

SUSAN JANE GILMAN

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Hypocrite in a Puffy White Dress*

**UNDRESS ME
IN THE TEMPLE
OF HEAVEN**



Take Me Home, Country Roads

Words and music by John Denver, Bill Danoff, and Taffy Nivert

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Also by Susan Jane Gilman

Kiss My Tiara
Hypocrite in a Pouffy White Dress

for

Bob Stefanski

my Beloved, my fellow traveler, my North Star

Author's Note

THIS IS A TRUE STORY, recounted as accurately as possible and corroborated by notes I took at the time and by others who were present. However, given the sensitive nature of what unfolded and the conditions under which many of the people in this story continue to live, I have changed the names of almost everyone unless given their permission. I have also altered distinguishing characteristics of several people—most notably of my friend “Claire Van Houten” and her family—to the extent of rendering them unrecognizable. It is my intention to protect their identity and privacy.

I've also spelled some Mandarin words the way they sounded to me at the time rather than as they're actually written.

Except for these alterations, this remains a work of nonfiction. All these events happened, and the people are real. God knows, I couldn't make this up.

—Susan Jane Gilmore

To become wise, one must *wish* to have certain experiences and run, as it were, into their gaping jaws. This is, of course, very dangerous; many a “wise man” has been swallowed.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Two Air Signs are fun to watch, like trapeze artists at the circus... Since Librans can never make up their minds, and Geminis are continually changing theirs, it's hard to know what to predict will happen in an association between them.

—Linda Goodman's *Love Signs*



Chapter 1

Kowloon

NO ONE ELSE seemed concerned when our plane took a nosedive. We banked sharply to the left, then plunged toward what looked like a tongue depressor, a tiny spit of land jutting into a titanium sea.

Our tray tables in their upright positions, our carry-ons stashed in the overhead bins, the plastic seat frames rattled violently. Below us, the earth went haywire. And yet the flight attendants remained placid at their stations. One of them was even leafing through—was that a golf magazine? The other picked at her cuticles. The plane continued plummeting. I gripped the armrests. *Dear God, we are all about to die with a splat!* Across the aisle from me, a businessman tossed his newspaper aside and yawned.

The cabin rang with the high-pitched whistle of deceleration. “Wow, check it out.” Claire leaned across me. Beyond the little oblong window, gargantuan mountains rose up wildly in the twilight; a phalanx of apartment buildings suddenly appeared. High-rises seemed to be lining the runway, providing some sort of sadistic buffer between our 747 and the peaks. They were so close, I thought I could see light fixtures silhouetted in their windows, clotheslines jiggling on their balconies. On the other side of the plane was the bay. If we didn’t land precisely, we’d careen into either the mountains or the sea.

“It’s like Scylla and Charybdis down there,” Claire laughed, spooling the cord from her headphones around her Walkman. She had majored in philosophy, so she tended to view the world through a prism of Greek mythology and nineteenth-century German depressives. The cabin began filling with the smell of sewage, jet fuel, rotting fish. Seeing my distress, she squeezed my arm. “Oh, sweetie. Relax. It’s all part of the adventure.”

There was a screaming roar; my heart went staccato in my chest. I flashed miserably on my teary-eyed parents, on my little brother back in Manhattan listening to all the record albums I’d left behind. A ribbon of asphalt swelled beneath the plane. I shut my eyes and braced myself for impact. The fuselage seemed to tear through a membrane. Everything convulsed, then shuddered, then released with an ear-splitting squeal.

We stopped. For an instant, there was silence.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the pilot said cheerily over the loudspeaker, “welcome to Kai Tak Airport.” The passengers applauded politely. I’d never heard people applaud a landing before—though to be fair, this was only the third time in my life I’d ever been on an airplane. As we taxied toward the gate, I exhaled and imagined that they were really clapping for Claire and me. Our arrival was momentous. It was unbelievable to me that we’d actually pulled it off. We were now truly here, on the other side of the earth. All that remained was for us to step out onto the glistening tarmac and into the gloriousness of our lives.

In 1986, my classmate Claire Van Houten and I decided to backpack around the world for a year. Neither of us had ever traveled independently before or been to a country where we couldn't speak the language. The farthest west I'd ever been, in fact, was Cleveland. Nonetheless, the two of us became convinced that we should not only embark on an epic journey, but begin someplace incredibly daunting and remote where none of our friends had ever set foot before. And so we decided to kick off our adventure in the People's Republic of China. At that point, Communist China had been open to independent backpackers for about all of ten minutes.

The summer after our graduation from college, we'd purchased around-the-world airline tickets, which began with a flight from New York to Hong Kong that September. By slowly plane-hopping around the waistline of the planet, we'd figured we'd circumnavigate the globe in exactly a year, returning just in time for my student loans to come due.

We had no idea, of course, of how complicated the world could be, or of our place in it, or of just how much trouble we were in for. We didn't even comprehend what it would feel like to lug water purifiers, sleeping bags, and leaden pairs of hiking boots around the globe. All we'd thought was: Hell, let's be Odysseus. Let's be Byron. Let's be Don Quixote, Huck Finn, and Jack Kerouac all rolled into one—except with lip gloss. Let's conquer the fucking world.

As we alighted from the gangway, Claire pirouetted. "Oh my God! We're in Hong Kong! Can you believe it?"

We each gave a trilling, girlish squeal—no doubt exactly as Odysseus would've done—and sashayed through passport control. We hadn't even reached the baggage claim, however, before I got a massive nosebleed.

Blood pooled in my left nostril, dripping down my face. A sweet, meaty taste filled the back of my throat. Although I'd been sure to stuff a half-pound bag of M&M's, my diaphragm, and my 913-page astrology guide, *Linda Goodman's Love Signs*, into my carry-on, it hadn't dawned on me to pack Kleenex. I found a crumpled, lint-ridden United Airlines cocktail napkin and stuck it up my nose.

"Ow." Claire winced as she drew closer. "That looks nasty. Here."

