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## LAVENDER BLUE

She knows it is trouble from the moment she steps off the sagging entry tube and onto the tiny aircraft. Every one of the half-dozen seats in First Class is already occupied.

"Sorry Madam," says the flight attendant, a tiny creature with an improbably big behind, "there must have been some mistake."

Yes, you idiot, she wants to reply, but feels sorry for the girl. Behind her, another attendant is being yelled at by a man with a mustache alarmingly like a writhing caterpillar and a crew cut of silvery bristles because she cannot find a place for his golf clubs in the "Emergency First Aid" closet.

"Do you know how much these cost!" he sputters. The attendant cringes as the man rants on about the people he knows in the airline's management and her own breathing tightens. She doesn't want to witness this violence sparking the air like electricity before a storm.

"No, no, it's not a problem," she tells the fretful girl, and lets herself be led, docile and agreeable, to a seat in the middle of the coach section. The girl looks so grateful she might cry.

Around her, it's like a cattle-car. Filled with mostly youngish men, all milling about and stuffing bags into the overhead bins, clambering one over the other, squeezing, pushing, twisting sinuously around sweat-stained torsos, but sort of gleefully. Like boisterous kids romping around the bus that's about to take them away to the freedom of summer camp.

She waits patiently while her seat mate is done before wedging her own carryon into the overhead baggage bin and squeezing past him into her seat.

Well, at least it is a window seat, thank god. Could have been worse; for a minute there, she'd thought the caterpillar mustache was going to hit the girl. She looks away from the clamor around her and peers through the shiny window, scanning the terminal for a glimpse of the shocking pink or lemon yellow dresses of Kamu and Bhagi, but can't see past the blazing mirror of the morning sun.

So considerate, and sweet, for her nieces to come all the way from Coorg just to see her off. She still can't believe it. Just the other day they were little tots, hanging on her every word and gesture; who would've thought. And where did all those brains come from? One a mechanical engineer, the other a second-year law student. Their father was an estate clerk who barely knew to fix the slipping lazy chain on his bicycle.

She wonders how the two of them would have turned out if they'd been raised in America. Would each have turned into corporate chief, Supreme Court counsel? No, that was just wishful thinking, not everyone was like her. They were sweet kids, but would have probably lost their spark like most women, just got caught up in the idiotic race to be like the Joneses.

A boyish captain's voice comes on saying that they are finally cleared for departure. The aircraft shudders and begins its erratic run. With the man beside her twisting and turning under his seatbelt like a convict trying to slip off his shackles, she drops her eyelids and drifts off into a reverie as the plane lurches for the last time and lifts off.

She comes awake with a start. The overhead luggage compartment is rattling loudly. She looks up to see the lid come unfastened, and a second later, her carryon tumbling out. It falls with a thump on her lap before she can move a muscle.

It has also caught a glancing blow en route on the knee of the man in the next seat. He winces and makes a pinched face but doesn't complain. She notices how painfully thin he is.

"Sorry!" he says instead, his features tight now with a servile shit-eating grin and her heart softens for a moment. Only in India would someone apologize for having something heavy dumped on his bones.

She stands and with some difficulty stuffs the bag back into the overflowing bin and slams the lid shut, sits down with a sigh and pins up her braids in a makeshift chignon, feeling less like a schoolgirl and more like the successful scientist once again. What kind of polymer had they used in making this stupid lid on the overhead luggage bin? Some cheap crap concocted by the lowest bidder, no doubt. One of these days the insides of a plane would just melt and drip down on the passengers like vile smelling lava.

She'd make damn sure she is back in First Class after the next stop. Or it's going to be someone's stupid head.

"Ye like dance, eh!" the man says after the seatbelt sign has gone off, indicating the open picture book on her lap. Still feeling a bit contrite about the bag she responds with a murmur that she hopes will be taken to mean an appreciation of his good taste.

