels, no co-workers, no numbers, no machines, just a soothing darkness and if they were lucky, peace. If she closed her eyes, she could enter that esoteric peace, which mostly only came to people in a deep sleep, when entering the unconscious

realm.

She rested her face against the train window and looked into the blackness, which the train passed through, again and again. Sometimes moving through the blackness was like a flickering of light, not darkness at all. It was a timeless space beyond the passings of the seasons, beyond movement. A state of vast emptiness. She wondered what time of the year it was on the other side of the tunnels, upstairs. Then she remembered the view from Doru's uncovered window; the park, the different red, green, and brown leaves, and the strong sunlight.

She slowly breathed in all the way to her diaphragm to get the most benefit from the stuffy and confined air on the train. At home in the village, growing up with the other kids, she never worried or wondered about the air or the passing of time. The villagers took care of every moment of the day, did their work with a smile and always took time to a neighbor, a family member, or one of the children, who would run around the houses playing or occasionally help out in the kitchen or with the washing. She had gone back to Peru once, since her parents came to the country and settled down in Florida. Her relatives had greeted her like a returning queen, making sure she had everything she needed. She never had to help or do anything. They had insisted that she'd eat all of their food even though they used meat in their cooking. When it made her awfully sick, she had guiltily wished that she would never come back. She felt like a stranger among her own people, even though she still spoke their language fluently.

When she got off, letting herself be led by the endless crowd until she found a corner of her own, she took out the small map that George had drawn for her. She rarely came to the MOSA center anymore. She preferred to work on her own now. The map was small enough to lie in the palm of her hand and didn't cause any attention. She slowed down and looked at the people around her. They were all going in the same direction, toward the West Fourth Market. She was walking in the opposite direction toward the utmost western parts. The crowd quickly thinned out in these parts and she walked quietly over to a small exit that no one used anymore. Once she was on her own she sped up. She remembered the way and only needed to look at the map once.

"Hi Soledad, my love."

George came to meet her in the last passage, which was wide and warm; most of the passages she had walked through had been damp, water dripping from pipes and electrical tubes hanging under the ceilings.

"I am so glad you could stop by. How are you doing?"

"Fine," her voice almost disappeared in his big embrace.

"Did you see Doru? I rarely hear from him."

"Yes. His group is growing and making progress. People are open."

"Good. I am glad. I feel time is on our side now. Something will happen soon."

George had eyes that looked at her with wonder and love. She felt secure with them. She felt her heart was in safe hands, that the more she opened it, the more she would gain, and the more she could give the

world.

"Are you hungry, my love? I am sure Michael has cooked up something, which we can have a bite of."

Soledad nodded to George as they opened the heavy, black door, and walked to the small kitchen, located on the first level of the center. From above, where the common rooms and classrooms were situated, she could hear somebody playing the sitar and a deep male voice was singing.

*Om Saha na vavatu  
Saha nau bhunaktu  
Saha viryam karavavahai  
Tejasvi navadhitmastu  
Ma vidvisavahai  
Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*

*O God, protect us both together,  
Accept us both together,  
Let us achieve strength,  
Let our learning ever shine,  
Let us not resent each other.  
Om, peace, peace, peace*

It was Michael playing and singing, a gentle, small skinny man with thick glasses. With patience and sweetness he studied at the school. She had made love to him once. They had been talking one night at the school, holding hands, connecting. When everyone had left the common room, their hands moved over the landscape of their bodies, to reach for that which was deeper within which moved them to feel the joy within their hearts. His touch was shy at first, but his heart full of passion and love.

She smiled. She was accepted here. It felt good to feel at home.

o o o o o o

It was the worst time of day to move through the West Fourth Market. It was packed with people coming from or going to work. In this part of town there was always a steady flow of people because of the NYU. It was one of few universities, which had survived the economic crisis after the Final War, when the Ustodians just began taking over. The Ustodians had invested a lot in the NYU, and as a result it had expanded its property, its economy had increased and academically it had won much worldwide acclaim. New York's economy relied heavily on its trade of knowledge, especially within the fields of computers and science.

Sera had always been fascinated with the stories she had heard of the big city and the famous NYU. It was a dream coming true, when she applied and got the scholarship to go to NYU to do her Master's degree. It was a fairy tale at first, but resources were scarce here too like in the rest of the world, and being

behind the walls of the wealthy school couldn't hide that from her for long. She had to face the other realities of the city. Money and reputation didn't mean much if water and electricity supplies were scarce. From twelve to four morning most of the city would be blacked out or running on very low capacity. The trains didn't run during those hours. Public institutions were closed. There was no late studying. In order to have electricity one needed a special permit. Nightclubs and Med clinics were some of the few authorized.

She put her ID-card through the slit and walked through the turnstile that counted and registered her move in some computer somewhere. She wondered why it was so. Were they counting the money they were losing since they decided to make the Underground free for everybody? Or did they like to keep a record of what their citizens were doing? On one of the walls there was a notice which read: 'New York 2042, the New Haven: employment, housing, education and security for everybody'. Under the text there was a picture of a group of smiling men and women, waving their hands. They were all dressed in either suits or uniforms. The picture didn't make her feel happy. She wondered if it was supposed to. There was something so ancient about this city that made her wonder if there had really been a Final War and if this was truly a new world, not a copy of something long forgotten.

The crowd was moving very slowly and she started losing her breath. She tried to relax her breathing. *One breath at a time*, she told herself, but still ended up feeling that she was choking. She walked to one of the walls and rested against it. She lost track of time while she tried to relax. She studied the people passing her and wondered again how similar they all looked, dressed in pastels or black shaded clothing and wearing the same kinds of short haircuts. Her breathing stabilized a little, but she felt too tired to move on; a heaviness and soreness overpowered her body.

She thought about the ocean again, waves breaking in the black hot summer sand, which she had to run over if she didn't wear sandals. In the baking sun, black sand absorbed a lot more heat than white. She would have to dress up like a Bedouin to avoid getting sick. Her white, pale skin, her frail, clear blue eyes and long reddish hair were too sensitive to the strong rays of the sun, but it didn't prevent her or others to go out under it, and even though her short moments near the water could be troublesome, even painful having to deal with the heat wrapped up in clothes, and people's stares, her love for it wasn't less passionate. The ocean didn't mean the same for her as it did for the surfers, who threw themselves mercifully into its exhilarating, lethal movements, and performed a highly sensuous and seductive dance with it; the ocean swept her away, even from a distance, like deep intuitive feelings by its colors, scents, sounds, and images, and it would speak to something very deep within as if they were long lost friends, who had finally met again.

*What am I doing here?* She thought. *Why did I ever return to this world?* Maybe it hadn't been right to come back. The Pohutukawa trees along the roads and the coastline had just begun to show their first flower buds, when she left Aotearoa. She had missed the blossoming of their bright red, large and round

flowers. That last morning Mia and Sera took the train to the airport, gliding soundlessly first through the green and rocky hills, and then through the quiet suburban areas of Auckland, where there were no longer any cars, only bicycles and pedestrians. She had felt the first warmth of spring on her face. It comforted her in the turmoil of ambiguous feelings, leaving Mia, Ea her white cat with gray spots and mild, yellow eyes, and their house on the hill.

"Watch out for yourself," Mia repeated once again. "Don't get involved in any of those strange men, who always approach you," she said.

"Mom, all men are strangers," Sera said and tried to sound merry. Mia didn't look amused.

"Yes, but not all women are like you."

"I can take care of myself," Sera promised, and they parted.

She missed the blossoming of the blood red flowers along the seashores and the quiet nights looking out at the sea and the green hills.

As she looked to her right where people were still moving through the turnstiles in a steady flow, she recognized the camera seller from the market last night. He was wearing a big cowboy hat and had a doltish smile on his face, as if he thought life was one big joke. She started moving away from the turnstiles. She wanted to avoid his gaze for anything. She had to get home and remove those protective curtains. She couldn't bear it anymore. She moved swiftly and forgot to look at the signs to see where she was going. She walked through one tunnel that seemed familiar then she turned at one corner and another. She moved insecurely and started choking on her breath. Then before she knew of it she was lying on the ground, her ankle in sharp pains. She must have sprained it. She started rubbing it slightly to try to soothe the pain. It helped a little, but she couldn't help the tears from running down her cheeks. In some strange way, the sudden pain and tears gave her a sense of relief.

After a while of trying to recover, she realized that she was lost. There were no direction signs and the passage was narrower and dimly illuminated. She stopped crying, scared by her own sounds. The place was very quiet. There were no sounds of the crowd here. She tried to stand up, but it was too hard because of the excruciating pain. She had to rest solely on her right leg and foot. She tried to visualize the steps she had taken in her mind, but it was all a blur. She couldn't even remember the direction she had come from.

She leaned up against the cold and damp wall. There had to be water near by or perhaps there were no air machines to make the air dry. Her choking sensations had stopped too and even though she was worried, her breathing was smooth and calm. Ahead of her she could faintly see the passage branch out. In one of the divisions, she noticed light. She decided that it had to be the Underground lights and steered slowly towards it, limping and feeling a constant thumping in her foot.

<Sera....>

She jumped startled, sure that she had heard somebody call out her name, but it wasn't possible. She

looked nervously around her, while moving slowly towards the end of the passage. She had to see a doctor tonight or tomorrow morning before classes started. She sat down on the ground up against the wall. The ground was dirty and dusty, untouched by the methodical Keepers.

Then she noticed that somebody was in the passage. She could faintly see the silhouette of a person. Whoever it was, he was waiting for her, she realized. She started to get up again, panicking. As a kid in school, her first instinct was always to run and hide, when the boys bullied the girls. There was nowhere to run to this time. She tried to think of the ocean, breathe it in. Breathing seemed to be all she could focus on doing.

“Don't get up. I'll help you.”

A tall, middle-aged man with a brown long ponytail, a reddish beard, and fine long bones came towards her. She stared at him without uttering a sound. He had long, fine fingers, which helped her sit down again, took her left foot and started to take off her boot.

“Argh....”

“Sit still,” he hushed. “It won't be long now. Bad, is it?”

She listened to his calm voice and sat still. She was enclosed in a protective vacuum, where no harm could happen. He started massaging her foot, still with the sock on. The pain started to subside. Then he took off her sock and stretched out her whole leg slowly, lightly twisting her foot from side to side. By then the pain had disappeared, and she gave out a little gasp of relief. The whole procedure had taken no more than two minutes. She stared at him fixedly. His eyes were like dark suns, tender and yet impenetrable.