She guided me like a blind person across the concourse to the ladies' room. Thousands of women had passed through it during the day; streamers of wet toilet paper lay matted across the floor. Claire eased me down onto a dry spot near the sinks. Leaning my head back, I almost choked on my own blood.

She rummaged through her purse, pulling out the split of champagne we'd bought at the duty-free shop back in San Francisco, her Mason Pearson hairbrush, a paperback copy of *The Genealogy of Morals*. Claire was perhaps the first person to insist on bringing the complete works of Friedrich Nietzsche on a backpacking trip. But she hadn't thought to pack tissues, either—which was ironic because we'd otherwise prepared for this voyage as if it were the invasion of Normandy. The bags we'd checked were laden with no less than fourteen Berlitz phrase books, two different types of malaria pills, earplugs, first aid kits, inflatable pillows, sarongs, flip-flops, bug spray, Kwell, anti-diarrhea medicine, canteens, condoms, six Penguin literary paperback classics by authors ranging from Cervantes to Virginia Woolf, and enough tampons to last us a year.

"Stay here," she instructed, pivoting around. Even when she was exhausted, Claire moved with the discipline of the ballerina she'd once been, her feet turned out, her carriage erect, her chin elevated. With her long neck and aristocratic features, she looked like a Dutch Renaissance Madonna—albeit one in a polo shirt and pleated khakis from L.L. Bean. She had an air of certainty about her, a regal loveliness. Me, I was all breasts and flyaway brown hair and enormous, mismatched rhinestone earrings; half the time, I flounced around in black ripped-neck sweatshirts with my bra strap showing

I'd cleaned up my act for traveling, but just barely.

The ladies' room door *whooshed* open and shut. An announcement crackled over the PA in English then Cantonese. Women came in to pee and stepped around me with annoyance. I felt foolish, wildly disoriented. We'd left New York over a day ago; we'd crossed the international dateline. It was eight a.m. back home, nine p.m. here. Time had collapsed in on itself like a soufflé.

Claire returned, dragging both our backpacks. "Fuck, we overpacked," she said.

Gingerly I stood up. My reflection in the mirror was a catastrophe. The lower half of my face was caked with dried blood. It looked like a Ming vase that had been smashed, then glued back together. Claire handed me a fistful of napkins from the airport snack bar, and I cleaned myself up as best I could.

Now, if you've never really traveled before, and you've just flown over thirty-one hours in economy class—two rows up from the smoking section—to a foreign city in an upside-down, day-is-night hallucinatory time zone—and you're filthy: your mouth feels encrusted with airplane pretzels and you haven't showered in over a day—and you both have splitting headaches from dehydration and from watching endless loops of *The Goonies* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* on the minuscule screens throughout the airplane—and at least one of you has just had a massive nosebleed—and as soon as you step outside the airport, a wall of tropical humidity hits you that makes you feel as if you're standing behind the exhaust pipe of a city bus—then as a general rule of thumb, it's a good idea to take a room at a Holiday Inn for a couple of days to get acclimated.

But Claire and I would have none of this. We were determined to check ourselves directly into a shit-hole.

"I want us to be *travelers*, not pampered little tourists," she'd declared during our many phone calls that summer. "No air-conditioned buses, no idiotic tour guides, no Hilton hotels."

"Absolutely," I'd agreed, twirling the phone cord around my knuckles. "The whole point of this trip is to experience the *real* world. Stay off the beaten path entirely. Stay only in local places, eat local food. Be totally hard core and authentic."

All our lives, Claire and I had been ambitious, straight-A students who built dioramas of Aztec villages for extra credit in social studies; who recited Robert Frost poems for our parents' unsuspecting dinner guests; who took AP French in high school and edited the yearbooks and wrote honors theses in college. It wasn't enough for us to merely navigate the world on our own. Oh no. We had to prove to everyone, in the process, just how expertly and imaginatively we could do it too. Like everything else in our lives, we seemed to believe our trip was something we'd be getting graded on.

In 1986, there were no regular commercial flights between the United States and Beijing. Independent travelers had to enter China through Hong Kong. We'd purchased an obscure budget guidebook, *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring*, published by a bunch of hippies calling themselves Lonely Planet. They recommended staying in Hong Kong's Kowloon section at a place called Chungking Mansions. This was not only a great base for backpackers, they said, but a good source for information about obtaining Chinese visas and arranging transport across the border.

So that's where we decided to go. Chungking Mansions. Just the name alone appealed to our sense of adventure and romance.

"It sounds sort of gothic, doesn't it?" Claire said as we slid into the taxi with our backpacks. "Like some sort of abandoned plantation with vines growing over it?"

"Wild peacocks roaming the verandah," I suggested.

She laughed, nodding. "Shutters banging in the wind."

Until our precipitous landing at Kai Tak Airport, Hong Kong had been an abstraction to me.

Despite my education, my conception of the world at that point was about as sophisticated as a kiddie ride at a theme park. Other nations were a blur to me of strange alphabets, kitschy costumes, tiresome folk songs, and snow globes. Mostly I assumed that what made a country foreign was the degree of its deviation from the standard of America. If a country had skyscrapers, refrigerators, and televisions, I figured it was pretty much the same as the United States. If it had houses, diets, or skirts made entirely of foliage, it wasn't.

My concepts of places were nothing less than bad poems: clichés lazily cobbled together. Hong Kong, to me, was simply an abstraction—the home of cheap novelty key rings, yo-yos, see-through pencil cases. I somehow imagined we'd be sleeping in a rice paddy.

Yet when I showed our driver the address, he gunned the cab onto a wide concrete access ramp looping down into a tunnel, a serpentine of white tiles and sodium lights sucking us back and forth beneath the bay. We emerged onto a chaotic intersection that looked like a compression of Times Square, the streets claustrophobic jumbles of high-rise buildings with enormous electric billboards for Toshiba, Aiwa, Kent cigarettes. Neon signs flashed “Pearls,” “Watches,” “Lucky Peking Duck.” Whole roast pigs dangled by their ankles like lanterns in the restaurants. Buses, old cars, and motor scooters ground out bluish-black plumes of exhaust; crowds elbowed each other at crosswalks. Honking trucks, mirrored bunting: The streets had a whorish, carnival quality that defied nighttime or any semblance of order.

