

ONCE

BY DONNA OBEID

She went to a place on another side of the world. A place where almost nothing was like anything here and where all the people stared silently at her.

She went there to visit a friend from college, an intense woman who studied monkeys and the mating behaviors of primates. It was something good for her, to get away from her work and her apartment to be there — in the exotic place — where the heat bears on you like a heavy book upon your head; where roads are made of dust and houses of wood; where insects are fuchsia and green and grow to be the size of your hand; where people are slender and sad and do not smile except when photographed; where the landscapes are mystical and neither snow nor winter comes, only a short season called *cold*. She meant to stay two weeks to see the landscapes and the monkey farms and her friend. And then she met the man.

She was lost. It was her second to last day there, her friend was with the monkeys and the map was gone. People stared as they passed slowly by her. The flies were making her irritable and she sat down out of the light, on a stone step. And then the door opened behind her and someone said, “Hello, may I help you?” And it was the man, the owner of the pub with the stone step she was sitting on. He was there above her in the doorway, magically, easily, as if he were simply fulfilling something previously arranged.

The man was a singer who played the guitar in a quiet and peaceful way, like people don't do anymore. He had very dark hair and small cinnamon-colored eyes and skin deeply tanned. His hands were softer than her mother's, with little calluses on the fingers, marks of a musician. She remembers that he liked to use a soap that smelled of vanilla. With a man like that, in a place so far away, you don't think of bad things in the world; the sun shines beautifully every day and the food is sweet and made from things like coconut milk and tender mangoes and sweet peanut paste that has a way of lifting your tongue and making you believe you are tasting happiness.

He came out of his pub with a fresh look still on him, as if he had just woken and bathed, she thought. And of course he had, even though it was the

afternoon. They talked about directions but still she felt lost and he invited her to lunch with him at a place across the street. They sat at a table in the very back and he made sure her face was not to the door, but still she knew by his eyes that behind them, people stared. He ordered two bowls of something delicious made from rice, black beans, papayas and figs. They ate from wooden bowls with wide tin spoons. She talked of things she loved and had not seen in a long time. He told her things she wanted to never forget but in the next hour, couldn't clearly recall. They sat until the sun turned the air pink.

Although it was a dangerous thing for a woman like her to do, she went alone that night on a rusted red bicycle to listen to his songs. Her friend had been a little sick from the heat and could not go. When she walked into the pub, he seemed surprised to see her, a little shocked even, and she knew she'd never known a man like this, a man so easily made happy by her.

The first night she heard him, she sat alone and was the only customer. The pub was small, with six wooden tables and twice as many little stools, and a narrow serving counter in the back. On the walls were framed magazine pictures of famous American movie stars. Everything about the pub was old and western and reminded her of something from an America she had never known except in books and films. From the stories of the songs, he had learned about Americans. When it was late and his fingers seemed tired, he came and sat across from her at the table. His face glowed like it was wet from the light of the glassed candle. "Stay two more weeks," he had said to her, like a dare.

For ten years the man had lived alone in the back of the pub, in a small room with a straw mat and very little else. Then she lived in the back room too, with this man, tangled around him, watching ants move in parallel paths on the wall lit by morning light that seeped in through the cracks. One by one the ants disappeared into the ceiling and she wondered where they went after that.

When the pub closed, they ate pieces of papaya and hot honeyed rolls. Sometimes they drank wine and sometimes water and then they would lie together on the straw mat. She'd put her head on his cool hard chest and think of reasons to stay with this man in this country forever.

They slept in the mornings until nearly noon and then went someplace close for lunch, usually to the restaurant across the street. Wherever they walked, people looked at her. He said they only looked because she was beautiful and white, but still it made her uneasy.

In the night she was awake with him inside the pub. She sat at a table with a candle and listened to his songs. They were old songs — songs like *Desperado* and *If* and *Lullaby* — songs she remembered hearing as a child. His singing them again unfastened some girlish happiness inside of her that'd been hidden all this time. The sounds of the songs were like water, sounds you never stop wanting.

The two weeks of her plane ticket extension ran out. And then he asked her if she could live there, with him forever, but all that she could think of was what it would be like to be stared at on the streets until she died.

