

Skin Art

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Although Madeline had qualms about traveling to India, a place where brides were burned, poverty was rampant, and corruption ruled, where the water was undrinkable and the food suspect, Bob wanted her to go with him, so she agreed. He'd built a partnership with Indian engineers involving water desalination, and so Madeline saw it as an opportunity to get away with him and relax a bit. After all, she wasn't working at the moment, and they were practically newly-weds; two weeks would be a long time to be apart. Maybe too she'd be distracted from the thoughts of cutting herself that had lately resurfaced after years of lying dormant.

The trip was unbearable—three flights, thirty hours—but she grabbed some sleep in the Frankfurt airport, her head on Bob's lap, legs pulled up fetally, while he stroked her hair and read his notes. When they finally arrived in Goa, she was drunk with fatigue, her joints kinked and stiff, and a spike of pain stabbed behind one eye. Bob's thick hair was mussed, and whiskers peppered his chin, but he still managed to look as if he'd slept soundly. He hit the tarmac at a brisk walk, and she struggled to keep up as they zigzagged around families pushing luggage carts burdened by towers of enormous suitcases. The humid air made her feel as if she were breathing through a mask.

Their driver, a young man named Bhanu, beefy and handsome except for a dead front tooth, held a sign aloft with Bob's last name, WARREN, and tossed their bags into the back of a small van. Madeline had braced herself for the assault of poverty and, once they began driving, she saw beggars lying on curbs, mothers breast-feeding babies, and cows eating garbage thrown in the street.

Bob questioned Bhanu about his childhood, his family, his politics, while Madeline concentrated on not getting carsick as she drifted in and out of sleep in the hot, stuffy vehicle. The air freshener hanging from the mirror coated the air with a gardenia scent that stuck in the back of her throat. Bob wasn't suffering any obvious signs of jet lag. He was jazzed, voluble, as if this were a home to which he was returning. She envied his ability to adapt so quickly to his surroundings.

Leaving behind the city of Panjim and the sea coast with its hotels and crowded beaches, they headed into the country, on roads lined with cashew trees and tall grasses. Bob had rolled up his sleeves and the open window blew his hair into an unruly bush. Bhanu dropped them off at the lush, quiet resort where Bob had rented a bungalow. Bougainvillea and palm trees lined the paths of stucco bungalows with clay-tiled roofs, shaded by red-flowered vines.

As Bob unlocked the front door, he pointed to the pool. "See? You can swim and take walks and amuse yourself while I'm off working."

"Yes, it's beautiful, but right now, I have to lie down." She took off her sandals and stretched out on the hard bed for a nap.

"You can't sleep now," Bob said. "You'll never get on the time zone. You have to resist it," he said, attaching the adapter plug to his laptop cord. They were going to the house of his hostess, Saraswati, for dinner with a group of engineers.

"I have to get some sleep," Madeline said.

"Have some tea, and you'll be okay."

"No, Bob. Tea won't do it. I need to sleep."

"O-kay. Suit yourself," he said, returning to his computer as Madeline bit back tears.

"Is it absolutely necessary that I go tonight? No one knows me. I won't be missed."

“I want you to be there. And I told them you’d be coming. It would be rude.”

“You could say I’m sick.”

“I’m not doing that. I’m tired too, but I can’t just bag out. This is my work. But take a nap if you have to.”

As soon as she lay down, Bob started to unpack his bag, loudly shuffling theangers on which he put his shirts and pants. So she got up, lugged her bag onto the bed, and unzipped it. Her eyes were dry and scratchy, and a tension knot was forming at the back of her neck. As soon as she hung up a few outfits, she took her book into the living room, her head throbbing.

Maybe if she took a walk, she could shake off her lethargy, but five steps outside the bungalow, the afternoon sun bore down so fiercely that she hurried back inside. Her sleeves stuck to her skin, so she pushed them up, pressing the white silvered scars on her arms, which faded, then reappeared. Grabbing her book, she sat by the living room window, nodding off a she tried to read. By then, Bob was happily pecking away at his laptop at the dining room table, wearing shorts and a tee-shirt, his hair damp and combed back, his glasses replaced by contacts.

Madeline was nervous about making conversation with people she didn’t know, particularly when she was exhausted. She was tired of explaining that her job in advertising had ended through no fault of her own. It just made her sound defensive.

At the airport, Bob had bought a bottle of Feni, a local cashew liqueur, to take to Saraswati and her husband, but Madeline was afraid it might not be what the locals drank, like bringing Minute Maid to Floridians.