It has been a rough two months at the Kathakali Kala Nilayam, the training center where she has been learning the ancient moves. The Ashans, traditional tutors of the dance, had taken a special pleasure, it seemed, in putting her through the paces. Her flesh still feels like it's been ripped from the tendons and restrung on a tournament tennis racket and the bones recast in a new version of high-grade synthetic rubber.

She has to admit: the overall effect is one of delicious physical abandon, as if she is on the outside looking in, a passerby momentarily stunned by the pleasure of a new apparition in the shop window.

They did not want to let her in at first. For centuries, Kathakali roles have been performed solely by men. The medium is a famously closed male preserve, her friends had assured her, there wasn't a chance on earth they would let that change. No matter what fine sounding words she meant to use in flattering them into relenting.

They don't care much for America-domiciled single women either, her friend Sheila had warned, don't go flashing your NRI status on them okay?

Well, she hadn't gotten to where she had by slinking away, discouraged by the first refusal thrown at her. She thought about it for a few days and made the all-male bastion of the Kala Nilayam an offer: she would give them a donation of two hundred thousand rupees, enough to renovate their aging practice hall, if they would let her just observe their routines; she would practice them on her own and safely out of sight in the privacy of her hotel room.

The head of the center agreed with such force and immediacy that she later thought she could have got away with offering less.

She took great pride in the fact that she was not only the first woman allowed on the premises during the program but also did as well as the best male novices. After admittance, she would follow the same rigorous regimen as the others. Took a rented house close by, was up at four, walked the mile and a half to the Nilayam – just like everyone else – and did not stray a hair-breadth from the strict routine. Towards the end she was enjoying it, especially reveling in the grueling rehearsals for the all-night performance that capped their training.

At her departure, the Ashans as a group bowed deep and said she could come back anytime she wished.

She flips the picture book she purchased at the last moment from the airport bookstore, and smiles at the contorted poses struck by the masked and costumed dancers. By the end of the two months of training she had sworn she had had enough, but now she's not so sure. Perhaps a refresher course next year. The nostalgia makes it feel like seconds at a feast now, not the sinew-tearing torture she had undergone.

"Very difficult training!" It is the man at her side. His eyes bulge to emphasize his admiration for the pictures in her lap. "It takes many, many years, you know!"

She smiles, lowers her eyes demurely. Indeed, she had been amazed at the concentration it demanded. But it was a pointless exercise, ultimately, an expensive indulgence, a capricious show of dollar power. What in the world was she going to do with it, show off little demos of the home culture along with her diagrams and charts? Provide a little comic relief when the colorful Power-Point presentations threatened to put her clients to sleep?

It was just a notion that had grabbed her on the flight over this time, coming from whither she knew not, this idea of exploring some activity instead of just doing the tired-old tourist thing: why not use the time gainfully, learn something, do something different than just sitting around answering the same old questions.

She had been making these annual three-month visits home since the Y-2K scare in 'Ninety-Nine. It had frightened her, suddenly seeing very vividly how she was going to die: alone in a hotel room and discovered the next day by condescending chambermaids, packed off by an irritated hotel management to the first available address they could offload the corpse to. She would lie for weeks in a morgue while bored clerks looked for someone to inform, pass off the buck. She didn't even want to think about the problem of who would decide the means of disposal.

Would there be a Hindu priest readily available? Were there actually any such ritual cremations in North America?

Of the three pillars of life, God, Family, and Money, you need at least one to survive this existence. In her fifteen years in America she had amassed more money than she could ever spend in a lifetime, so the lack of either God or family had never been a real issue. Not until then.

She still had no God, but the thought of dying without reconnecting with her family became a nagging problem.

That was when she hit on the idea of spending some time every year with them. At the beginning of each summer for the past three years she wound up her business obligations and took a Lufthansa flight out of New York City, First Class, on a liberating journey that would eventually deposit her in the bright hued, monsoon drenched rain forest of home in Kerala.