“Thank you very much.”

He let go of her foot and she touched it, as to check if it was really true. The foot was healed. The man got up. She stared at him with amazement.

“Thank you, I don't know....”

“No need to thank me, it was my pleasure.”

Sera got up too, still puzzled that she had no troubles any longer.

“Perhaps I could buy you a cup of coffee or something like that.”

The man smiled friendly, and the small freckles, which covered his face, seemed to smile too. His skin was golden. His clothes were simple and worn, his jeans had faded to a pale blue, and his green shirt was frayed at the edges. But he was clean and had a pleasant unfamiliar scent.

“Maybe you can tell me where I am, I think I am lost,” she laughed nervously and considered the possibility that he might be lost too.

“Yes, I can help you.”

“You will have to show me the way to the nearest coffee bar.”

The man smiled again.

“I insist,” she pleaded.

They started walking in silence, he leading the way. They were in a very complex system of narrow passages that seemed to have no end or beginning. She didn't pay much attention to the passages, only noticed that he took her through some tunnels that she didn't recognize. When they came out on the other side of the Market, she breathed a sigh of relief and praised herself lucky that she had bumped into somebody, who knew his way around.

They walked into one of the small coffee bars at the West Fourth Market, which was situated in a very busy area; but neither of them paid any attention to the constant buzzing of people moving back and forth, running, talking, or eating.

“My name is Sera, what is yours?” she asked stretching her hand toward him, which he put in the palms of his hands.

He had ordered a cup of chamomile tea, which now stood in front of him, untouched. She started stirring her coffee with a small plastic spoon.

“George,” he said and looked directly at her for a while.

She felt that he was studying her, as if testing her.

“Very impressive that you found your way into the old path systems. Very few people come that way.”

“You live in there?”

“Yes, for the time being. There are still things that the Ustodians are unaware of. ”

He looked over at the turnstiles and pointed to them.

“People used to walk through the turnstiles and up some stairs into what we now-a-days call the Grounds. That was when I first came here, more than twenty years ago.”

“How was it to live here then?”

“Busy. If you can believe it, the city attracted millions and millions of people. Of course that was before the Final War. It took millions of sacrifices. The land finally protested and acted against all the abuse that people had done to it. All that anger, frustration and suffering finally turned against us, somebody pressed the button and turned the world into a bigger nightmare than it already was. Maybe it was a blessing for us. But now we have to live like servants underneath Earth's feet in this Black aeon.”

“It must have been a huge change. They couldn't just move the streets down here right away?”

“No, the Ustodians, which they later on called themselves, a group of powerful and wealthy people, took the initiative to start the reconstructions. And we all helped out, the ones who were capable and strong. People stayed indoors at that time, they were afraid of breathing in the air. The Ustodians supplied people with masks, but it didn't help against the sun, which stung like flames. Even though the bomb hit the Middle East and affected huge areas of China and some of Europe, it still had its effects on this side of the world. And we also had to deal with the anthrax spores, which made the air lethal. Many died, mostly the people without homes who had no shelter to go to. Some of them survived. God only knows how. But

in all the horror, it was also a time of connection. People helped each other, grew closer to one another, feeling finally a love for the Universe, for a collective spirit, for something larger than life. Together, our will-power grew and in just two years our work on the Underground had made an amazing progress. Most people were out of danger. Not much has changed in the Manhattan parts of the city. But I hear they are expanding the Underground into city parts on the other side of the eastern river.”

“There is a river?”

“There are two rivers on both sides of Manhattan and then the ocean at the tip of it,” the man’s voice was full of joy.

Sera felt a deep sadness for what had been done to the city.

“So things became better afterwards?” she asked.

“For a while things were good. The Ustodians’ promises of a better future and their successful efforts in rebuilding the city were proof enough for people to accept their leadership. And it did make sense. It came down to choosing between cruel anarchy and the security they could provide us with.”

She observed him as he talked. His hands and lips were moving, but his eyes stayed calm, almost as if they were listening. There was something very pleasant about him that she couldn’t put her finger on, but she knew that she hoped to see him again. She felt safe and still in his company, she didn’t feel the need to rush or drift away.

“Now, tell me something about the place you come from.”

He had been talking so engagingly that she was surprised by the sudden attention directed to her.

“You mean, Aotearoa? I don’t know. It’s so different. It’s more peaceful. There is real light. There’s the ocean and the sky, which is open for everybody. The holes in the ozone layer are just as big as the rest of the world, so people can’t go out in the sunshine in the middle of the day, even when it is overcast. But the rivers and woods are clean. Kids can play in the streets, because most places in the country have given up cars and have constructed railway systems. They started the construction, when I was little, after the Final War, and it took about ten years to finish. With fewer roads in the cities, it means that our gardens have become larger and most households grow their own vegetables now. We are working hard to maintain a harmonious nature and eliminate all pollution. I guess, because we are so isolated it makes it easier. They say, before human beings came to settle down in Aotearoa starting from the 17th century, the only inhabitants were birds and plants.”

She found it hard to continue, home was too far away. She thought about her bedroom window from where, on clear days, she could faintly follow the surfers riding the waves and see the wind surfers jumping off or gliding with high speed over the wild surfaces of the sea. *Why am I really here?* She thought.

“It’s good you came. I wish more people like you would come. Do you share your experiences with people here? Don’t forget to tell them about the world you come from?”

Sera was taken aback by his genuine forwardness.

“Yes, I guess.”

“There are a lot of people that still suffer here. The air is not vital enough for the weaker ones, not even with the air filters everywhere. With the dark as well, it is easy to lose faith. People need to hear stories, different from those they are being told now.”

She nodded.

“Sera, how is your foot?”

“My foot?” she said and remembered her bad luck.

“It feels good. How did you do that?”

“It’s what I do. I’m a healer.”

“I’ve heard about healers in Aotearoa, but I’ve never met one. Can you heal any illness?”

“It depends on energy among other things, but I’ll tell you more about it if you are interested some other time. I have to be somewhere else now.”

“Okay.”

She felt like crying, she didn’t want him to leave. *When can I see you again?* She thought but kept silent, afraid to make a wrong impression.

“We can meet here again, if you like,” George looked at her with calm eyes that could feel whatever she carried within.

“Next week, same time and I’ll show you what’s at the end of the passage,” he said and smiled in a teasing manner.

He took his tea, and drank most of it.

They both got up from their seats, and suddenly she noticed the noise and smells of the place, as if a spell had been broken. He took her hand again, embraced it with his and looked at her.

“Don’t worry, Sera. You have been blessed with gifts, which will bring you through all of this. You have the heart of a child, so you will be protected. Go with light in your heart always.”

Before she could respond, he walked away. He went in the other direction of the one they had come from. She followed him until he was out of eyesight.

The apartment smelled of Selma’s home-baked bread and Sera dropped her bags in the hallway and went straight to the kitchen. Selma was standing at the kitchen table, putting bread into little bags that she would put into the freezer for later use. For periods the freezer would be full of bread, one loaf after another, too many for the freezer ever to empty out. There were bread free periods too, and then they would laugh more, go out more and talk into the night, sharing thoughts, emotions and experiences.

“Hi beautiful!”

Selma looked at her and smiled.

“Come and have some bread. I have just baked.”

“Thanks. I am starving.”

Sera sat down and put butter on a slice of bread. She loved Selma’s bread, but she always felt guilty eating it, as if she was taking the food out of Selma’s mouth. At home Mia only baked on special occasions and she rarely put much effort into the cooking. Selma cooked a lot, but there was always a certain amount of discomfort or pain involved, hunched over the table with knitted brows and sinister lips. She was drawn to and revolted by the food she handled. It was the only way to live the life she had been given accidentally by parents, who never visited or called her, or of whom Selma never spoke much about. Sera had watched her, when she was on her own; she never let go of anything or fell into daydreams like Sera would. Selma always occupied herself with something as if stopping would kill her.

Selma started taking food out of the fridge, preparing for a bigger meal.

“Do you want to have some too? I am making a stir-fry. There are a lot of vegetables left.”

“Sure. Do you need some help?”

Selma shook her head; her hands were moving and sorting the vegetables with confidence.

“I took some handouts for you at school. You didn't miss out on much. Thorsen was sick. Are you okay?”

“I am fine.”

“I am here for you, anytime.”

“What did you do today?” Selma cringed while she started cutting the vegetables on the table. “You’re back so late.”

“Oh, I just met the most interesting man!” Sera said in a light manner.

“No, really what did you do?” Selma whined.

Sera wanted to tell her about George and the man on the train, but something held her back.

“Got stuck at school. By the way, I saw Frank in class.”

Selma stopped cutting for a second and then began again. All the while her back was against Sera.

“Are you okay?” asked Sera carefully.

“Don’t...,” Selma turned around and stared at her harshly, “just leave it, okay!”

Her eyes were furious, and Sera had never seen her this upset.

“Okay. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Sera almost whispered.

“Just leave me alone,” Selma replied, beginning to put the vegetables on a pan.

Sera left the kitchen and walked into their small living room, which only had a couch, a small coffee table, and an old TV, which they rarely used. She needed to get a lot of reading done, but she couldn’t when the air was filled with tension. She walked over to one of the windows that looked more like a square black picture. The city was full of black pictures, like one endless blackout during war. She let her finger run along the fringe of the black curtain, made of some kind of plastic material. It had been poorly put up, and in places it opened slightly by her touch, a faint soft light streaming through. She could feel the light

soothing her hands, as if the setting rays of the sun could still bring warmth to her limbs. She got her big pair of scissors and started to work her way through the layers of new and old glue, cutting into the light, and making the hole bigger and bigger. She worked systematically with a determination that surprised her.

“What are you doing?” Selma asked.

Selma had come into the room and looked at her with blank eyes.

Sera had opened most of the lower part and could smell the slumbering light like dying embers. She stopped working.

“Letting in the light. Can you give me a hand?”

Selma looked at her suspiciously for a long time, and then she smiled and came over.

“Just hold this end, while I kill this son-of-a-bitch,” Sera said and they both laughed.

“Light, oh beautiful, come to me, let me drink your loving nectar,” Sera sang, intoxicated by the project. Selma was silent, but smiled too.

“Oh, the dinner!” she suddenly cried out. She let go of the curtain and ran into the kitchen.

“It’s fine,” she yelled and came back to Sera. “It was close though. I guess it can sit for a while.”