She undressed and stepped into the shower, hoping to wash away the layers of grime, but the smells from the trip stayed in her nose—urine and feces, incense, car exhaust, body odor. After a minute, the hot water petered

out. The scars on her arms and legs had turned violet under the cold water, like invisible ink appearing on white paper to reveal the message of her secret distress. But no, she told herself, she was done with that.

At 6:30, she ironed her dress, a long black jumper, and dropped the dress over her head, smoothing the front.

“You should cover up more. Sleeveless isn’t appropriate. Don’t you have a blouse you can wear with that?”

“But I’ll be so hot.”

“Indian women wear layers and they’re fine. Cotton breathes.”

She yanked off her dress and grabbed a blouse and buttoned it up, her hands shaking, the fabric clinging to her damp arms. When she dropped the dress over her head again, she asked, “Okay?”

He took her sleeve and tugged it a bit, as if to make it longer. “Yes, you look very nice.”

“Do you want to check my arms? Is that what this is all about?”

“Of course not. Come on. Let’s have a nice evening. You look great, sleeves or no sleeves.”

“Yeah, right.” Her watch said 6:50. “Shouldn’t we get going? We don’t want to keep Bhanu waiting.”

“He’ll wait for us. He’s probably not even there yet. Indian time.” He lowered his palms in a simmer-down motion. “You’ve gotta slow down here. What’s your hurry? You’ve got nothing to do.”

“Thanks, Bob. I needed that reminder.”

“Oh, come on. This’ll be fun. Remember, don’t eat any salad and don’t eat with your left hand.”

“I know, I know. You already told me. Don’t worry; I won’t embarrass you.”

The sun had dropped in the sky, and the air was starting to cool off. They walked up the path toward the large hand-painted sign for the resort,

announcing itself in both English and Hindi. After a couple of minutes, the resort van barreled around the corner and screeched to a halt. Bhanu hopped out, smiling. "Hello, Mr. Bob. Mum."

"Please call me Madeline."

Bob touched her arm and shook his head.

They buckled themselves into their seats and Bhanu accelerated, sending the van bouncing over the dirt road, weaving in and out of lines of cars and around the cows that ambled along, unfazed by the traffic. Madeline was frightened to look straight ahead at what was hurtling toward them, so she focused on the side of the road, the men talking and smoking out front of low huts, the women sweeping the dirt with brooms made of palm fronds, barefoot children scrambling after a soccer ball. At intervals, mixed among the huts, vacation homes for rich Indians and Europeans emerged from welters of weeds.

Bob smiled at Madeline and said, "I'm sure you'll get a second wind. That's how it works with me."

Bhanu pulled up in front of a tall house of dark wood beams connected by white-washed stucco. They rang the bell, and Saraswati, a short, heavy woman with thick black hair, wearing a green tunic and pants, invited them in. She accepted the Feni with a formal nod, then disappeared into the kitchen. Had they arrived too early?

Inside, photos hung above eye level at a precarious angle which threatened to pitch them onto the heads of the people below. Saraswati introduced them to her husband, Vijay, also an engineer, a tall, handsome man with a full grey beard, and their shy, bespectacled teenage son, Samir, who lingered politely before retreating behind a curtain to his room. Vijay's elderly parents were visiting, and after they tottered over to meet the Americans, Madeline offered to help with dinner. "Oh, no. You are the guest. It has all been arranged," Saraswati said. Behind a curtain, Madeline caught a

glimpse of a young Indian woman in a sari and realized, of course, that as a middle-class family, they'd have a regular cook. Madeline was hungry. Bob had said that Saraswati would probably steer clear of dicey food, given that they were foreigners, but Madeline was worried anyway.

Bob launched into an animated conversation with Saraswati about their water treatment project. The older parents seemed to have been invited to take care of Madeline. The mother-in-law was a tiny woman in black slacks and a sleeveless embroidered white shirt. Irritated by Bob's insistence that she cover up when it clearly wasn't necessary, Madeline itched to roll up her sleeves. She stroked her stomach, trying to stifle its loud gurgle. Her legs were wobbly, and she longed to sit down, but everyone else was standing.

The other guests arrived nearly an hour later—Father John Fernandes, a native Goan who was the local priest and teacher at the school, and an ex-pat German couple, Reiner and Anna, and their adopted Indian son, Niko. Reiner pigeonholed Vijay into a discussion of local politics, which Madeline couldn't follow. Saraswati beckoned them to the table and placed Madeline at one corner and Bob down at the other end.