The driver lurched onto a huge main road with three lanes of traffic running in each direction, then came to an abrupt stop in front of an arcade full of lurid discount stores. “Okay.” He pointed to the meter. “Two hundred twenty dollar.”

Claire and I looked out the window. “What?” I leaned forward and pointed to our guidebook. “Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road.”

The driver looked at me furiously. Jabbing the page with his finger, he pointed outside. “This Chungking Mansions!” he shouted. “This Nathan Road.”

Claire rolled down the window and poked her head out. “Shit,” she said after a moment. “He's right.”

We paid him with our strange-looking Hong Kong dollars, and his cab screeched away, leaving us with our backpacks on the edge of the gutter. A sign above the arcade read: “Chungking Mansions, 304 44 Nathan Road, Kowloon.” It looked nothing like a tropical villa and everything like the Port Authority Bus Terminal back in New York City. Inside was a warren of convenience stores selling cheap electronics and knock-off designer handbags. Music blared, a drum machine punching out a bass line. Young Asian and African men in grease-stained T-shirts slithered out of a newsstand drinking beer out of brown paper bags. In an instant, they descended upon us. “You want wristwatch? For you, special price. You want guest house, come on. I show you.” The stench of sweat, urine, and frying pork was dizzying. Already, we were drenched in perspiration. The tropical air was broth. My traveler's checks and passport were strapped beneath my clothes in a money belt. It felt like a damp tourniquet, but I kept checking to make sure it was still there.

“Okay, clearly, this is not the Chungking Mansions in the guidebook,” I panted.

We were the only Westerners on the entire block, as well as the only women. With our bulging backpacks and our deer-in-the-headlights faces, we might as well have had giant bull's-eyes painted on our chests.

A Western couple emerged from the arcade.

“Excuse me.” I flagged them down. “Do you know where Chungking Mansions is?”

They looked at me as if I were mentally retarded. “Right here,” the girl sniffed, pointing to the

elevators.

~~Reluctantly Claire and I hoisted up our packs and trundled inside. Above a bank of decrepit steel elevators were plastic slats listing restaurants, massage parlors, and guesthouses in no particular order. Chungking Mansions wasn't a hotel at all, but a warehouse for transients.~~

“I don't know,” I said warily. I'd grown up in a rough inner-city neighborhood in New York. I'd gotten harassed often enough to know when something looked like a bad idea. It didn't take much imagination to see the entire filthy corridor cordoned off with yellow crime-scene tape.

Claire sighed and raked her hands through her hair. Of the two of us, she was by far the more optimistic. “Well, we won't know until we see.” She jammed the button for the elevator. “Let's start with the Lucky Guesthouse at the top. If we don't like it, we'll just work our way down till we find something.”

I tried to keep my pulse in check. Claire had been raised in New Canaan, Connecticut, in a colonnaded house with a circular driveway flanked by topiaries and a swimming pool that looked like a giant turquoise paramecium. When the Van Houtens had invited me and my family up for a little post-graduation party, their maid had greeted us at the door with a tray full of champagne and lemonade.

The door to the Lucky Guesthouse had a frosted window like an old detective agency. The proprietor sat behind a dented metal desk smoking a cigarette and staring at a television mounted high on a shelf in the corner. Two men onscreen appeared to be beating each other with sticks.

“Hello,” Claire said. I had to admit, I admired her fearlessness. She just walked right in on her long, caliper legs.

The proprietor continued staring at the TV. An electric fan whirred on his desk, making the papers flutter. The tiny room smelled like an ashtray. Somewhere a toilet flushed gaseously. “Room or dormitory?” he said gruffly.

“A room,” Claire said crisply. “With a private bathroom and two beds, please.”

The man yanked open a drawer and tossed a key at her, never once removing his gaze from the screen. “Number six,” he said. “Down hall, on right. Eighty dollars. Cash only. You pay first thing in morning.” Eighty Hong Kong dollars was roughly eleven bucks.

Claire strode down the corridor. I bumbled along behind her. Room 6 was a concrete cell with two denuded mattresses. A bare plastic lamp molded in the shape of a candlestick sputtered on the floor between them. When we tried the light switch, the overhead bulb blew out with a spark and a pop and a huge cockroach scuttled out from a crack in the ceiling.

Without a word, Claire spun around and walked back down the hall. When she dropped the key back on the desk, the manager never even took his eyes off the television.

Riding and stopping at each floor in Chungking Mansion's elevator for the next twenty minutes was like reading one of those pop-up books I'd had as a child in which you pulled open little paper flaps to reveal tiny domestic scenes behind each one. Except in this case, each time the elevator door slid open, it unveiled a tiny tableau of squalor and depravity.

On one floor, we saw an obese Chinese man sitting on the landing in a giant diaper. His hair was matted; he was masturbating, weeping, and growling like a rabid dog. On the floor below that was an empty hallway heaped with garbage, a sole lightbulb swinging overhead like a noose, the walls gouged with graffiti. On the next was a red and gold sign for a massage parlor and the sound of people fighting. Puffs of greasy, garlic-scented smoke filled the hallway in front of the Happy Family Hostess.

With each stop, our trepidation increased. But when I finally suggested we take out the credit card we had for emergencies and check into the Kowloon Holiday Inn, Claire cried, “No!”

“Please,” she said more gently, “if we check into a fancy place for one night, soon we’ll be, like, ‘Oh, let’s just stay here.’ It would be too easy. We’ve got to stay strong, okay? I promise we’ll find something, okay?”

Eventually we arrived at the Boston Guesthouse, whose name, at least, sounded promising. “Hello. Welcome. I am Mr. Chung,” said a studious-looking young man behind the counter. “Come.” He smiled extravagantly. “I have nice rooms. You want with air-conditioning or fan?”