“Good, I’m almost done here, I need your long arms...yes that’s it! Give it a good slap. Here we go,” Sera said.

The curtain was heavy and smelled bitter. They carried it to the bare wall and walked back to the window. The sun had already disappeared behind a thick layer of pink and purple clouds. Above, the sky was turning into night colors. The waning strength of the sun behind the clouds was still visible. Sera looked for the medieval place, but a building blocked their view, and she could only see parts of the park here and there. She imagined where it was supposed to be located. She felt an aching longing from all of the time, she had been deprived of the light and the sky. She knew the rays of the sun very well. How they would dance and glitter so mysteriously on the cool seawater. How they would reflect themselves in streams and rivers. How they would heat up every grain of sand within their reach. How they would softly penetrate every crack and hole in her house at home. How they would burn into her skin and sting her eyes. How they would open her pores, letting that moist fluid seep through, and bring out the bluest of blue at the rims of the pupils.

After they had eaten, with rosy cheeks and sweaty hands, they took down the other curtain in the living room. Even though it was hard work, they both smiled and laughed. After that there wasn’t any time or energy left for studying so they both said good night.

Sera lay on her bed unable to calm down and feel the heaviness of her eyelids. Her body felt hot and energetic as if she was still taking curtains down. She tried to find a comfortable position under the comforter, but restlessness had taken over and her mind hummed with thoughts that like bees flew in and out of her hive.

*I'm in the passageways, first running, and then coming to a stop. Hands reach out for me, touch me and relieve pain, a pain that seems to go further than the body into the darkest parts of my breathing. Something lets go, snaps like a twig and I feel lighter, moving through tunnels on the train rails, floating like a boat down the river, drifting with the current. I'm following a set course, knowing my way in the dark, even though I have no oars to steer with or light to travel by....*

*I come to the ocean, waves wash up on the black sand and the sound of them breaking calms me, soothes me. Then suddenly, a body is washing ashore, I see it rolling with the waves, like a bundle of wet and dirty laundry. It is George, his face serene. I pull him further up the beach and listen to his heart. It is beating, very slowly. I fill him with the clear ocean air I inhale. He stirs, opening his eyes, and for a brief moment, I see the face of my father, youthful brown and yellow eyes like a tiger's eye...then I drift away or perhaps he does.*

*I'm back in the passages, winding, narrow, cold and dark. I can feel the sky above me, feel the wind leading me, lifting my hair and stroking my face. The caresses make me content and warm, lulling me back to a deep sleep.*

## V. Desire for Love

The ceilings of the living room were low and the pictures hanging on the walls, no longer with the support of the furniture, looked out of place. They had moved all of the chairs and a table into the other room of the small east-side apartment. The place still could barely accommodate her seven students, and some had to wait for others to be able to move into the positions to avoid minor collisions. A burning stick of incense, resting on its censer, sent up a slim column of smoke.

“Now we’ll do the relaxation. Those of you who have space to lie down do so, and the rest have to sit in a comfortable position with your back straight yet relaxed, there are chairs if that works better for you,” Soledad said and looked at everybody.

They were uncomfortable, she sensed. A lot had dropped out on the way, the anxiety was too great and the risk too costly. Nobody wished to go to prison for doing meditation and some stretching exercises, and the benefits from it were subtle and often took a long time to manifest. She was losing the enthusiasm she had had in the beginning, when she first started the class. It had been exciting to see her students learn and advance, physically and spiritually. She had to maintain that faith and belief, even if her class had shrunk. If the teacher failed to believe how could her students succeed?

“Start focusing on your breath, inhale all the way to your diaphragm and let it out slowly and silently. Feel that your body lets go of all anxieties. If you feel any tension, breathe into these areas as if your whole body is inhaling rejuvenating fluid, soothing energy, and rebuilding these areas.”

She guided them through all the different body parts and looked at them. Some had left all tension behind and were focused, but four people still had problems with the deep breathing. They weren't used to breathing all the way into their diaphragm, which was the key to deep relaxation. Either the air machines couldn't provide New York with enough air, or the air simply lacked something vital. On top of that people were never exposed to the sky or wind, and had no real connection with the air element. When she had first come to New York on her own, she had had the fear of not being able to breathe. She'd never known of that fear. Where she came from there hadn't been any need for air machines. There was air enough for everybody, but not food or work enough. When she started learning how much the body itself could compensate for any losses or deficiencies, and how little it needed to rely on, as long as there was an awareness of the connection between everything, she could let go of that fear and any of the symptoms.

The energy in the room was tense. She looked closer at the faces. At the back of the room, she spotted

two eyes closing as she reached them. It was Matthew, the clean-shaven man with the bright green eyes. He was new in the class, in his early thirties. Even though he had come at his own choice, his energy disturbed her. He sent out a sense of unwillingness to participate genuinely. An unloved child. She closed her eyes and focused on transforming her frustration into compassionate energies, tried to open herself up like a flower, petal by petal, letting out that precious vitality at the core of her.

“Now note a state of floating, of mental freedom. The outline of the body has vanished. You’re in a state of expanded consciousness, fusing and attuning your own microcosm with the macrocosm, the universe.

“Become aware of the harmony. Note the growth of self-confidence, the inner balance, the improved will-power...” She paused for a long time, letting her students feel themselves. They all had a core where harmony and awareness was ever present.

“And now slowly return to your physical body.... Wiggle your fingers and toes...and stretch your body in both ends, as far as you can, then roll over carefully to your left side. Let's sit down and repeat the Om three times.”

People were moving into sitting positions. Some were just waking up from the deep state of being.

“Om,” it vibrated through the room and each 'Om' was more resonant than the other. She felt the vibrations from it in her heart.

Soledad got up too abruptly, and noticed how tired she still was. Even after the yoga, a heavy drowsiness conquered her. She went to turn the lights up.

“I’m handing out papers on the new asana we did today. We’ve run out of time, so if you have any questions about it, come with them next week, when you have looked it over at home. Now, if you have any questions or comments in general?” she looked around at the faces, some calm, others seemed to be in a rush to leave but remained sitting.

Anna, a young woman, raised her voice.

“I’ve been doing the mantra meditation for a while now, every day. The other day, I got a fright. I was repeating the mantra. Then I stopped repeating it, because I was the sound. And I no longer had a sense of being in my room. It was like I was in the middle of a storm. There was no up or down, just the forceful sweeping of the winds, which pushed me about. I didn’t know what to do. Then I tried to repeat the mantra. It was very hard, and I could scarcely hear my own inner voice. It helped though after a while.”

“You must always repeat the mantra. It is very important. Listen to the sounds that come back, but always return to your mantra. There is nothing to fear, if you stay conscious of the mantra,” Soledad said and smiled to Anna. “You’ve come far in your meditation. You have proved how powerful this form of meditation can be.”

Soledad looked at the faces. Matthew gave her a hard stare. He had stretched his legs and was leaning his foot against the woman in front of him. There was no smile on his lips, and she couldn’t sense whether

it was aggression, fear, or something else that he projected.

Thomas, a young, thin guy with a kind, but worn out face, put his hand into the air. Soledad nodded.

“Can you tell me what the connection between illness and energy is?”

“According to many different holistic and spiritual traditions, all illnesses and symptoms are imbalances in the body, in other words, energy blockages, which are caused by something, which has happened in our consciousness. It may be that we haven't paid attention to our inner voice; we chose to do something, which isn't good for ourselves. It may be that we persist on continuing an unhealthy pattern and in time our body will persist on showing us what we need to look at, that is if we understand the symptoms our body has developed. We can also say that all that happens in our body is caused and allowed by ourselves. We are the decision-makers of whether there is balance or not. And the way we chose to lead our lives is reflected in our body. This may seem a cruel thing to say. We are so conditioned to seeing illness as something opposing its presence on us from the outside. But we have full responsibility for what happens in our lives, and likewise in our bodies. And when we do take the responsibility and live in a way that is good for us, there is balance. This means of course that anything, any illness or symptom, can be healed, if we want it,” Soledad looked at the open faces in front her.

They were listening. She wasn't always sure how much she could let them in on. These were radical ideas that could change a lot of things, which the Ustodians probably knew all too well and had therefore banned ideas like that.

"For more than 5,000 years, the yogis in India have practiced a holistic healing system. They very much speak about energy and illness in this way. Their system operates with five basic principles: ether, air, fire, water and earth, which are present in the manifest world of matter that is also our body. The human being like any other living creatures, be it a plant or a cat is made up of energy wheels, different centers that represent different parts or levels of our consciousness. These are called chakras. We have already discussed these a little bit in connection with the poses. I will talk more in detail about it later on in our class. But this science says that even when a cold occurs, there is an imbalance in our consciousness, in our energy. Energy works differently from the ways of matter. Energy can be altered by a thought or a wish. Matter is a denser level of reality, but both are of course part of the same reality, merely two levels. The energetic makeup of matter is really what we talk about here. Not until illness is treated on the energetic level, is it curable, otherwise it is usually shifted to a different place. It is very simple, imbalance is imbalance, and no matter how severe it is, balance can be restored with the right kind of diet, the right kind of living, doing yoga, and the right kind of thinking. In other words, by healing yourself. The beauty of yoga is that these sacred poses can go directly to the source and work on the energetic makeup of our body. The body is a wonderful tool, but like anything else of this world in order to work perfectly, it needs regular attunement and love. The body functions the best, when all parts of the human being are in harmony: the mental, physical and spiritual. It is a delicate balance, but our body is truly a beautiful

instrument, never underestimate it, always treat it with the same respect as you would a holy place. In many ways, it reflects your soul. To most of us, what is the most essential is invisible. ”

Soledad held her breath for a little while. She imagined the walls had ears, and that her students had tape recorders that would let her on, and it gave her goose bumps. She had seen friends of hers be taken away by the authorities, because what they believed in was off limits, outside the jurisdiction of the Underground.

"Thomas, does that somewhat explain it for you?"

Thomas nodded and smiled.

"I suggest you go to the library in midtown, and find some books on the subject. The librarians take good care of this kind of information there; you just have to be smart about it. They can help you if you keep a low profile," she added.

Michael, a young man with an old, pale face, whom Soledad knew through MOSA, spoke up.

"I have problems with my stomach, the lower part, what would be good for that?"

"Is it cramps in the lower parts and do you have a lot of gas in your intestines?"

He nodded.