The food looked safe except for the salad, which she avoided. She took dollops of various curries—green, orange, brown—and a piece of puffy bread. Bob was enthusiastically involved in a talk about something called the BJP with Reiner, who had vulpine features and blond hair and managed to incorporate the snobbism of both Europe and Asia. “Actually, no one who doesn't live in India can possibly understand Rushdie and how he is generally dismissed by Indians.” He never looked at or directed any talk to Madeline. His wife, Anna, was pretty except for a receding chin, a flaw which Madeline found somehow touching.

Madeline's back hurt from sitting on a bench, and the meal dragged on with no sign of ending. To keep herself awake, she studied the photos hung on

the dining room wall. Most of them featured stern, sepia-tinted ancestors interspersed with portraits of Saraswati's children, Samir and an older girl.

"Have some more food," Saraswati said, passing Madeline a bowl of bright yellow potatoes, sprinkled with fresh parsley. She declined, blushing, then closed her eyes for a moment and felt her head droop forward. It snapped up, and she took a deep breath to revive herself. When Bob glanced her way, she widened her eyes to signal that she wanted to leave. He acted as if he hadn't seen her. She looked at her watch. It was nearly ten.

Her attention wandered to Niko, a boy of about six, with a gorgeous face, bottomless-pit black eyes and spiky hair. He was rolling tiny cars along the floors and striking them with a homemade wooden dagger as he jabbered to himself in German. Madeline ached to run her hand along the velvet skin of his arms, but she didn't want to crowd him, so she smiled and nodded. He grabbed her hand and said, "*Spiel mit mir*," clacked the truck with his sword, then pushed the soft pad of his hand into hers. She looked up to see the adults were consumed in conversations, so she leaned over and took a car and ran it around Niko's truck. When her back kinked, she lowered herself to the floor. Niko clearly had a scenario in mind, so she pretended to understand and followed his lead. Every few feet, he'd clank his sword on the tiles, yell, "*Halt!*" and give her a menacing look.

Madeline reached over and touched his arm. "Be careful." As he raised his sword again, the tip grazed her forearm, leaving a long scratch. "Ow!" She shook her head to caution him.

"Madeline?" Bob asked. The rest of the guests had stopped talking and were staring at her sitting on the floor.

"Niko wanted me to play." Her voice came out tinny and forced, and she covered the stinging scratch with her hand.

Saraswati was frowning, and Bob gave her a disapproving stare. Her face flushed, and she lumbered to her feet and sat on the bench, biting her lip.

What do you want from me? she wanted to ask. She pressed her fingernails into the meat of her palms to keep from crying.

“Excuse me. Where is your bathroom?” she asked Saraswati, who pointed down the hall. Madeline was relieved to find they had a European toilet instead of a hole in the floor and a bucket of water. She sat and laid her head on the cool porcelain sink to steady herself. When she was finished peeing, she rose shakily and splashed some water on her face. Looking at herself in the mirror, she rubbed some concealer over her eye bags and wished she didn’t have to face those people again. To stall a bit, she opened a drawer and found a comb, a cone of incense, and a double-edged razor. The welt on her arm itched to be deepened, to be more than a scratch--a clean cut. She took the blade out, turned it over in her hands, touched the edge to her arm, and then dropped it back into the drawer, her hands trembling.

When she returned to the table, no one seemed to have noted her absence. She wanted to shock them all by letting out a long, anguished scream, but instead, she sat, hands entwined firmly on the table in front of her, heart beating raggedly.

Finally, Bob tapped his watch and gave her a nod, and they thanked Saraswati and Vijay. “That was fun,” Bob said, as he placed his hand on the small of her back and steered her out the door. As soon as they were out of sight, she shoved his hand away. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Just don’t touch me,” she said through clenched teeth.

Bhanu was waiting for them out front so she couldn’t melt down in front of him. She pinched her arm as hard as she could, fantasizing that it was Bob she was pinching.

When they let themselves into the bungalow, she turned to him. “Don’t do that to me again.”

“What?”

“You know. When I was sitting on the floor with that boy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please.” A mosquito bit her and she slapped it. Blood met her hand. But part of her welcomed the sting, allowing all her pain to be localized into one sharp pinprick where she could find and savor it.

Madeline remembered how the x-acto knife would tickle the skin on her forearms before the thrilling pinch as it broke the surface, drops of blood pearling behind the blade like rubies. It had been year since her last cutting, and the scars were fainter now, but when she ran her hand down the inside of her arm, the edgy numbness made her shiver.

A few weeks after Bob and Madeline started sleeping together, he asked, “Why do you always keep the lights off?” She’d moved to Chicago after college and was wary of finding someone who would accept her, damaged as she felt.

He pushed, and she pretended it was shyness, but she knew he didn’t believe her and might lose his patience and leave her. So one night, when she burst into tears and he insisted knowing what was wrong, she unfolded her arms and held them out straight. White lines ran across her wrists like scratches on a table top. “They’ve faded,” she said. “I don’t do it anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Bob, don’t kid about this.”