“Air-conditioning,” we chorused wearily, our foreheads glistening. So much for roughing it.

In its previous incarnation, the Boston Guesthouse had clearly been a bathhouse; the rooms were windowless, aquamarine tiled stalls with an asterisk of a drain embedded in their floors. Each was blindingly lit by a fluorescent tube running the length of the ceiling. Tiny bathrooms were sectioned off from the beds by a shiny plastic shower curtain. A few ants scurried across the tiles, but otherwise the rooms seemed clean enough. In fact they reeked of chlorine. Air conditioners were bolted unevenly to the walls just below the ceiling. It was now almost eleven p.m. We were running out of options.

“They’re fine. We’ll take them,” Claire sighed, tucking her hair back behind her ears. She had an opalescent complexion, like milk glass; you could see the fine blue veins at her temples. In the queasy fluorescence of the guesthouse, her hair looked almost green.

We paid Chung seventy Hong Kong dollars apiece, and he handed us keys to two small, adjoining rooms. And there we were: officially ensconced in Asia.

I closed my door and dropped my backpack on the floor, the *thunk* reverberating off the tiles. I sat down on the bed. In a few minutes, Claire would come over to uncork the champagne we’d brought to toast our arrival. Yet somehow I couldn’t bring myself to move. Although the air-conditioning was on high, I couldn’t stop sweating. Perspiration bloomed in the armpits of my T-shirt, damp flowers of exhaustion.

From overhead came the sizzle of mosquitoes frying against the fluorescent bulb. I looked around. Without any windows, it was impossible to get oriented. I sat on the edge of the metal-framed bed, trying to catch my own breath.

It was the first time I’d ever been alone in a foreign country.

It didn’t feel triumphant or glorious at all.

Like most grandiose ideas, ours had begun stupidly. Claire and I had first conceived of our little adventure at four a.m. at the International House of Pancakes fifteen days before our graduation from Brown. We were both drunk and bemoaning the fact that we had no idea what the hell to do with ourselves once we tossed off our mortarboards. We were, I suppose, typical twenty-one-year-olds: We believed we were exceptional.

Both of us had had big plans for ourselves after college. Mine had been to write the Great American Novel by the end of senior year and publish it to international acclaim. Claire’s had been to win a Rhodes scholarship. Yet somehow neither of these had panned out. All that awaited Claire was a gelatinous summer at her family’s beach house in Hilton Head, where her stepmother (whom she called “the Lady Macbeth of the dog show circuit”) would dote on her six pedigree bichons-ises while yelling at Claire not to spill Tab on the slipcovers. All that awaited me was moving back home with my parents and pretending that a job at Lady Footlocker was some sort of feminist activism.

At the IHOP, a beleaguered waitress had set a couple of paper place mats in front of us with the menu printed on them. “Pancakes of Many Nations!” they’d read. Beneath this were little pictures that reduced the world’s great cultural differences to a matter of hotcakes and waffles: *Vive La France*: crepes. *Polynesia Paradise*: pineapple and ham. *O, Canada*: flapjacks, maple syrup. The pictures had a faded, nostalgic quality: they appeared to have been taken in the fifties. Presented this way, the vast world we were about to enter suddenly appeared cheery and infinitely manageable; there was not a single nation on earth, the IHOP menu implied, that couldn’t be mastered with a fork.

Staring at it, we’d had a jolt of inspiration. Why not eat pancakes of many nations *in* many nations? Why not travel the world? Oddly, barreling headlong into developing countries with a backpack somehow seemed far easier to us than simply getting a job.

“Oh my God, let’s do it!” we cried. “Let’s literally circle the globe.”

Neither of us knew the other terribly well. Our freshman year at Brown, we’d lived on the same hallway and taken comparative literature together. Although Claire had gone on to join a sorority and to frequent football games while I’d installed myself at the Womyn’s Center with other leftie malcontents, once a semester or so, we went out for coffee. We’d end up laughing so hard that the proprietors of the café invariably asked us to leave. Parting, we always blew each other silly, exaggerated air kisses, said “Au revoir, darling,” and left flushed with goodwill and kinship.

Deciding to travel the world together on impulse didn’t strike either of us as unreasonable. We were at that age when we still believed that genius arrived in bolts of lightning and shrieks of “Eureka!” We still believed in love at first sight, not just with people, but with ideas—that in a single instant, you could *just know*.

What’s more, we’d been raised to assume that one day we would in fact conquer the world. Claire and I had come of age during that rare moment in human history when little girls were pumped full of the steroids of feminism, told en masse that we could do anything, be anything, go anywhere. During our freshman orientation week at Brown, the university president had addressed us as “the best and brightest, the future leaders of America.”

Whenever we’d read books about bold, romantic, heroes who’d sailed the oceans, climbed the mountains, and ventured into uncharted territories, we’d been supremely irritated that almost none of them had had a vagina. Why couldn’t women be heroes in great epics too?

That night at the IHOP, Claire had reached into her purse, pulled out a ballpoint pen, and clicked it expertly, as if preparing to administer an injection. “Let’s star in our own epic. Let’s write down every place in the world we’ve ever wanted to go.” Flipping over her place mat, she’d scribbled down the words *Katmandu, Thailand, Greece*, then passed it to me.

Marrakech, I’d jotted down. *Paris. Bali*. I could barely identify these places on a map, but they sounded cool. I couldn’t quite believe we were actually going to go through with this, but so what? *Italy*, I wrote. *Sri Lanka*.

In the scheme of human history, 1986 is not long ago. And yet as we made our lists, the foreign countries we were naming seemed a lot farther away than they do now. With the Cold War raging, the entire Eastern Bloc was sequestered behind the iron curtain, and mass tourism beyond Europe was only nascent. This was years before the Internet; before routine transpacific flights; before American jobs were outsourced to Mumbai and Manila; before overseas direct dialing and cell phones; and before CNN, Sky TV, and the 24-hour news cycle regularly transmitted images around the globe into everybody’s living rooms. And this was, of course, before September 11.