"It is probably like imbalances in your digestive system. For starters, a pinch of baking soda with a squeeze of lemon in a warm glass of water, and acidophilus tablets are good remedies for bringing back balance into the digestive system. You can also kindle your digestive fire by doing 'fire breath' or the shoulder stand where you consciously move the energy upwards. Are you a vegetarian?"

"No," he replied.

"Try to experiment with your diet. Stop eating meat for a while. The yogis say meat can damage our system. Meat takes very long to be digested and in the process a lot of energy is wasted. Meat also makes us less susceptible to spiritual growth and higher awareness. It slows down our senses, as we have to fight digesting and absorbing it, because it is a heavy and stressful energy. So I suggest you take a closer look at what feels good to you. Don't be afraid of choosing and making conscious choices. Go on one of the cleansing diets, and then see how your body reacts to what you put in it. And avoid the boosters for a while. You never know what they give you. I have done well without them for years."

"Another important thing, in connection with the chakras and consciousness is that that part of your stomach has to do with your second chakra. So take a look at your relationship to sex, food or your feelings in general. There is an imbalance in either of these areas."

There was a moment of silence. She had certainly not been prepared for this kind of talk this soon with this class, but Soledad was sure there was a reason for these questions arising. The class was ready to hear these things.

"If nobody else has anything to add, I will just excuse once again for the lack of space presently. Unfortunately, it can't be any different than this right now and thank you Carrie for hosting us."

“And why can’t we use the regular space?” Matthew asked harshly and stared at her.

Soledad wasn’t sure if she should tell the class everything that she was doing. She felt he was trying to put her in an awkward situation. She didn’t understand why.

“My new job doesn’t allow me taking any chances, so using my facilities will not only jeopardize me and my job, but also all of you. I’m working on finding a place for us. Maybe when we come home tonight, we can all will or visualize that changes are going to come. Sit down for five or ten minutes and focus on change, whatever you associate with change, like a flower opening, trees budding, and the wind. I’ll see you next week, same place,” Soledad said and felt out of breath.

“Go with peace and light, and bring it to your family and friends,” she added in a lower, more careful voice.

She just needed to lie down and reload energy. She wanted to dream and enter that other dimension of life, mindless and free. Her students left one by one until there were only Carrie and Matthew left. Matthew was waiting for her at the front door. She wondered what he wanted. It was probably time for her to get to know her new student.

They walked to the elevator in silence. Soledad was perfectly content with being separate, two silent minds, then she could focus on herself for a while, what had brought her stress, and what she could do to release it. Still, she was a teacher with her student and was aware of the responsibility therein.

“How are you doing, Matthew?” she asked and looked at him.

“Fine and you?” he looked at her and smiled numbly.

“How are your exercises going along? Are you making progress?”

“What do you think?” he asked back and smiled again.

“I think, you would benefit from doing the positions at home on your own, you need to learn to lift and refine your energy.”

Inside the elevator the light was malfunctioning, and they were standing in twilight darkness. She put her bag on the floor and closed her eyes for a moment. The tiredness overwhelmed her. She needed to feel the wind and light on her skin again, she was aching so badly. She felt warm skin on her hand. For a second, she thought her prayers had been heard, but then she remembered she wasn’t alone. She gave his hand a small squeeze. *So this is what it’s all about*, she thought relieved. She had been afraid that his intentions might have been of another kind. His reasons for being in her class weren’t always that clear, he could have been planted there.

It felt good to hold his hand and the tension between them disappeared. When his energy connected to hers, it quickly became more affectionate. She focused on opening up and transmitting loving energy through her hand. She hadn’t flirted with anyone for a long time. It made her timid and wary of what to say. She was no longer the teacher. And there they stood; two silent shadows in the darkness of the small elevator.

They got off at the second floor and took the staircase the last floor to avoid the surveillance. They opened the fire escape doors by pressing the code into a small alarm apparatus on the wall, and came into the passageways, where numbers and arrows directed them to the trains. Their hands held onto each other, but not many glances were exchanged. After a while, she could feel fear emanating from somewhere deep within him, but she couldn't determine its origin, colors or aura and didn't know what to do to help.

The turnstiles appeared around a corner and they entered. She let go of his hand.

"Where are you going, Matthew?"

"With you."

"I'm glad that you like me, I enjoy your company, but I have to be on my own tonight."

He looked at her like a wounded dog, his brown eyes, big and round, his arms to his sides and his mouth slightly open.

"What kind of yogi are you?" he blurted out and laughed scornfully. "Leading me on like that!"

There was so much anger in him, and his strong, fluid energy changed so rapidly like stormy waters. She felt anger too in her, against the city and what it deprived her and other people of. Lifting yourself above the heavy darkness of living was hard, especially with the many temptations of quick highs on drugs, alcohol, sex or boosters, which eventually would leave your body heavier and sicker than before. Who was to remember how it could have been, how the body could function with the colors of the Grounds? Anger and frustration bred well under such circumstances of deprivation. She understood very well. She steadied her focus on joy and warmth and began to see the light colors of the world again. She could lift the energy even under high stress; many years of practice and the necessary gifts had taught her that. It was her blessing. Her voice was sturdy and tentative, when she replied.

"Matthew," she repeated his name again to try to reach him.

"I'm sorry. I have no ill intentions. I wish you well," she looked at him kindly. "I'll see you next week," she added.

*Open up, Matthew, she thought, and let go and you'll see that love is not an object of your desires and expectations, it goes beyond that.*

His face was still laughing, but something stirred in his body. His hands were unruly, dangling down like a gorilla's. She left him there near the turnstiles, before he could react. She felt a sting of guilt, when she walked to her platform. But she was also relieved that he didn't get angry, provoking anger would only make things worse.

She found a seat and quickly fell into a slumber-like state while going through her day. *I need to eat more now; the new job surroundings take more of my energy. How can those people live like that day in and day out?* She thought. *Well, I can't judge them. We all play a role in the world of matter. Fruit, bee pollen, nuts, c-vitamins, proteins, and more water that is what I need to get.* Soledad opened her eyes and felt the earth under her, and the sky above; beyond layers and layers of soil, it was still there, moving slowly, influencing

and guiding her energy, lifting her closer toward a higher state of being.

o o o o o o

Sera walked eastbound, down the 14th Street passage running along with the L train. She had been there just the other night, but in the daytime it was much busier. She lingered outside the big glass doors of the Med Clinic. She knew why they had painted the walls green. It was a placid color, as if there were special reasons to calm people. The walls were decorated with drawings of people and obscure landscapes with no shapes or colors, like in dreams their meanings were ambiguous. Sera went to the reception and handed the woman on the other side her ID-card.

“Here for general medical care?” the woman asked and smiled to Sera, who nodded reluctantly.

In silence, the woman entered Sera’s data into the computer in front of her. Sera couldn’t see what the receptionist was typing. Without a word, she handed the card back to Sera and pointed toward another glass door on the right. The door read ‘General Examination’. Sera entered and sat down on an empty chair. There were no numbers or line up of people. A medic person in a beige coat with a red flower on the right hand chest pocket called in people by their full name one after another. She waited for fifteen minutes, listening to the muzak and leafing diffidently through a week’s old newspapers. Opposite her was an elderly man with a big belly and heavy, drowsy looking eyes, which trailed her relentlessly like flies. Every once in a while, she would look up and he would look away. She smiled to herself even though she felt uncomfortable. It helped. It lifted something inside of her. Nobody spoke in the room except from the doctor, who would announce the next patient to come into his office. She held onto the paper as to stay focused on something else than the waiting room, the small group of people there and the clean, green walls. The gray paper slowly melted in her sweaty hands.

“Ms. Sera Skau, please come on in!” the doctor finally announced, when she was ready to take off.

She stepped into his office, a little bigger than the waiting room, but with the same strange pictures and the same green wall color, which looked more like shiny plastic than paint. He pointed her to sit down in a chair opposite his small desk.

“So this is your monthly visit, Sera?” he said and smiled, showing an unnaturally white set of teeth. He had dimples and looked otherwise like a friendly person behind his glasses and beige coat.

She nodded to his question.

“I see you haven’t been here for a while,” he said reading the small computer screen in front of him.

“I went home over the summer vacation,” she answered.

“Yes, but since that. You are supposed to report as soon as you get into the city,” he said and looked at her with concern from over his glasses and the computer screen.

“Well, in that case we better do a thorough examination now and give you an extra shot.”

“One is enough, doctor. Thank you,” she answered.

He didn’t answer and got up from the desk and walked over to her, when he began to do an examination of her eyes, throat, ears and glands.

“Have you had any colds or aching muscles,” he asked.

“No.”

He began to take her pulse and she felt his cold hands. He used a small apparatus, which he also placed in front of her heart.

“Please, lift your shirt, so I can examine your breast.”

She lifted her shirt and showed her naked skin to the doctor. His cold hands filled her with dread.

“Have you had sexual intercourse regularly?” he asked, with his hands still on her skin.

“No,” she answered numbly.

He finished the examination of her breasts and stomach, mumbling a ‘fine’ to himself.

“What about your bowel movements? Pretty regular?” he asked as he went back to his desk and started writing.

She nodded again.

“Loose or firm?”

“Firm.”

“What about exercise?”

“I only exercise at home.”

“There are gyms available to the public, you know. You need to higher your oxygen intake.”

“Yes,” she answered.

“I will give you an extra dose of the booster, just to be on the safe side.”

The doctor got up again and walked over to a small table where a number of different medical supplies had been placed. He opened a cupboard above the table and took out a number of different colored bottles. He took a large syringe and filled it with the different contents, measuring with care the amount going into it. Then he came back to the desk and looked at Sera.

“It won’t take long, just look at me. We put the booster into the muscle tissue so there is not the same kind of pain involved with it,” the doctor said and entered her arm with the syringe.

Sera looked at the green walls and thought of something that could distract her from the painful feeling of being invaded.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it Sera? Now, I want you to come back in a month exactly. I want to know if the booster has helped you.”

Sera nodded and pulled her arm to her. It was bleeding slightly from where he had entered her skin. She couldn’t tell him that the reason why she hadn’t come until now was that she didn’t like coming. She couldn’t tell him that she didn’t plan on coming again unless there was an emergency.

Sera could hear the train coming from far away in the tunnel. She ran down the last stairs and found a place in the crowd, before the train doors opened. She sat down on the first available seat she could find. The running had taken away her breath and she sat for a while trying to recover. Her lungs were very slowly filling up with air, rattling as if full of mucus. She thought of the doctor's inadequate advice and the different substances he had filled her with.