He leaned over, cradling her arm in both of his, and ran his hand over the skin gently, barely touching it. “Those? I can barely see them. What happened?”

She confessed about the cutting. He listened. All he said was, “Promise you won’t hurt yourself again.” And he kissed the scars.

She decided that any man that sweet was worth hanging onto. So they were married, and she was fine, but after the loss of her job, the urge to cut

returned. She confided to him that she was afraid of backsliding, and he gave her a pep talk, but then she noticed that he would run his hand along her arms, as if he were caressing them, but lingering a moment and stealing a peek. It was nothing overt, but she could tell he didn't trust her.

Bob was scheduled to spend the bulk of each day in Goa with local engineers, leaving her alone at the bungalow. At night, he sat up going over his plans while she went to bed. So much for great vacation sex. He was less available than at home. Every morning after he left, she read one of the novels she'd brought until her eyes blurred. She tried watching TV, but the power was intermittent, and she could only stand to watch so my Bollywood music videos.

At ten o'clock each day, when the cleaning crew came to freshen up the bungalow, she would follow a path around the pool, through the gardens. At that time of the morning, the guests there for Ayurvedic training would carry their yoga mats back to their bungalows and a lone swimmer would be do laps. She couldn't muster the energy to go swimming or join a yoga class. So she read some more and waited for Bob to come back.

On the morning of the sixth day, Madeline lay in bed as Bob scurried around, dressing for a meeting. "What are you going to do today?" he asked, as he had every morning so far.

"I don't know." She was half asleep.

"You should go see some of the sights. Bhanu could take you. That's his job."

"Does it matter to you if I stay here or go out? You'll be busy all day. I can amuse myself."

"Oh, I know that."

She hauled herself up. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

“You know it’s not healthy for you to spend all your time alone. Frankly, that worries me.” He grabbed his briefcase. “But I can’t hold your hand all the time.”

“I never asked you to hold my hand.”

He shut his eyes and sighed.

“You know, if I really wanted to cut myself, I could do it while you’re at work. Without your knowing. But I’m not doing it, okay?”

He stood for a moment, staring at her, then left. When she heard the door shut, she flopped back onto the pillow. But she couldn’t fall asleep, so she got up, uselessly flipped the switch for hot water, and climbed into a cold shower. Then she put on a dress and heated some water for tea. Her arms were covered with mosquito bites, and she clawed at them, leaving faint white trails of dry skin.

She walked up to the office to check her email. The receptionist stood out front, talking to Bhanu, and it was clear from the tone of their voices and body language that they were flirting. The young woman ducked her head and smiled and readjusted her long, lavender scarf over her shoulder. She was young and voluptuous and she seemed to move on oiled joints. Bhanu leaned against a wooden beam, smiling, not shy about his brown tooth, and Madeline wondered if they were a couple and if they had been promised to each other by their families.

“Hello, Mum,” Bhanu said. She greeted them and asked the receptionist if she could use the computer for the Internet. The young woman tilted her head from side to side like a metronome. Yes or no? Madeline wasn’t sure. Did the woman even understand? Bhanu told her to go ahead, the computer was free, so Madeline walked into the dark office. As she sat behind the monitor waiting for the machine to boot up, her thighs stuck to the chair, and she fanned herself with a paperback. After waiting a full half-hour, she wrote,

then lost, a letter to her friend, Christine. Frustrated, she logged off and trudged back to the bungalow.

She didn't want to eat lunch alone in the dining room again but had not yet managed to introduce herself to the group of German and British visitors.

She swigged a bottle of water and opened a package of cookies. A coat of numbness surrounded her. Teetering on the brink of sleep, she couldn't drop off, nor could she stay awake. Her book held no interest, and she found herself reading the same lines over and over.

After taking another shower, she plugged in the adaptor for her hair dryer, and sparks spurted from the outlet, zapping a shock up her hand. She dropped the dryer and flopped down on the bed, massaging her tingling fingers. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she pressed the palms of her hands against her wet cheeks. Then she stumbled over to Bob's travel pouch and dug through it until she found some nail clippers, the kind with a tiny file on a screw. She swiveled the file out and ran the blade along her arm, pressing, waiting for the skin to give way. Just one cut. That's all she'd allow herself. She held her breath and pressed.

"No!" She hurled the clippers across the room, stood up, and paced, kneading her upper arms. Ruffling through the pile of brochures for activities at the resort, she found one for Ayurvedic massages.