She spent most of the time traveling around the tri-state area, lazing away the time with relatives near and far, with a carefree happiness she had not known since she was a little tyke in pigtails. People in Mavelikara and Kottayam in Kerala, Mysore and Mercara in Karnataka, Coimbatore and Mettupalayam in Tamil Nadu. They were so flattered it was all she could do to keep them from treating her like visiting royalty.

A last stop in Trivandrum to say goodbye to her old grandaunt rounded out what became the standard itinerary each year, more or less.

The flight attendant is leaning over the man to dangle a delicately manicured fragrant hand over her head.

"Sorry about the seating problem, Madam," she says, apologizing for the mix-up for the third time since takeoff, "I've called ahead and confirmed, you are all clear on both flights after Riyadh. Would you care for something to drink?"

She declines the conciliatory offer with a smiling shake of the head, mouthing a silent No Thanks. She does not want to do anything that might necessitate the use of the bathroom on this flight. It has been years since she flew Coach but still remembers the claustrophobia that the stench and lack of hygiene used to bring on in those suffocating closets. She would hold on until they reached Riyadh, no matter what.

It is surprised by how accommodating she has become in recent months. Another time, she would have chewed the girl's head off. You didn't pay First Class out of your own pocket to ride in Coach. But the stuffed-to-the-gills space she is clamped in today actually makes her feel calm, its ethos of nervous energy vaguely comforting.

The thin man takes this drink offer to include him and pipes up that he would like a beer. The attendant frowns sharply but returns with the beverage. He slurps the frothy liquid directly from the can and gives her a sheepish sideways look.

A beer, at ten in the morning!

The man removes a gold chain from his neck that has a heavy-looking cross dangling from it and secretes it inside a clutch stuffed with documents and some Arabian currency.

"Saudi Police, you know?" he says, noting her gaze.

She has no jewelry herself. Not a ring, not a set of the simplest earrings. She had inherited a few pieces from her mother, worn old gold, some rubies, things she was told would one day make up part of her dowry. She gave it all away to various aunts and nieces on the eve of her departure to America. Ah, that time, way back when. Talk about Golden Handcuffs!

The safe deposit box she keeps in the Manhattan bank holds the only “valuable” she has ever cared for, the only reminder of the past she will ever need. Her dad’s Tissot wristwatch. An ancient contraption, faded gilt plating, yellowed and brown-stained face, mottled hands pointing the time it stopped fifteen years ago, the day after he died.

She had never thought of winding it up to see if it still worked.

“Your English, it is really First Class, no!”

It is the man again. She notes his slightly cross-eyed look, the wetly contemptuous down-turned lips. One more drink and he’d be asking her rapacious personal questions. Or hazarding a sneaky grope. She leans away from him and into the window bay, wondering if she should head it off at the pass with a gently curt reply.

Her father’s watch was blackboard where she first learned that English. Seven o’clock, time for school. Three o’clock, time to go visit Amma at the hospital. Nine o’clock, time for the Priest to begin the funeral rite. Ten-thirty, end of the inauspicious Raghu Kallam, okay to proceed to the cremation ground.

And thirty-four seconds exactly, the time she learned to hold her breath for, whenever she felt the old panic coming on.

Like now. The man is leaning closer, breath fuming with beer.

“You are having own house in USA?” He grimaces. She smiles back a Yes at him and he rolls his eyes in an exaggerated show of appreciation.

Well, she does have a home of sorts. A standing reservation anytime she needs it in eleven different hotels. Eight in America and three in Europe. It is part of her annual contract with the half-dozen companies she assists as their product development strategist. Chemicals, plastics, cutting edge synthetics.

It had begun with her winging around the country to help one firm after another. It was after a couple of years of practically never sleeping in her own bed that she realized the futility and plain silliness – of maintaining a full-facility house for just one very absent person. She paid off the lease on the place and moved into a hotel. And lived out her suitcase

ever since. Her first summer visit home was the first time in eleven years she laid her head on a pillow without first removing pair of miniature chocolates left by room service.