Cold had come, suddenly in one night, and the next day she woke up and had lost her voice. They shared a blanket between them but it was not enough and at last — because she asked him to — he lay on top of her and like that, she understood with this man what the world meant when it talked about love. Early the next morning she woke up and he was still sleeping. She washed herself quickly, dressed with more layers than usual and went out to the post office. She used the international phone and called America. She told her big sister she was going to stay on in this place with a man she loved.

And her big sister scolded her like a child and said it was wrong to fall for a man like *that*, in a place — a life! — not even real. People have obligations to the places they come from — *don't you know that?* Her sister told her to come home — she would never belong there, *in that place, with that kind of man* — and then wanted to know exactly how far she had gone.

He was trying a new blues song on his guitar and when he looked up and saw her with her suitcase, he smiled as though she were pretending. She started crying and then he did too. “Are you sure?” he asked and when she said no, he looked confused. “You can come back, right back here,” he said and when she said yes, he wanted to know when.

He rode with her to the airport and on the torn red taxi seat she quietly cried to him, imagining him alone when he returned again to the pub. He sat with her in the airport until her time was announced. He held her hand and wore his

sunglasses so she couldn't tell if he was still crying or not. When she went through the gate, she turned to look once again at his face so that it would be the last thing she remembered from his country. And she saw that his eyes were still covered.

She drew millions of monkeys with baby bodies and old man eyes; she filled pages with fruits she was now familiar with and their curly vines, setting half-suns and musical notes. At night she could hardly sleep and she would look at his picture instead and whisper you were my world until she'd start to cry. For a quarter of a year she wrote him letters but did not get a reply once and she thought something must have happened to him. Unsteadily, she dialed the post office to request they notify him of a call coming for him – tomorrow at noon. He was still there. Nothing had happened. When he was at last speaking with her, his voice sounded very small and his English poor. He asked if her family was happy now that she was home. He asked if she was happy. When he asked her when she was coming again, she said only that she loved him.

Almost a half-year went by and she still did not feel better. She saw a doctor she had never been to before – a young doctor with thin blond hair. He stuttered at her and she could not tell why. “Maybe only a, a little traveler's virus,” he said. “When we know, know for certain, we'll call you. In, in 48 hours we will have the, the blood results. We'll call...once we know.”

BUT WHEN IS ONCE? That once is now, that 48 hours is here, for the phone has just rung. The first ring jarred her a little – the way a scream jars the air – made her mark the black-and-white page in front of her accidentally with a green felt pen. A green pen on black and white.

She's been sitting all this time at her drafting table as if she never left. She is a professional drawer of wallpaper for estates and private companies. She sketches the patterns on her drafting table, inside of her apartment, and mails the pages out to be seen and returned once, then sent out again and blown up. Sometimes the pages are mailed back to her in three months, but the important ones – the ones sent to France and Italy – can take up to half a year to be returned. Today – one hour ago, in fact – she received her black and white in an international oversized envelope.

She owns no answering machine (has always hated them a little) and the phone keeps ringing. This morning, an hour ago even, she would have rushed to it. She was certain she wanted to know. The voice inside of the phone would tell her the matter. The voice would give her an answer.

Six months ago, the day before she went on her trip, she mailed out the first draft of a pattern made of dark circles and light circles, overlapping the blank triangular gaps. An hour ago, she opened the envelope containing her draft. A note was included inside. Someone had typed: A PRACTICAL AND USEFUL COMBINATION OF COLOR AND SPACE. SEND FINAL DRAFT.

The words, the capitalization of the letters even, now seem to her an ironic clue about the world. She looks at the mark she has accidentally made on her pattern, her praised and magnificent pattern. A green mark, a growth, between the two circles.

And then abruptly she gets up to unplug the thin white cord, actually yanks it from out of the wall, something she's never done before. The blanket she wraps more tightly around her and then she goes to sit down at her table, feeling a little accomplished. She is strong but she is weak and feels very old. Sooner or later, she thinks, the body must heal alone.

She picks up the felt pen again and begins filling in the triangular space between the circles with green. Green papaya trees. She starts unconventionally, without first practicing on a scrap. She shapes the one in the very center first, the place where she made the accidental mark. Quickly, easily, the mark turns into a crooked tree with tiny papayas on the branches.

She fills in the whole draft the same way. It is beautiful. But when she mails it to them, they will return it with a letter asking her to do it again in the pattern of two disconnected dark and light circles without the papaya trees. And for the sake of money and professional rapport, she'll do another final draft for them. For those to whom she is obliged.