"Are you all right?" a man's voice asked beside her.

She looked up startled. She had become accustomed to the silent faces. No one had talked to her on the trains before. He looked youthful. He wore a red, thin cotton jacket, which reminded her of something; her eyes lingered at it for a while, trying unsuccessfully to capture a memory that fluttered before her like a butterfly.

"It's just the air, it seems like there isn't enough of it." She still breathed heavily, which made her speak slowly.

"I know. Let me help..."

"I'll be fine, in a minute," Sera said and tried to suppress her hyperventilation.

"I won't touch you, just close your eyes and visualize a calm breath, feel how you inhale air and then exhale slowly."

She listened to his voice, melodic and soothing, and the breathing became easier, lighter. There was something in the ring of his voice, which made her trust him.

"It helps, thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," he looked away for a moment, as if shy.

It surprised her, because he had such demure, mature lines in his face. It was hard to imagine insecurity inhabiting those lines. His eyes were dark and his skin golden like her Grandpa Mihai, who had come from Romania, before he went to Denmark and married her Grandma.

They sat in silence, while the loudspeakers announced one station after another. Sera felt time moving away from her. The further it seemed to shift, the further they rolled into the dark tunnels. She wanted to say something but nothing came to her lips, and between them, she counted how the minutes slipped away from her. Then he finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry, my name is Doru." He moved toward her and handed her his hand. It was dry and warm.

"Sera," she answered.

"Sera," he repeated contemplatively. "I like it. I have never met anyone by that name before. Are you from around here?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't think so with that beautiful hair and skin."

She blushed and smiled.

“Thank you,” she said not knowing what else would be appropriate. He looked at her seriously, watching her as if he was looking for something.

“Your breath is steady now. Breath is the main source of life. You must learn to control it better. This world doesn’t exactly make it easier for you, but there are ways ....”

She detected a fear as he glanced about, his serene eyes flickering nervously, reminding her of sunlight dancing on still deep water.

<beyond the fires of the earth that keep us trapped in matter and anger, there is a place where water and air move as freely as light penetrates the darkness behind the grates>

Sera sighed deeply; she knew what that place felt like as if she had had a recollection of something very familiar, but she didn't know what it was.

“Maybe one day I can show you....”

“190”, the loudspeaker announced.

“My stop,” she said disappointedly.

“Mine too,” he said and smiled.

When they stepped out into the hot, dark air, she could feel the walls sucking her into the dark passages, like Jonah when he was swallowed by the whale.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

She panicked for a moment. *How do I know?* She thought.

“I live on the eastside of the station,” she said, ensuring herself she was out of danger.

“I live on the north side, but I’ll walk you home if you like. These passage ways are not particularly pleasant.”

“Thank you, but I’ll be all right. I don’t mind the dark at all,” she tried to avoid his gaze, but he was standing opposite her on the deserted platform, looking at her.

She was afraid, he would become self-assertive like some men did, but he remained calmly smiling. Above them a bulb was flickering, dying, but it desperately held onto the little light that was there. She thought she saw his face laughing, but couldn’t hear the sounds of laughter and didn’t understand at what he would be laughing. She didn’t remember having told a joke. Then his face was serious again, his dark beard made it look sharp and fiery. He started walking slowly, his footsteps echoing under the low, arching ceilings.

“Maybe some other time?”

Sera realized that she might not see him again and felt nauseous.

“Maybe,” she said hesitantly.

They reached the turnstiles and ran their ID-cards through the slits and pushed the metal poles, which

gave off a click. Her hand on the cold metal, suddenly made her feel alive, pulsating of life, unafraid of the cold that she knew was outside the Underground walls, which could seep through the soil, bricks, metal and wood, perhaps. Something as tangible as the cold reminded her of the sky, the winds and the cool rain. How much joy the simple rain could bring her.

“This is it. I enjoyed talking to you. I hope I will see you again, soon.”

He gave her his hand and squeezed it lightly, but she just stood immobile like a statue. She accepted his hand but was too numb to feel its warmth or kindness.

“Here is my number,” he said and looked around. “I’m a...teacher. I could teach you about breathing. It would be my pleasure,” his smile was careful, but she still thought he was laughing.

“Thanks,” she mumbled and took off without looking back, she didn’t have to.

Somewhere right behind her, she knew he was standing smiling with those serene eyes. Were they gloating or gleaming?

Walking along the cold cement walls, following the numbers, she again recalled the familiarity about him. She had seen him before, but where and when? She heard her own footsteps and once she stopped and looked back, thinking she heard other footsteps, but the place was deserted. She regretted not having accepted his offer even if the walls would hold no protection for her. They would just passively record everything that passed them. Or perhaps one day, they would open themselves up for her, if she needed rescue?

As Sera opened the door to the apartment, she could hear voices and she walked into the living room. They were sitting on the couch. There were half a bottle of wine on the table and two glasses. Selma had put up regular curtains to protect them from the sun, so there was no light coming in. A big lamp in the ceiling was supplying the room with light.

“Hi Frank. Hi Selma,” she said and sat down opposite them on a chair.

“We’re celebrating,” Selma said and smiled. “Frank is going to have his poetry published.”

“It’s not for sure yet though,” he said and gave Sera a smile of embarrassment. “But it looks like it, anyhow.”

“Congratulations, Frank. Have you guys eaten? I’m starving,” she said and got up.

She knew she should be happy for them, but she wasn’t. She felt uncomfortable being with them and wondered if they could ever be happy without the wine. They had only been apart for a week. She wanted to talk to Selma, shake the demons out of her head, but she couldn’t even make eye contact with her. She sensed that Frank stared at her secretly.

The Kali Lounge was covered by a heavy, drowsy darkness, only lit up by small candles and tiny bulbs near the ceilings hanging on the three sharp, rectangular pillars that were placed in the middle of the

lounge. They had to push their way through the crowd to get to the bar, which was the only area fully illuminated, removed from the overpowering substance of the dark. There, even the force of the music was less stupefying. Sera wished they could stay there, but the constant movements of the crowd made it very trying.

Selma and Frank had already consumed a bottle of wine at home and a couple of vodka shots in the bar. Sera never felt like drinking in the company of Selma and Frank. Looking at them made her intoxicated. She had a glass of juice. She balanced it in her hand as she moved through the crowd. Her stomach began to contract when she became aware of the bodies, pushing, squeezing, and rubbing against each other. As they went further into the room, the taste of smoke entered her nostrils going downwards first to her throat and then her lungs.

They moved steadily through the wave of people. A constant stream of loud, metallic, high beat music surged the room, wrapped everything and everyone in an airless blanket of sound. People's voices became loud whispers that were repeatedly stifled by the beats. Sera reached a point where she no longer heard the music, or the voices, all she heard was a ringing, a humming right behind her ears. She looked at her two drunken friends and regretted having let them persuade her into coming along.

"Where are we going?" Sera yelled into Selma's face.

Selma pointed toward the back of the room. She had a distant smile on her lips and was holding onto Frank's hand. Sera thought she was very beautiful, when she showed affection like she had done all night with Frank, but Sera still felt uneasy. She wondered if Doru was ever the kind of person to set foot in this pot. She was sure that the serenity of his eyes would drown in this world and turn into tears.

They found a small table, and sat down and took off their light jackets. Even though it was late fall and probably cold and windy outside, there was no need for winter clothes in the Underground, the deeper you went, the warmer it became.

"I need to talk to you, Selma," Sera spoke into her ear.

"Can't it wait?"

"I need some advice from you. I met someone on the train. I'd like to see him again. What would you do?"

"Don't worry so, if you like him. Meet him in a public place and you'll be fine. New York is the safest place in the world as long as you stay in the Underground," Selma said and laughed heartily. Her eyes were gleaming in the darkness like a cat's.

Frank was looking at them. From his facial expression it was obvious he couldn't hear what they were talking about. He smirked as if he thought they were being sexy. For a moment, Sera thought she saw tears running down his face and began to worry about the strange, airy things she was seeing.

They left her to go to the bathroom. Sera looked at her juice and took a sip. She tried not to look at people around her, afraid of being spotted out by some guy, who wouldn't leave her alone. She knew if she

hid, pretended she wasn't there, she could be safe. When Selma and Frank came back, their eyes were shiny and pupils huge. They giggled and kissed constantly. They saw or heard nothing other than themselves.

Sera felt nauseous and needed to get some air. The humming in her ears was getting worse, and it was beginning to get harder for her to breathe. She walked to the bathroom. There was a long line of women outside, all in short, black, golden or brown outfits and each of them carrying small handbags. They all looked alike, short and skinny, with a crew cut. A short guy, with an excessive red dye, sticky eyes, wearing thick cotton jeans and a sweatshirt, approached her with a smirk.

"You look unhappy, girl. I can help, you know."

He studied her as if she was a sculpture on display, moving his eyes and face back and forth to get all angles of her.

"It's the living in the dark. It gets at you, I know. I like you. Look at that beautiful hair," he said and ran a finger through it while he stepped around her. "You are special, your colors glow, Babe. I'll give you a special price. I have the blue, the pink, and the striped ones."

She looked at the little man, making his little dance around her. First, she had been taken aback by his seeming openness, but then she quickly realized he was selling something.

"No, thank you," she said.

"You sure, Babe? It's hot stuff. It'll make the world a brighter place. You like the sky?"

Sera nodded. She knew the sky so well. It had so many colors, so much endless space.

"You like the sky? When was the last time you saw it? This is the sky," he said and pointed at his pocket.

"No, thank you," she said again, thinking it was funny to think of the sky in a small pill. The sky was least of all an object.

He smirked for a brief moment, but didn't persist. Then, to her relief, he quietly disappeared.

In the muffled quietness of the bathroom, as she sat down on the toilet letting out the little urine she had, she felt, for a moment, at peace. There was only a slight ringing in her ears. It was then she decided to go home.

## VI. Doru's Hands ... Sera's Dance

A heavy scent of flowers hit her, when Sera came through the glass doors, and she imagined the fields and meadows where they grew near trees and streams. The restaurant had its name for a reason; in between and on the tables, in corners and hanging from the ceilings, there were flowers. The red bud-like bulks of the Chrysanthemum's flowers rested in its ring of leaves, the sweet smelling petals of blue and purple violets sprung out among its heart shaped leaves, the softness of rose petals in red, white and yellow with their long thorny legs coming up from soil or water sweetened the air, the yellow delicate daffodils and strong, stoic tulips, and the sweet blue, purple, and lavender hyacinths with their heavy overweight abundance of flowers embraced the room from their round underground parts. The elegant, linear lines of the purple and white flesh of the irises opened themselves like a woman one layer after another, and rising from the floors from their large red, purple, pink or white flowers, the bush-like rhododendron trees filled the air with a strange blooming coolness.