Oblivious to the ickiness of our presumption that we would discover cultures that were actually far older and far more evolved than we were, we believed that there was still a great frontier left to

explore—a frontier, in fact, that eagerly awaited us. *The People's Republic of China*. It seemed so vast, so unknown, so pregnant with promise! “Look out, world,” we giggled. “Here we come!”—

As we scribbled, the sun started to rise, inflaming the windows of the IHOP, blinding us with hot slats of gold reflected off the Formica tabletop. Claire glanced up at me, brushed her white-blond hair back with her wrist, and smiled a dazzling, exuberant smile. “We’re really going to do this, you know,” she said rapturously. “We’re going to have an adventure worthy of great literature.”

Across from us, four truckers stood up, hiked up their pants, adjusted their belts, inserted toothpicks between their lips. The waitress wiped down their table and reset it. Then she untied her apron and sauntered off.

The restaurant was empty. The stillness felt like relief. We could hear the clanking of pans in the kitchen, a griddle being hosed down, a time clock chomping a punch card. From the parking lot came the first tentative peeps of sparrows. As we wrote, scribbling down budgets, listing the supplies we might need, we became more and more giddy. Our laughter rang out like a carillon in the morning. We grew increasingly delirious with our newfound sense of possibility, our widescreen visions, our raw, voracious ambition. We were young, brilliant, and drunk. We were the future leaders of America. We were off and running. We now had a plan.

When Claire’s mother had died, she’d left Claire a trust fund. I, however, had grown up in a government-subsidized housing project and attended Brown on financial aid. To pay for our trip, I’d had to defer repaying my student loans and work multiple jobs. That summer I’d answered telephone during the day at a real estate office, then waitressed at a grungy Upper West Side bar at night. The bar was notorious for serving alcohol to minors. The fact that I could get arrested for this didn’t bother me nearly so much as the fact that teenagers never tipped.

By the time the jukebox was switched off at the end of my shift each night, it was close to three a.m. To save money, I walked home. The dark, cracked pavement glittered in the heat. Back at my parents’ apartment, I’d tiptoe into the kitchen and make myself a Kahlúa and milk, then carry the clinking glass to my bedroom and sip it as I counted out my tips. I’d smooth each dollar bill lovingly fanning them out on my bedspread. On a good night, I earned over seventy-five bucks; on a bad night less than forty.

My parents’ apartment overlooked rows of dilapidated brownstones, their backyards strewn with rusted baby carriages, disemboweled sofas, plastic pink flamingos bleached to the color of an infection. Beyond these towered ugly, Braque-like buildings like our own. As the sun came up each morning, I’d stare out the window and listen to the sound of jackhammers, to the police sirens ripping by and our neighbors yelling from fire escapes, “I kill you, you dumb fuck,” and I’d think with relief *In just a few months, I’ll get out of here and bstride the world like a goddess.*

Now, sitting on a metal bed ten thousand miles from home in a cell the pale blue-green color of chewing gum, listening to two people yelling in Cantonese through a grimy ventilation duct, I realize what a mother lode of stupidity this had been. Claire and I didn’t speak a word of Chinese. What if we got sick? Our guidebooks were full of warnings about parasites, worms, fungi, fevers. What if we were molested or robbed? What if we got lost?

We didn’t know one soul in the entire hemisphere. We’d landed in Asia without a single name scribbled on a napkin. No friend of a friend’s cousin teaching English. No army buddy of her father’s

No Brown alumnus to call in case of an emergency. When we'd finally made it into the arrivals hall at Kai Tak, there'd been absolutely nobody waiting for us. For all my talk about wanting to be a bold, independent traveler, I'd never considered what it would actually feel like to journey halfway around the world with no one to greet me on the other end.

The reality of how utterly alone we were was starting to hit me; the loneliness of it was sonic. We could disappear or die here—who would even care?

It was, I realize, a Copernican moment. For perhaps the first time in my life, it became viscerally clear to me just how little I mattered, just how much I was not in fact the center of the universe. It was like a swift kick to the gut.

I had just spent two thousand dollars on a nonrefundable around-the-world airplane ticket, received a battery of vaccinations against everything from tetanus to yellow fever, and traveled halfway across the globe for what was clearly a hideous mistake.

My teeth began chattering so hard I thought they would crack. Shutting off the air-conditioning, I curled up in a fetal position in my sleeping bag and tried to think of how to break it to Claire that I was sorry, that I just wasn't *that type of girl* after all—that this was all wrong—and I had to go home immediately.

As if on cue, there was a knock on my door. "Susie?"

Leaping up, I switched the AC back on and tried to recompose myself. Claire hurried in. Her hair was wet from showering. She was clad in light-blue-and-white-pinstripe pajamas that smelled of fabric softener.

"The champagne. I'm sorry. I think I left it in the bathroom at the airport. Oh, Susie!" She sat down on my bed and buried her face in her hands.

"Claire, what is it?"

"This place! My mattress is crawling with ants. The AC is broken. My room's like an oven. And it's so strange. There are all these weird noises. And I suddenly feel so *completely* alone. What are we doing here?"

I dropped down beside her. "I don't know." I hiccuped. "I was just thinking the same thing."

"I'm so sorry," Claire choked. "First I go, 'Hey, let's travel the world. Let's go totally off the beaten path.' And then I'm, like, 'We're going to rough it. No Hilton hotels for us. I'm not some pampered little princess.' But you know what, Suze? I *am* a pampered little princess. I didn't think I was, but I am. Tonight has totally creped me out. My father is right."

When he'd seen us off at JFK, Claire's father had paced around the departure gate, chain-smoking and cracking his knuckles, his sport coat tugging across his shoulder blades. "They're making a terrible mistake," he told my parents, shaking his head gravely.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, princess," he said to Claire. The muscle in his jaw spasmed. He had a long patrician face and pewter-colored hair clipped close to his skull. He looked like a pained greyhound.