She grew into the skin of the Permanent Wanderer, accepted what she knew other people saw in the reflection. A professional female, forty-something, not stunningly attractive, not un-sexy either, someone who looked like she would give back exactly what she got, good or bad, pretty or ugly, the vermillion dab on forehead and throat notwithstanding.

And most of all, that fiery rush of energy, quietly seething, just beneath that elegant, world-traveled veneer. She was never at a loss for company, or an interesting experience.

Most of each year was spent hopping between three-star hotels, with time off in holiday resorts, the occasional jaunt to Europe. And everything paid for by admiring employers. What was not to love in this home she'd built out of chemical formulas and dreams of complex compounds?

Her romance life had evolved in a natural progression of denial to become a sort of split-level affair. A cool, asexual, take-no-prisoners persona displayed on the upper floor balcony, the vulnerable raging adolescent prudently banished to the basement.

The guest-room gossip and family dramas she encounters on these summer visits are her main source of entertainment nowadays anyway. And her challenge. To stay just that step ahead of getting actually involved – which would mean going from connoisseur to victim, she is certain of that.

Kamu and Bhagi for example. Kamu would like to come study in the States, and that would be no problem, she could herself finance the kid's whole stay including her tuition. Easily. But this would only create an invisible but very tangible rift in their world. And she would find herself plumb in the middle of another family feud.

Leave it be.

The exhilaration of shedding encumbrance was a drug. She doesn't own anything, not a single item of durable goods. Everything she uses is either rented or leased.

Her safe deposit box contains the financial records, stock certificates, a copy of her Will. The defunct old savings passbook in there is an anomaly, an ancient artifact she keeps to remind her of the days when she counted pennies as a graduate student, worried she might

have to give up the struggle for want of funds and return home in shame. Her periodic payments, health insurance and cell phone basically, are done automatically out of her checking account.

“Look Ma, no hands!” as Sam likes to tease her.

Sam’s videotape is in the safe deposit box too. The one titled “Lavender Blue.” The first lesbian porn tape she ever saw, and naturally, the one that tipped her over into a love affair with a woman.

Not because of its intriguing image but the title. “Lavender blue, dilly dilly, lavender green,” she learned to sing, the first day in the costly kindergarten her father took her to, “Lavender blue, dilly dilly, lavender’s green, when I am king, you shall be queen!” She thinks wistfully to that conference in San Antonio where it had happened. She was in the hotel bar after a long day of debating a new top-secret amalgam for use by the Department of Defense when she saw this woman with a man’s haircut and a security guard’s uniform at the other end of the bar. The woman looked up from her drink and gave her a wry half-smile.

She had always thought, at least when it came to women of a certain age, that attachment was the equivalent of death. You spend your life building up your fortifications and it’s all gone in an instant.

“USA - better for you, no?” the man is saying, looking into his empty beer can with a morose expression. He turns to blow more acidic fumes at her throat. “Saudi Police, very strict about women!” He mumbles something about how he’d never take his wife there, even if he were able to marry someday.

Wife. It was what Sam called her when she got overly frisky or affectionate, or introduced her to her bosom bar pals. She wonders if Sam has passed her FBI entrance exam this time. The first failure, something about her having dropped out of West Point years ago, had made her doubly determined to get in. She had written saying she’d enlisted in a rock-climbing class in Utah to prepare for the physicals.

Sam would, if anyone could. She had that intangible something which spelled success, no matter the field or endeavor, whatever the obstacle. The thing (drive,

determination, tenacity; “balls” as Sam put it simply), which she discovered to her shock and surprise she herself possessed.

“Animals,” the man blurts, abruptly ending his painful discourse on the nature of Arabian law enforcement.

It was that very quality which was spectacularly absent in these people, these over-sentimental boys from the beautiful land of her birth. Not even the aggressive ones had it, or even the brashest, like the people who kept pushing their resumes and documents on her at the end of these visits.