Inside the restaurant, she noticed a more organized sense of busyness than outside in the markets and shopping areas where people ran around in confusion, filling out their lunch breaks with small errands. The waiters walked back and forth with an elegance and composure as if the food on the plates, they carried, were sacred offerings in a temple.

She stayed near the entrance, trying to avoid the attention of the waiters, so she could wait while she indulged herself in the many sensual impressions of the place. Apart from the flowers, the place was famous for its special 'porthole', which was one foot thick, transparent glass located in the ceiling of the restaurant. In the daytime, the sun would shine through and cast a veil of light, unfamiliar and strange to most people from the Underground. At night, if the weather permitted it, the stars and the moon would appear with overwhelming clarity to any curious onlookers. The legendary city night-lights of Manhattan that had been said to be burning incessantly were now a picture in a dusty, old book.

This was the only place in town, she knew of, where people could finally get a sense of the comings and goings of the light outside. Below the surface of the soil in the Underground, there was always lights on, not soft and soothing like the rays of the sun, but cold and sharp, surrounded by a warm, drowsy darkness, which seeped out of the train tunnels like a perfume, luring and too sweet.

She pressed the back of her head against the wall and closed her eyes, imagining the light of the sun on her, drawing her into something warm and kindling. She quickly opened her eyes and looked around,

afraid that he would walk past her, overlook her after all this waiting. It no longer seemed real that she had called him, and he was coming. Her sense of reality had shifted. Very easily, she could walk through those doors again, and nobody would ever know she had been there. It would all just have been like a warm dream. Nothing would have happened, and she wouldn't have to report anything to Selma, who, by the time, she had sobered up, had changed her mind about Sera's date.

"Have you gone completely out of your mind? He sounds like a loony to me! Even though this is a respectable city, and all that, there are a lot of people out there who do too many weird drugs and what is worse. That stuff can make you crazy."

But by then it was too late, Sera had already called him and she had been looking forward to the rendezvous. They were meeting for a cup at the Violet Gardens by Times Square, the best public place she could think of. The area was always busy, full of restaurants, shops, and trains.

She moved her feet up and down like a little child examining and trying out a new pair of shoes, checking their flexibility. She would wait a while longer. She couldn't wait to look through the window and maybe the sun, if the sky was clear.

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Somebody had fallen in one of the green waiting areas further up the platform, had been pushed and stepped on when the train doors opened and people forced their way through. Doru had been walking in the other direction, but something had caught his attention, and he walked back. It was a boy, maybe nine years old, and a rarity in the Underground. Usually children were taken out of the city, and brought up in boarding schools or old monasteries in parts of the country, where they could still walk under the sky and breathe the air. He had serious abrasions on his knees and he was clearly shaken from the fall, maybe he had a concussion. He was lying on his back. A few people, who had encircled him, were staring ruthlessly at him. An elderly woman was bent over the small body, but it was clear that she didn't have a clue.

"Somebody call the Keepers," an agitated voice cried out.

*I hope, I have enough time before they show up,* he thought and moved faster.

"What is a kid doing here anyway? Who let him in?" another man grumbled. "The world is out of joint," he added to himself.

"Oh, shut up!" a woman cried out. "He's just a boy. Maybe he got lost."

"But they don't belong here! They should go back to their schools!" another woman said.

He walked through the small crowd and the woman got up automatically, as if obliged by his determination. He sat down and took the boy's pulse, while he examined his eyes, face and skin. The pulse was fine. Then he prepared himself to ignore the crowd, which was following his every move with a merciless and sinister glare. He concentrated his body on becoming a healing channel by focusing on his

breath, the energy pouring out of his hands, and his Anahata chakra, spinning round and round. He finally opened up, put his hands on the boy's shoulders and started spreading white light energy into the boy. Afterwards, his fingers moved over the boy's skin, without touching it, he saw within where the broken pathways were located.

"Close your eyes," he said softly to the scared blue eyes, which were staring at him. "You'll be all right."

He began from the bottom, from the boy's feet, moving up his legs, over his knees where he stopped and streamed color energy into the chakras. He touched all the chakras lightly and poured the right color energy into them, some he lingered with for longer than others. He stopped for the longest time at his forehead. The boy didn't appear to have a concussion, but was seriously shaken from fear. It seemed as if the boy wasn't sure what had happened and where he was.

"You need some serious nutrition, but that's not a problem. It's going to be all right, just keep your eyes closed and focus on getting well. I'm here to help you," he said as softly as he could.

The boy was all relaxed now and his limbs at ease. Doru was worried about his head though and didn't feel he could just leave him there. Then again, he sensed the gaping eyes surrounding him in the circle, watching him like vultures.

"Will you please mind me," he said in a harsh voice and lifted the boy into his arms. The boy was surprisingly light for a tall nine-year-old body.

"This is an emergency, excuse me."

He didn't know the network in the Times Square area very well, but assumed that he would find one of the exit doors. He walked to the opposite end of the exits of the platform.

"Now, we say a little prayer to our protector, focus all your energy on the top of your head, my boy," he whispered to the boy and himself.

He walked in a steady pace. No one was following them, but he knew that they were watching. If only the darkness could enclose them like a heavy, impenetrable veil and hide away the traces of their presence.

He then remembered an old door that was once used by the rail workers, now by MOSA people. Some of them lived in the catacomb-like rooms that had been constructed centuries ago, when they built the rail tracks and Underground networks. He had to get onto the rails in order to get to it. They reached the end of the platform.

"This is not going to be easy boy, but it's best we avoid the Keepers."

Doru looked at the frightened eyes that stared at him, trying to grasp. *Is he afraid of me or them?*

"What brought you so far from home?" he asked.

The boy remained silent. Doru looked back at the other end of the platform. People were waiting around, some still looking at the odd couple that was moving out of the picture.

"Can you stand on your feet?"

The boy stood, but his movements were slow.

“We’ll have George take a look at you. You’ll like him better, I’m sure. Now, can you climb through this crack? We have to be quick before the next train comes. Can you be a clever boy?” he tried to be soft spoken, so that the boy would know he could trust him. If the boy would have second thoughts, they would both be in trouble, when the Keepers appeared. The boy looked back.

“What’s your name?”

“Hans,” the boy said in a whisper.

“Sounds like a European name. Okay, Hans. Let’s go. You follow me.”

He had to force himself through the crack, which gave way with his body weight. He came through and landed with a bang on the side of the rail. He could hear and feel the ground move a little under him, his shoes scraped on gravel and dirt, but he couldn’t see anything. The tunnel was completely swathed in darkness. It took him some time to find his sense of direction. The silence of the darkness made the few pebbles under his feet sound like rocks falling. Then he saw the light coming through the crack and Hans’ leg moving. He reached out his arm and touched the leg to get as close as possible to the boy, afraid that else he would lose him.

“You’re not afraid of the dark, are you?” he said playfully.

It was he, not the dark, the boy had reservations with.

Hans slipped through easily and stood on the small ledge. He caught him in his arms and smelled the sweat of fear, unsure whether it was his own or the boy’s. *The door*, he thought. *Protector of all beings reach out your merciful arms.*

He held Hans close to his chest so that they wouldn’t get hit if a train did decide to show up. He could feel their hearts beating, his calmer than the boy’s, but slowly they fell into the same beating pattern.

“That’s good. Now, we just have to find a door, it’s heavy and black, not that its color makes any difference here,” he whispered to avoid the echoing dark.

He hoped that somehow his voice would calm and guide them. As he walked very carefully, he tried to open his third eye to see through the layers of darkness that stung in his eyes. But there was too much fear in him. It was so different to be in the dark, holding this little being. The danger was so much greater. It was no longer a matter of him and his survival. Something more was at stake. Beyond him. He touched the damp, greasy walls with his free hand, the other held firmly onto the boy’s body.

“We must be there soon.”

He felt something with a dry coldness to it. It was hard metal, much smoother than the bricks and soil. Hans started crying, and his sobbing was greeted by what sounded like wounded animals coming out of the tunnel. Hans stopped for a little while, listened and then continued crying. His body was still in Doru’s arms. Doru started knocking on the door frantically. In the distance they heard a train approaching. After just a moment of knocking, which seemed to go on for a long time with the boy’s

sobbing face making his chest and neck wet, something happened.

“Hello,” he finally heard behind the door.

“It’s Doru from MOSA,” he yelled twice to the door and was hit by echoing sounds from every side that resembled the cries of gorillas.

In the dark behind them, a train was starting up, moving its engine like the roar of an angry bear. Since the trains were being fully controlled by computer chips now, there was no longer any reason to have lights on, so they couldn’t see it. When the door opened, Doru and Hans fell through it, having leaned up against it. Just on the other side of the door, a train passed by drowsily, unaware.

A big, tall man with a long, black beard, bushy eyebrows and jet-black hair helped them on their feet. They were in a wide, light corridor. Light was coming from deep shafts in the ceilings, and fell in blocks, warm and yellow, filling up some of the corridor.

“That was close, mate. Are you okay?” the man asked.

Doru nodded.

“Who’s the boy?” he asked and observed Hans, who leaned up against the closed door, his eyes staring at the beams. At first, he was too preoccupied to notice having been talked about, but when he realized, he looked down at the floor, afraid to meet the big man’s attentive eyes.

“I found him on the platform, terribly shaken up and he possibly has minor injuries. His head needs to be examined. Maybe if George has time, he can have a look. I think, he’s a run-away. I don’t blame the poor kids. His name is Hans,” he said and directed his voice to the boy, softening it as much as he could.

He hadn’t spent much time around kids, not even as a kid, but he knew the powers of the energy of the voice. Teaching had taught him many things.

“Hans, I want you to go with Kind Bear. He’ll show you to a nice place where you can rest and then you may decide what you want to do. You’re always welcome here with us!”

“Here!” Hans replied.

He had been listening, and looked at Doru with curiosity.

“Yes, you’ll see. It’s a nice place with water, lots of lights, and soft couches.”