Asia was a cesspool, he said loudly. Didn't we know that? It was Third World, rice fields and shanties, filthy children, beggars in the streets. Of course, he'd only been to Tokyo, back in the seventies. But trust him. Oriental culture was perverse. Those men had schoolgirl fetishes. They read pornography openly on the subways, and nobody ever went jogging. Worse yet, they considered us white people to be monkeys. "And this after we rebuilt their country. They bombed Pearl Harbor, and we gave them Toyota," he said. No, sir, he was 100 percent opposed to us setting foot in Japan.

"We're not going to Japan, Daddy," Claire had said irritably. "We're starting in China."

"The People's Republic. A Communist empire." He'd snorted. "When you come crying home to u

princess, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Your father's wrong," I told Claire now. ~~"There's a difference between being a princess and not wanting to spend the night in an ant-infested shit-hole with guys in diapers jerking off by the elevator"~~

"Look," I said, "if it's any consolation, I'm completely freaked out, too. In fact I've been freaked out since the minute we got off the plane."

"Really?" Claire sniffled.

"Uh-huh, totally. The heat, the noise, the craziness. And the idea of going to China, this Communist country where no one speaks English—"

"We don't have to, you know," she said quickly. "I mean, I was thinking. At least maybe we shouldn't start there, you know? Maybe we should get our bearings somewhere else a little easier first. Like Bali."

"Bali?"

"Sure. It's supposed to have tropical beaches. Palm trees. We could go there, acclimate, and then if we feel like it, go to China."

"True," I said after a moment. "I guess I was thinking of someplace even easier."

"Like?"

"Chicago. Or Philadelphia. Philadelphia's probably my speed."

Claire stared at me.

"But they're not even in Asia," she said after a moment.

"I know." Then, unable to contain myself, I wailed, "Oh, Claire. I'm not like you. I've never traveled the way you have. You at least spent a semester studying in Paris."

"No one ever tells you this," I said despairingly, waving at the turquoise tiled walls, the bare, hissing light fixture. "All those travel magazines. People with their vacation photos. They just make it look so easy."

Claire looked at me sympathetically. Suddenly she clamped her hands over her mouth.

"What?" I said.

She shook her head back and forth like a horse breaking free of its bridle. Then she started laughing. "Oh, my God. 'Let's go to Bali. Let's go to Philadelphia. There are ants in my bed.' Suze, would you listen to us? What kind of wusses are we?"

"You know what this is?" Claire said. "Jet lag. And culture shock. The two of us are so exhausted and disoriented, we're practically psychotic. So we're getting freaked out. Over nothing."

Hugging myself, I wiped my nose on the back of my wrist.

"I'm serious, Suze. You know my stepbrother? Dominic?"

I nodded feebly. Claire had three stepbrothers, Alexander, Edward, and Dominic. They were all gorgeous, strapping, and redheaded, and I couldn't tell one from the other. They treated Claire like their mascot. "Every time Dominic goes anywhere—England or just back to Wharton—the first night he arrives? He always has a meltdown. He gets obsessed with the bed pillows, the noises in the street."

"So what we're feeling here? It's totally normal. We've just got to get through this first night, is all, and we'll be fine." She tilted her head at me, her hair falling across her forehead, her lips pursed. "Sweetie, you think you can sleep?"

I shrugged.

"Nah. Me neither, I guess." She sighed and threw up her hands. "This place is a dump. But we just have to stick it out. Here. Move over. This way at least we won't have to go it alone."

I rolled against the tiled wall and made room for Claire on the flimsy narrow bed. She was extremely thin and much taller than me—five-nine—a former dancer, a horseback rider, all legs and

ribs and elbows and knees. As she wedged in next to me, we kept knocking up against each other, apologizing as we shifted about trying to get comfortable. The bed squeaked insanely. The air conditioner grunted and belched. Claire started giggling. “Oh my god! This is absurd!” she hooted at the ceiling. “Look at us!”

Rolling onto her stomach, she propped herself up on her elbows. “Okay, right now, at this very moment, this feels like hell, right? But in the morning, I promise, Hong Kong will seem so much better.”

She snuggled up against me and sighed.

After a moment, she said, “Want me to burp ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ ”

“Nuh-uh,” I said miserably.

This was a talent she’d picked up from her stepbrothers. Normally it cracked me up. Now I worried it would only make me more homesick.

“You sure? Okay. Well, you just let me know if you change your mind.”

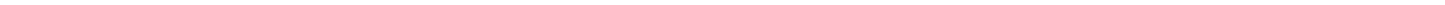
With a little flounce, she turned over on her side. From the way she went about adjusting her pillow, plumping and re-plumping it, I could sense her acceptance of our situation, her growing contentment with it, and this only made me feel more wretched.

Amazingly, while I was growing up, my hippie mother had gone through an Eastern religion phase during which she’d compelled us all to practice Transcendental Meditation and listen to a guru named Baba Ram Dass. “Be here now,” he’d instructed. “Live completely in the moment.” But the moment was all I ever lived in, and it made me fucking miserable. I could never see beyond whatever emotion had me directly in its grip.

As she lay beside me, I knew that Claire was already seeing in her mind’s eye the Yangtze River, shining like mercury. She was standing in chartreuse rice paddies and talc-like sand. She was climbing the Great Wall and twirling ecstatically in the Temple of Heaven. Despite her trepidation, she was off—and soaring above all expectation and constraint. Me, all I could see were filthy hotel rooms swarming with ants, yawning toilets, and demented men in diapers wailing amid the remnants of vegetables. All I could see were the other passengers from our flight, leaving Kai Tak Airport with their families in a great yarn ball of love, leaving me to bleed alone, scared and incompetent on the floor of a public bathroom. All I could see were street signs like hieroglyphics that I would never be able to understand, convoluted neighborhoods I would never be able to navigate, and the endless, interminable trek I would have to make beneath the weight of my backpack in an idiotic Bataan Death March of Tourism of my own making—to be endured across one alien land, then another, in order to finally make it home a year later deranged with exhaustion. All I could smell and taste was fear, hot curry at the back of my throat.