The overhead rack comes open and her bag tumbles down once again, this time directly into her lap, thank god. The man proffers his pitifully thin arms in aid to hoist it up again but she demurs, saying she’ll just hold on to it until they land.

In a half-hour or less they would be touching down. She’s never been in Riyadh, but sees it precisely in her mind’s eye. Another sparkling new airport complex, architecturally bombastic, filled with bright mosaic and marble, like the ones she had seen on all these standard oil-country stops, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah.

She is looking forward to it.

As she does on each return leg, she will get a can of Pepsi, take it to the Women’s Room, spike it half-full of brandy from the flask in her purse, feel the joyful fire of the first alcohol in her blood in three months spread up her torso and into her grateful brain. Her welcome home Soma. “Theertham,” her dad used to call it, whatever that meant. Sweet meaningless Sanskrit.

She had run into an Indian once in such an airport facility, as she stumbled out of the toilet stall, head aflame with the shock of the booze. The woman stared at her for a moment, slack-jawed, before gathering the sash of her Salwar Kameez close about her belly and carrying on with her listless work of swabbing the spotless marble with a wet mop. She had felt a sharp pang in her gut then, and a fleeting image of the woman, her work done, lounging in some congested and cluttered hovel, a swarm of filthy kids clambering over her in adoration.

She shrugs off the memory and visualizes the task that's coming up. She'd find a quiet spot in the transit lounge, away from the glittering thoroughfare and open the carryon. Her only piece of luggage.

"Less Luggage, More Comfort – Make Travel A Pleasure," as the signs on her childhood train trips had cheerily proclaimed.

Once again, she would sort through the hundred or so packets of information. A hundred-odd lives summarized, more than a hundred dreams cast to the winds of fate like so many messages in a bottle. Almost none of whom would stand a fighting chance in America.

She would skim the names and addresses one last time (just in case someone wrote or called). And that would be it. More than that, she wouldn't know to handle. Once she touched down on American soil her life was not her own. One by one she would chuck them in the waste disposal. Then squeeze in this cheap plastic carryon after the lot.

When she boards the flight bound for Frankfurt and on to New York she would as usual have nothing on her except the shoulder purse with one change of underwear and her passport.

A male attendant with a harassed brow passes out disembarkation cards for them to fill out.

"Can you please help me?" the man next to her asks, holding out his documents and an ink-smeared Bic. She nods, takes out her own sterling silver Mont Blanc and starts filling in the data, first his and then her own.

Nothing to declare.

She was in the habit of bringing one memento back from these trips. A Ganesh bronze from Chennai, a ceremonial dagger from Mercara, a sandstone Nandi bull from Mysore. She'd keep it for a week or two and then gave it away to the first one person who remarked on its beauty. Never to Sam. Miss Samantha did not like presents. "You are my gift," Sam said, the first time she tried, "I don't want anything to take away from that."

This year, it was an elaborate Kathakali mask that the Ashans had specially made up for her graduation. She was thrilled with it, but decided at the last minute that it was just too

big and too fragile to lug on her person all the way to New York. Less Luggage, More Comfort.

She hands back the card and the dog-eared sheaf of papers to the man, sees his brow furrowed deep in anticipation of the upcoming exile in the wilderness and touches his arm in reassurance. He starts like he has been scalded, then turns away squirming, fidgets with his pants crotch.

She recalls train trips, big men pushing, grabbing, groping, their eyes as sad as those starving kids in the adopt-a-child-for-five-dollars-a-day commercials.

Maybe it was a genetic thing. Hadn't her cousins been the same, cornering her in the woodshed, laughing as if it was the biggest joke in the world while forcing themselves on her?

A thought comes. She smiles broadly. She cannot wait to see the look on the Customs guy's face when she gets home. When she tells him once again that she's come more than ten thousand miles across the globe carrying zero luggage.

As ever, it would be the high point of summer.