The boy got up and they moved down the corridor, all three of them, Hans following just behind the two men. They passed small cement-walled cubicles down the corridor; some of them were uninhabited, others furnished by mattresses, books, papers, chairs, candles and in some of the bunkers, light bulbs had been installed. In the light, Doru could see why he weighed so little. He was only skin and bones in his scarce clothing and his eyes were big and heavy. It was only in the light of the hallways that his eyes seemed to take on some color and life. It wasn’t an easy life this boy had had, but seeing the curiosity and openness of the boy, as they walked down the corridor, transformed the little man back into a boy.

“I need to get to the center of Times Square. Can you take me there? I’m running very late for an appointment.”

Kind Bear smiled at Doru and winked.

"It's always the same story with you. I think it's the Romanian blood. It's never just ten minutes. I never understand how you manage to keep your ladies, when they have to wait so much."

Doru shrugged his shoulders absentmindedly in reply.

He led Doru through a couple of corridors, the boy following right behind, until they came to another door, where they stopped. Kind Bear gave him further instructions and turned to walk back.

"Go with light in your heart always, my friend," Kind Bear said and smiled softly. "I will take care of Hans, and we hope to see you at the center soon."

On the wall next to her, there was a life-like painting of a window looking into a field and a forest. Her face was leaning against the frame of the window, which she seemed to look out of, while a golden light, from somewhere above, fell on her pale, sharp cheeks.

*I've been here before...*, Doru thought to himself and felt ease inside.

"Excuse me, I think you've taken the seat that was meant for a lovely woman I'm meeting here."

She looked up, startled as if waking from a dream. When she recognized his face, she smiled and blushed a little.

"I'm sorry, I'm late," she answered. "I almost fell asleep in the rays of the sun."

She pointed to the window in the ceiling in the middle of the restaurant. It was blue outside. Blue was a rare color in these parts of the world. *Blue and golden*, he thought, *like at the ocean*.

"I got caught up with urgent work," he said and sat down opposite her. "I'm glad to see you again, Sera. Thank you for waiting."

He wanted to reach out for her, touch and feel her energy. He sensed it would be blissful with his.

"I was glad that I had a good excuse to sit here. I love this place. What would you like to have?" she asked and looked at the menu card. "They have cappuccino. It's not great, but it's the only place I know they have it."

She looked up, expecting a response. Her eyes were open, vulnerable. When she realized he was staring at her intensively, she blushed and looked almost sad or scared.

"Are you thirsty or hungry?" he asked.

"Not really. Why? Sera asked.

"Then I'd like to show you a place," he got up and reached out his hand to her. She looked at it for a short moment, took her bag and jacket from the chair and got up too, but didn't touch his hand.

"Okay," she said and they walked through the restaurant. The waiters stopped up and looked at them as they plodded past them, he tall, his body raised proudly, wearing his red jacket and blue pants, she short and thin, slightly bent over, following his steps wearing an elegant long, Bordeaux red dress with a matching, short suit.

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He was so quiet seated beside her; and it seemed that the rest of the passengers, nodding their faces with the rolling motions of the train, had all entered a collective realm of contemplation. She felt Sera had to say or do something. The silence made her nervous.

“So where are we going?” she tried again, beginning to feel a little uneasy about the ordeal of being taken to a mysterious place. She felt she had broken the main rule, not to let him control the date.

“I want it to be a surprise,” he said and smiled self-assured.

They were on the train to Inwood. She started imagining what he was plotting, what most men were always plotting according to the women she knew, and it made her uneasy. Their voices darted through her head.

“Maybe it’s better I go home. I didn’t plan on this being a whole day’s excursion,” she spoke softly. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

He didn’t say anything for a while, and then when he spoke it was very lightly, his voice scarcely audible to anyone else but her.

“I’m taking you somewhere which the sun touches, because I noticed you seem to be fond of it and it suits you. Most people here don’t even appear to care for it anymore. They feel protected and that’s enough for them. Protection and security. I believe there is much more to life, and I want to show you somewhere special,” he had his face close to hers, almost touching.

His lips spoke to her skin, and she could smell his skin, a soft, light fragrance, which reminded her of something familiar.

“Promise, you won’t be scared, will you? Please trust me. I think, you know you can trust me, if you listen to yourself, but, of course, you are insecure.”

First, she was angry because of his arrogance, and wanted to say something. Then she noticed that a change in her breathing had occurred. It was now deeper and fuller. She felt warmth spreading in her limbs and torso, which bewildered her. How could she trust a stranger, and yet why couldn’t she reject him? She felt she had to come up with an answer, his eyes attentive and anticipatory.

“Okay, then,” she said and sighed. “Show me the place”, she added and looked him into his eyes. *I dare you*, she thought. And it seemed that he had no reactions to her offensive glance. He just let it in, to the place behind the walls of skin, bones, and arteries.

“Sera, I would never force my will onto any person, let alone a woman like you. I know your fear and doubt. I see and recognize it in many women here. A woman is protected if she stays alone but within a crowd. But without risking something we will never grow or gain anything.”

His words entered her like a hypnotizer’s. Although, something annoyed her about him, perhaps the

serious tone of his voice, she felt herself falling inside her mind, through webs and intricate patterns of strings holding onto each other. She was letting go of something she had held onto for very long.

The train stopped at “190” and they went out. He took her hand in his. She let him and felt the gentleness of his skin. His hand was warm like the air in the street tunnel, and vibrant like rays of sun on her skin. He took her to the opposite end of the exits, to an old closed down iron sliding door where parts of the rusty iron had cracked, and led her through. If she had been much bigger, she might have got stuck in the crack, but luckily that didn't happen, her dress didn't even catch onto the rusty metal. On the other side, there was very little light, but she could make out that the place had been abandoned for many years. Rocks, concrete and dirt were everywhere and every time she stepped on it, she started, afraid of what it might be. She thought about Ea's attic, the smells and boxes, the fear of something unknown waiting for her in the dark, when she wasn't paying attention. They walked through a narrow corridor, went through a heavy door, and then he started climbing a set of stairs. When she finally realized, they were going up and out, she stopped following him. He turned around and smiled.

“It's not far. If you like we'll put on some of the old masks from the catastrophes. They're up there,” he said and pointed toward the end of the stairs.

When he was out of sight, she became worried and looked around her. She felt like running away, so that she wouldn't have to face him or what lay beyond the stairs. When she slowly began to steer back, he came down the stairs, carrying two masks.

“They are a little dusty, but they still work.”

She blew off the dust, making sure she didn't inhale any of it or get it in her eyes. She looked at the two peepers and the terrifying insect-like mouthpiece, which stared back at her. He had put on his and started helping her. It felt uncomfortable on her face, as if it prevented her from breathing, and it took a while before she got used to the heaviness it inflicted on her breath.

He lifted up his and spoke, “like you can feel, it's impossible to speak with it on, so you have to make sign language. Watch out for the sun, the rays are strong. Just follow me closely. I know where we are going. You are not afraid, are you?” he looked amused behind the grave appearance of his mask.

The light was overwhelming and first hit her like a heat wave even under the chilliness of the wind. Her light Underground clothing wasn't made for windy weather conditions, let alone snow, rain, or frost. She immediately put her hands in her pockets to protect them from the cold and the rays. She breathed with difficulty, still unfamiliar to the mask and afraid of what she might inhale.

He walked in front of her with a grace and confidence that only someone who knew where he was going would have. Instead of reassuring her, it made her uneasy. But when she started looking around her, she became absorbed instead by the strange, chimerical world around her. The streets were deserted,

totally stripped of any human-made materials, not even a piece of newspaper or a can lay on the sidewalks. It was like the desert after a storm, everything had been swept away and left was the ground; a dry, cracking asphalt, which had been penetrated by strange weeds or other growths. In some places, trees had pierced through the barren concrete and grew in the middle of the streets. All windows and doors on the buildings were black and shut, some even covered with wood or whatever seemed to have been available at the time, as if people had frantically wanted to protect themselves against some evil power, forcing its entrance on everything that was vulnerable, penetrable and visible.

She followed him down a smaller street, and they entered what looked like a huge park whose pathways and lawns now were overgrown with all kinds of weeds and oddly looking trees, some with very little resemblance to plants she had seen at home. In spite all, the plants had insisted on growing and mutations in colors, sizes and shapes had happened; the lush greens was almost non-existent, and every plant stayed as low as possible to the soil, far away from the strong light.

They climbed a set of steep stairs and the breathing through the mask became harder. She had to slow down while he relentlessly walked on. She wanted to yell for him to stop, as she watched him getting further and further ahead, but she was afraid to take off the mask. She grabbed at a plant and tore off a leaf of its branch, waving it into the air in panic. Then she threw it at the ground, swerving obscenities behind the hard plastic, which made her sound like a wild animal in heat. After a while, she calmed down and started walking again, now her thoughts plead for him to wait for her. She couldn't bear the thought of being left behind.

The steady and determined walking warmed her up and the brisk wind, which increased the further she came up, didn't bother her anymore. Birds were chirping away in places, but she couldn't see them anywhere. The further up she walked, the more bewildered she was that this world was real, possible for them to enter, two people. There were no crowds, no noisy trains, no dark corridors, just lively light, greens, birds and the dry cracking asphalt. She couldn't believe that no one else had found it before, and she wondered with horror-stricken curiosity, if there were other living creatures inhabiting the space.

He was waiting for her at the end of the many stairs, which went in a zigzag course, further and further up. He saw her, and pointed toward an abandoned building half of it piles of bricks and rocks, a graveyard of the past. When they came closer, she noticed it resembled parts of an old, medieval castle she had seen pictures of in the old books her grandmother had collected from her time in Denmark. She determined excitedly that it had to be the medieval place she had heard about. The dread and weariness had now been exchanged by the excitement of being on an expedition to unexplored territories.

He took her hand, and they walked into the remains of the building. The silence around them was only disturbed by their breathing through the sweaty masks, the twittering of birds, and the wind playing with the leaves. They walked through a long corridor with high vault ceilings, still withstanding the passings of time. Whereas the rest looked like it had been altered beyond recognition. The firm and

stubborn granite stonewalls, enclosing around them like otherworldly monuments, had miraculously surpassed what most substances of the world couldn't, when uncared for and left to slowly deteriorate. She noticed light, coming from an oval window at the end of the corridor. It spread like liquid oozing onto the dusty, stone floor and the solid walls of the place. A misty, fragrant light.