“You’ll see, sweetie,” Claire murmured as she finally began to drift off to sleep. “A few months from now, this will all just seem really, really funny.”

Even then, when she said this, I had the terrible feeling that it wouldn’t.



Chapter 2

Hong Kong

I DON'T KNOW how many of the world's great explorers called home in tears immediately after they arrived someplace strange. I suspected I might have been the first.

When we finally awoke—hours, days later—unable to discern if it was morning or night, Claire hopped out of bed positively mentholated with energy. “Wow, I feel so much better. Don't you?” She pirouetted, grabbed her room key. “Let's wash up, then go explore.”

The moment I heard the arrhythmia of the shower in her bathroom, I yanked on my clothes, dashed out into the reception area, and begged Mr. Chung to help me.

As the overseas operator tried the connection, I wiped my nose on the back of my wrist and bit down on my knuckle. Finally there came a click.

“MOM?” I shouted. My voice echoed over a crackle of static.

“SUSIE?” my mother shouted back. “WHERE ARE YOU?”

“Hong Kong—”

“Are you all right? The Van Houtens are worried. They haven't heard from Claire.” Our voices overlapped, then cut each other off abruptly like fingers blocking and releasing an air valve.

“We've both been sleeping. We're really jet-lagged.”

“Good. I'll let them know you arrived.”

“Oh, Mom, I'm really homesick. I'm kinda freaked out.”

“Oh, honey, I'm sure you'll be fine.”

“I'm thinking of cashing in my plane ticket and just coming home.”

There was a pause, a lunacy of high-pitched whistles. I heard my mother exhale. I imagined her standing over our kitchen sink in her purple leotard, filling a steamer with organic brown rice. She'd been uneasy about my trip from the beginning. At JFK, when I'd finally turned and headed down the gangway, her face was so wet and palsied with emotion, she could barely say goodbye.

But now she shouted across the hemispheres, “What? You can't just fly back home. You just got there. What are you going to do for money?”

The week before my departure, I'd had a false pregnancy scare, followed by an unfortunate night of drunkenness, and a big fight over doing the laundry. We had our issues, my mother and I. Now, as I clutched the telephone receiver in Hong Kong, it suddenly occurred to me that her sobs at the airport hadn't been those of a distraught parent at all. Rather, they'd been like those of a death-row inmate receiving a last-minute reprieve from the governor. I'd be departing the country for an entire year and inflicting myself on the Communists instead; she couldn't believe her good luck.

“No, if you come back, you have to have a plan,” she announced now. “I think you should stick it out in Asia awhile. You'll see. In a few days, you'll feel better.”

“But, Mom—”

“Listen. This call is costing us a fortune, and we're about to sit down to dinner. I'm thrilled you

called. Really I am. Tell Claire I'll call her folks for her, and let me know when you get to China. Hang in there, girl. Your mama loves you."

With that, she hung up.

I stood there incredulous, the gunmetal receiver heavy in my hand. Mr. Chung waited respectfully off to the side, pretending to sort a pile of tourist brochures.

Of all my family members, my grandmother had always been my staunchest ally. For years, she'd fancied herself a Communist. When she wasn't berating her housekeeper—whom she degradingly called "the domestic"—she'd sit back in a crushed velvet armchair with an enormous gin and tonic and speak glowingly of Trotsky.

"You're not a Communist, Ma," my father would say with irritation. "You're an alcoholic. There's a difference."

Real Communists didn't have country houses and tennis club memberships, he pointed out. Real Communists didn't play the stock market.

Luckily for me, though, my grandmother did. For a Bolshevik, she was somehow the only person in our family with any disposable income. When she heard I was planning to backpack around the world, she said ecstatically, "The only thing that could make me any happier, *bubeleh*, would be if you married a Negro."

Grasping both my hands, she whispered, "Years ago, I bought some bonds. Today, they're worth three thousand dollars. I'm going to cash them. As long as you go to China, the money's yours. Otherwise, you pay me back with interest."

Now, standing amid the file cabinets at the Boston Guesthouse, I considered calling her collect, too. But then, I knew exactly what she would say.

Claire emerged from the bathroom smelling of peppermint castile soap. We'd each brought quart-sized bottles for the trip; according to the label, it was 100 percent biodegradable and could be used interchangeably as shampoo, toothpaste, and laundry detergent.

"So how's this for a plan?" She flounced onto my bed, her towel draped around her neck like a stole. Whipping out a comb, she pulled it briskly through her hair. "We go get some breakfast, then head to the Chinese consulate to get visas. After lunch, we take the cable car to Victoria Peak."

I studied the mattress ticking as if I were actually considering this. Reaching behind her head, Claire gathered the damp skeins into a ponytail and secured it expertly with an elastic band. "Well?"

Her gas-blue eyes fixed on me expectantly. On the floor, ants congregated around the drain.

When Claire had urged me to travel with her that night at the IHOP, I hadn't quite believed it. Claire Van Houten and me?

Most of my time at Brown, I'd felt like geometry: a collection of unlovely, isolated parts that needed to be proven over and over. I'd sauntered around campus in miniskirts and fishnet stockings and gold leather ankle boots, trying desperately to convince people that I was this sophisticated and outré New Yorker. But I didn't think I fooled anyone.

As part of my financial aid package, I'd served turkey tetrazzini to my classmates at the dining hall for four years while dressed in a paper hat. Otherwise, all I'd managed to do at college was gain weight, have my heart broken, and write term papers with titles such as "A Post-Lacanian Analysis of Valorizations of Gender" that even my professors found tedious. Junior year, when my father secretly

telephoned to tell me that he was thinking of leaving my mother, I'd checked into health services for week.

My friends had been equally neurotic—arch, hyper-articulate young women with asymmetrical haircuts and black eyeliner who sat around quoting obscure French feminists and rolling their own cigarettes. And yet, for women obsessed with liberation, they were as rigid and sensitive as tuning forks: Everything set them off. Freud offended them. Nonvegetarian lasagna offended them. The words *fascinating*, *natural*, and *objective* offended them. Money offended them, too—I suppose because, unlike me, they'd always had more than enough of it.