At the end of the corridor a set of stairs led them further up into a half open space. In places, the remains of a roof and other stories of the building still lingered, reluctant to collapse like the other walls and rooftops, now serving as resting places for birds and other animals. They had to walk through piles of rocks and bricks, old furniture and disfigured substances. He still held her hand, watching her and waiting to help her climb obstacles. First, they passed through a round room, where the contours of the bending walls still remained, then onto another corridor. She looked through an opening to a part of the building whose granite walls had also remained. Sunlight fell through a window onto the floor of a chapel. They walked along an accessible path in the turmoil of bricks, dust and ancient broken stones. At the end of the corridor, she saw another chapel constructed with marble and sandstone. A broken, headless limestone figure stretched its arms out in a last attempt to embrace the remains of a forgotten world. A couple of pews still remained in the otherwise ruined space. She ran her fingers along the edge of the soft wood. A thick layer of dust spilled onto her fingers. She brushed it off with her other hand. The speckles flew into the air, catching the glare of the rays, glittering.

They walked on, past a square piece of open garden. On the other side, the ceiling of another room had remained fairly intact. It was unusually shaped, arching like a bridge, in a vault-like fashion. There were pillars to support its round, soft curves and a glassless window; a slim oval-shaped hole in the wall was looking out onto a river. She wondered about all the small details that had been put into this kind of architecture. Totally unnecessary for functionality, but bringing such power and beauty to the space, even in the bare ruins of it. What made people chose squares instead of round shapes? Was it merely a question of economy?

Doru walked on in his own tempo. He had let go of her hand, as she lingered to look closer at everything. She walked to the oval window and stared directly into the moving element beneath her, which pulled in her body like a magnet, lulling her into a state of rest. Soft and yet strong enough to cut through earth, it carried with it the kind of energy slippery emotions and dreams were made of. Like with the travelings of the soul, water was too fluid to be grasped, and yet it would have solidity inside a vessel.

At the end of the corridor surrounding the square garden, they walked through another room and down a staircase. She had to watch her steps; in places it was hard to see where to step, as light didn't fall on the enclosed stairs. At the bottom, she saw light pouring in through three stained-glass windows onto a tombstone placed in the middle of another small chapel. She lingered and Doru stopped to take her hand again. There was urgency in his movements. Though the mask was heavy and hard to get comfortable with, she was beginning to cherish this journey, its stimulation so wondrous to her mind.

They came through another room and through a door into an open garden terrace, beyond it were park and a better view of the river, rising blue and strong. Just as she had imagined it would look like from what George had told her. It was one of the few tidal rivers in the world where salt and fresh water merged into one. There were four pear trees in the center of the garden, surrounding them a few plants here and there. Though the season had long past, the trees were still heavy with untouched fruits; the air filled with their abundant sweetness and drunken ripeness, as she entered the garden.

Beyond the open herb garden, another enclosed area appeared with the same kind of covered passages running around an open square garden. These grounds still had solid walls round its outer sides, its ceilings carried by pillars, shading the sun, and rows of arches with columns along its inner sides. It was formed like a convent passage similar to the one they had walked through on the upper floor. Some of the artful crafts of the stone benches and pillars were still visible, and in the middle of the cloister, in the small roofless yard rested a fountain. She let go of his hand again and walked over to the waterless fountain and saw the remains of a little angel boy, his wings broken, his face distorted, but his hands still holding onto an urn where water once would have flowed through. She had seen him in her daydreams. The little angel boy.

She turned around to look back at him; he sat on one of the benches under the shade of the roof, his eyes closed and legs in a cross-legged position. He looked peaceful. She wanted to thank him for bringing her. She had never been so happy to see a place before. It felt like returning home after a long, stressful journey. She touched the boy's head carefully, the stone felt solid and warm on her fingers. Here in the sun, protected from the unfamiliar chills of the wind by the walls, she felt comfortable and free.

She stepped in front of him and studied his calm face, like a Buddha statue it had that contemplative, joyful smile. She felt like touching him or saying something, pulling him away from the inner silence into her space. Then she realized with piercing dread that he had taken off his mask. She started shaking his body in frenzy. *It has to be a mistake. It is only a dream*, she thought. *We aren't going to die.*

He opened his eyes slowly, his face laughing at her, as if scorning her and letting her fall deeper into that hole in her chest. Not knowing what to do.

"Calm down, Sera or you'll give both of us a heart attack."

His voice was calm, but also a little irritated, not the voice of a dying man. She was angry with him, but she let go of his body, her arms dropped as if they suddenly had lost their strength.

"That was the next thing, I wanted to show you. I've been testing the air and I think it's clean enough..." he said and looked at her, the whites of his eyes suddenly showing.

He put his fingers to his throat as if he was choking on the air. She went into panic again, searching with her eyes for his mask. Her screams, muffled by the mask, sounded like moans. When she got the mask, he was sitting calmly, smiling.

"You really don't trust me. I'm sorry. I couldn't resist. I guess it wasn't that funny."

She was furious. How dared he? Who did he think he was to treat her like this? She felt like hitting him, putting all her anger into the strokes, but behind the mask she felt inhibited, because she knew he couldn't see her anger. When he started laughing, his eyes glowing in the shade of the cloister, she gave in and felt a sudden relief in feeling the laughter moving its way from her stomach to her mouth. Behind the mask her laughter sounded like a lament.

"Sera, I come here often."

He stopped laughing and, with a serious look on his face, said:

"I wanted to show you this place. I thought you might love it too. Sometimes, I think the air up here is cleaner than what they give us in the Underground."

*How do you know?* She wanted to ask him.

"You look so silly with that on," he pointed at the mask.

Her hands automatically ran to hold onto the mask and he moved his hand away from her.

"You can at least sit down," he said and smiled to her. "Or we can go back if you like?"

She shook her head and sat down next to him. He took her hand in his and held it there. They sat for a long time in the quietness of the pillars and ancient stones. The light fell in between the shadows of the pillars and moved slowly to the spot where they were sitting, hand in hand, looking stealthily at each other.

"You know one day," he said suddenly, breaking the silence and undoing the straps of her mask. "This city will enjoy air and light again and maybe this time we'll take better care of life. Maybe we will finally realize that without compassion and love, we destroy ourselves slowly. That was what the great masters came here to teach us, but it's been so many life times and we still haven't grown. Now, we have to teach ourselves. We must realize that it's our own responsibility."

She didn't move, just listened and felt his hand relieving her of the tight mask, which now seemed to pull her away from life rather than supporting her to stay alive. When she awkwardly swallowed the first breath of air, she thought it tasted like some salty substance, and began to cough violently, tears springing from her eyes. *I'm going to die*, she thought.

"It's all right. It's the fear that's controlling you. Take in as little as possible to begin with. You are hyperventilating, my love. Imagine your breathing is liquid and you take it in like sweet nectar. It's the vital force of your being. Every breath is sacred."

"I'm afraid," she whispered in between sobs, her breathing calmer now.

"I know," he whispered back and held her hand, his eyes watching her with concern, reassuring her of a sense of safety. His attention filled her up like a drug she couldn't get enough of.

"Breathe in all the way to your diaphragm, feel it lifting."

He put his hand on her lower stomach.

"The air is good, it's life giving. Breathe out all of those toxins, which inhabit your body, the

frustrations and anxieties, feel that you become calmer within.”

After a while she calmed down. She could suddenly hear and feel her breathing. It did feel like an invigorating liquid that filled her with joy. He gently moved her to face him on the stone bench.

“Try to sit with your legs crossed,” he said amiably.

They both crossed their legs and he took her hands in his, forming a small closed cycle.

“I want to share something with you. Close your eyes for a while, still your mind, and tell me what you feel, afterwards.”

She saw him close his eyes and did the same. She could hear the birds singing and thought she heard water running, but knew that the fountain was dry. Then after a while she relaxed and closed out the sounds. Her thoughts were buzzing around Doru and his warm, gentle hands. It was as though the air was full of tender music, which her thoughts danced to. Then she realized it was his hands that made her feel that sensation as if they were giving her back life, the urge to dance and feel joy. The buzzing went back and forth their hands and arms, round and round in a circle.

Then her legs started hurting, unused to sitting in a cross-legged position. She opened her eyes slowly and moved a little in her position. She glanced at her watch and realized that four hours ago she had been waiting for him in the Underground. He opened his eyes too.

“You lost your focus, didn’t you?” he asserted and smiled.

“My legs,” she said and let go of his hands.

“I know they’ll get stronger. You have a good focus. How are you feeling?”

She had to think about his question, before she answered.

“Good, I think.”

“Have you ever meditated before?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Not really.”

“Well, that was your first lesson then, becoming aware of energy, how it flows in you and others. You have a forceful energy.”

She felt flattered, but didn’t really know if she was supposed to. It made her feel special, but she didn’t understand why. She got up and walked around on her sore legs. She looked back at him, he hadn’t moved at all from his seat. He looked so peaceful and comfortable on the bench surrounded by the white and red stonewalls and pillars of the place. Now that he was out of physical reach, his face occupied with important, private thoughts, he no longer looked friendly. His peace was his own and she wondered if she could be part of that space ever. He didn’t need her, would he ever? Yet the loving warmth from his smiles and hands bewildered her.

“I’d better go home now,” she knew her voice invaded a space, which was sacred, but she continued with determination. “I’m hungry and I’ve got work to do.”

As they started their walk back, a slow, drizzly rain set in. It fell softly and eerily onto their skin, bringing a cool and tranquil feel to the air. She listened to its falling. They walked side by side, the same way as they had come, through the destitute place with all of its splendid architecture, art and religious artifacts, and down the stairs through the hilly park. She saw a big, red squirrel swiftly climbing a tree, its tail hairless and long like a rat's. With the rain and the setting sun, she was getting cold again. She knew if she could only hold his hand, she would feel fine, but she was reluctant to take any initiatives. She was afraid of his lips, his arms taking hold of her, leaving her vulnerable and controlled by urges that always had seemed to her to be bigger than the mind. She strongly believed in the world of her mind, not in the body. Her mind could never be taken or violated. Her mind was her living, her future.

"Take good care, Sera," he said.

They had reached the old subway entrance. He was taking a different route home, but she would go back the same way as they had come in, through the crack. He held out his arms to give her a hug. She slipped into his arms very briefly and let go.

"Thank you for showing me around."

"I hope you had a good time. We'll talk soon, I'm sure. Take care."

She watched him walk away, and regretted that she had pulled away from his arms so quickly, that she hadn't said more, and now she had to go back to the Underground. He slipped so easily in and out of the Grounds as though it was the most natural thing to do. She still didn't know anything about him. Yet she knew his hands so well. They had moved her and made her long to dance.