Any time I made a smart-ass remark—say, if I suggested that we call our feminist coffeehouse Girls, Girls, Girls!—they glared at me with thinly veiled contempt.

Claire, by contrast, had a laugh like a waterfall. You could hear its cadences building and spilling clear across the dining hall. Her great-uncle had donated a rare books collection to the John Hay Library. Her stepbrother Alexander had been roommates one semester with JFK Jr. Yet she was a standout in her own right. With her height, her cascade of pale hair, and her milky skin, she was hard to miss. Plus, she was smart. Whiplash, magna cum laude smart. Everything that I didn't know, she did. Latin. Supply-side economics. How to play tennis. How to drive a car, change a tire, ride a horse. How to follow the stock market. How to read Plato and Aristotle in the original Greek. How to make chicken tarragon in our Soviet-style dormitory using only a saucepan and a fork. She was self-assured and utterly at home in the world in every way that I was not.

Perhaps most importantly, she was kind. Rich, beautiful girls weren't expected to take a special student to his prom. But on Claire's bulletin board freshman year, I'd seen a snapshot of her in a fuchsia taffeta dress, smiling over a tuxedoed boy in a wheelchair. "Him? Oh, that's Jimmy," she'd simply shrugged. "A kid I used to tutor."

Okay, so she voted Republican. And she could listen to the Gary Numan song "Cars" fifteen times in a row. And she'd decorated her freshman dorm with puppy calendars. But in the end, I found her an enormous relief to be around. Striding purposefully across campus in her puffy white ski jacket, oblivious to her own dreamy-faced beauty—her hair dancing in the wind, catching in the corners of her mouth—she looked to me like normalcy. She looked to me like happiness. I secretly hoped that by traveling with her, some of her gold dust might rub off on me.

Yet now, at the guesthouse, my gutlessness was palpable, ungainly. It filled the room like a hideous air bag. I'd been unmasked as the weak link, the albatross, the sissy.

"Look, Claire," I said after a minute. "I just. I don't know. I still feel really, really... *unsure*."

She set down her tortoiseshell comb. "What's to be unsure about?"

I shrugged miserably.

"Okay, look," she said after a moment. "You're still acclimating. And China isn't exactly a luxury destination. But Suze, what's the worst that can possibly happen to us? We hate the food? The hotels are uncomfortable? The scenery sucks? So what? We move on. But shouldn't we at least try? We have the chance of a lifetime here. We'll hate ourselves if we don't seize it. It's like Joseph Campbell says, 'Follow your bliss.' "

I gnawed at my thumbnail. "Usually whenever I follow my bliss," I said quietly, "I end up with a rash."

Claire narrowed her eyes. "C'mon, Suze. I'm serious. We've been planning this for ages. We've come all this way—you can't just back out now." Her voice rose. I could sense her struggling to contain her frustration: the wild pony of it thrashing against the reins.

"I mean, I'm sorry," she declared, "But this is our big chance. We do this, and for the rest of our

lives, we're going to have this extraordinary experience under our belts. We're going to know certain things that almost nobody else does. I mean, do you really think the world needs just a couple more Ivy League assholes—two more people like us who go on to become corporate weenies or lawyers, sleepwalking through life?"

"I know, but—"

"You want to be a great writer? Great writers always go abroad. Twain. Hemingway. Steinbeck. You think they just sat on their beds moaning, 'Oh, I'm afraid. Oh, I'll get a rash' "

She leapt up, exhaled, and paced around the bed, vibrating with exasperation. "Okay, I'm sorry." She pivoted around. "But I will *not* let you give into fear here. We're *going*, Suze, whether I have to—I don't know—throw you over my shoulders and *carry* you there myself. You are not leaving me to go it alone, and I'm not letting you back out, either. We are young and brilliant and capable. If we can't do this, nobody can. We are going to fucking China."

Her words resonated in the air like a gunshot.

For a moment I just stared at her.

I leaned my head back and blinked desperately at the ceiling. "Claire," I whispered. "I'm sorry. But I'm *just not you*, okay? I'm not."

I couldn't help it. I started to cry. I felt so foolish. Whatever made me think I could do this?

My pathos seemed to drain all the fight out of Claire. She sat down heavily beside me and sighed. After a moment, she got up, walked into the bathroom, and came back with a handful of toilet paper. She took a wad of it, dabbed her eyes, and handed the rest to me. Her own unhappiness was peculiarly reassuring. I blew my nose a couple of times, and so did she.

"I'm sorry, I was too harsh," she said finally. "I guess with all this newness... and the jet lag... I just really, really want us to go to China, is all."

She scanned my face with heartfelt concern, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy. "Oh, Susie. We could have such an amazing time together. Just think of the adventures we'll have. You may not have much confidence in yourself," she said gently, "but, sweetie, I do. You are so smart and funny and sexy. And you're a great writer. You're an amazing woman. Trust me. I have faith in you. You can do this."

She glanced down at her hands. "But I can't force you to go someplace you really don't want to go."

I nodded, swollen with gratitude. "Thank you," I mouthed.

"At the same time," she continued, her voice nearly a whisper, "I can't *not* go someplace just because you're too weirded out, either.

"I'm sorry, Susie," she added, "but I just can't."

The Star Ferry wobbled in the stewy bay. People scrambled across the swaying cabin, vying for seats on slatted wooden benches. The steaminess of the day weighed on us like netting. All the windows were open, yet even when the horn sounded and the engines began grinding, there was no breeze. Passengers waved folded newspapers and paper plates in front of their faces, trying to generate their own weather.

Across the harbor, the Hong Kong side of the city was barely visible. Enormous neon billboards for Carlsberg beer, Longines watches, and Coca-Cola lined the waterfront, creating a relentless seawall of advertisements, a barricade of corporate graffiti. From behind them, the skyline and mountains of

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