A few minutes later, she arrived at the Ayurvedic doctor's office. He took her blood pressure, and she paid him 500 rupees. Then two young women in saris arrived with twinkling nose jewelry, each with a jewel glued over the third eye. One of them held a dented metal cup. They walked ahead of Madeline down the stairs, talking and laughing. Madeline wondered if they were making fun of her. They were young, beautiful, dark-skinned, their thick black hair oiled and braided to their waists. Squinting under the hot sun, Madeline watched the braids sway as she followed them across a path and up a stone staircase into a room with a wide-open window. A palm tree fanned

the air outside. One of the women handed Madeline a folded piece of muslin with dangling strings and told her, in halting English, to put it on, but Madeline had no idea what to do with it. She'd hoped for a gown—even the paper variety she wore at the gynecologist's—but she stripped naked, glancing nervously at the window, and stood, flat-footed, shrugging as she fumbled with the cloth. The masseuse leaned over and tied it around Madeline like a string bikini bottom, then she put a step next to the table, which was hollowed out like a cutting board. Madeline climbed up and lay down in the curve of the wood, then sat up again, crossing her arms over her bare breasts. Calm down, she told herself.

The other woman, whom Madeline decided was the assistant, motioned for her to remove her wedding rings. She hesitated, then obeyed. The assistant lit a flame under a tin bowl and poured oil from the cup into the bowl and picked up a cheese-cloth-covered bundle of herbs.

“Your skin is bright,” said the assistant as she ran her hand along Madeline's shin. She felt herself blush, ashamed of her dry skin, the tracery of blue veins, her silvery scars.

The masseuse motioned to Madeline to lie down again, and she felt her vertebrae settle into the hard wood. Her belly sank, and her hip bones jutted upward.

“Is this the herbal massage?” Madeline asked. They nodded, again with the metronome head bobble, so Madeline wasn't sure if they'd understood her. As they stirred, they talked like women sharing confidences. Lifting the bundle of herbs from the oil, the masseuse pounded it against the soles of Madeline's feet. She flinched. The masseuse ran her hand along Madeline's arm to calm her. After dipping the bundle again, the woman briskly patted it along Madeline's skin while the assistant massaged the oil into her legs. Four arms worked in concert, rubbing up and down. Eyes shut, Madeline pictured

the blue of the Arabian Sea and the vibrant colors of Panjim and fantasized about smuggling home a blanket of marigolds.

Covered with oil, she slipped back and forth on the table. They rolled her onto her side and arranged her arms and legs, then continued to rub, dip, and pat. The breeze wafted in through the window, and her joints softened, her muscles loosened. She imagined a phantom lover, a four-handed dark god, juicing her up for a marathon of lovemaking. Only as an afterthought did she think of her husband.

A touch on her shoulder signaled the end of the massage. Madeline blinked, surprised to find herself in the massage room. The women helped her sit up. Shaky as a newborn, covered in an afterbirth of oil, she dangled her legs over the side of the table. The masseuse motioned for her to climb down, and she did, on wobbly legs. She peeled off the sodden muslin thong and handed it to the assistant, who threw it on the floor, then took clean towels to wipe her down, a goddess anointed with sacramental oils. Her skin was singing, her Western clothes—pants and a shirt—hung like limp sacks on her new body. The masseuse took a plate containing red powder and ran her finger through it, reaching into Madeline's hair, tracing a straight line along her part. Madeline bowed, then left the women, floating down the stairs, back to their bungalow, where she fell into bed and slept deeply for two hours.

She awoke tingly with energy, pleased that she had done something healthy for herself instead of cutting. But she couldn't tell Bob because she didn't want to let on how close she had come to relapsing. To reward herself, she called Bhanu and asked him to drive her to Panjim. When he picked her up, he handed her a tourist's guide to Portuguese churches and Hindu temples. "I can show you anything you want, Mum."

"What I really want is to go shopping. Can you take me to some good clothing stores?"

He turned and smiled at her. "As you wish, Mum."

She sat back in her seat and opened the window a crack, letting the breeze blow over her face.

When they reached the business district of Panjim, and traffic slowed to a crawl, Bhanu offered to wait for her, but she told him to go enjoy himself for a couple of hours, that she'd be fine. Pulling the car into a parking space, he pointed out a row of narrow store fronts with gaudy signs and black silhouettes of curvy women.

Madeline wandered into a shop and tried on outfits, finally settling on a salwar kameez, a dark red tunic and pants with a blue scarf. Then she found earrings and a necklace of pounded silver. She stuffed her own pants and blouse into the bag, paid, and went to a restaurant. She ordered tea masala, then sat, watching the people and soaking up the street scenes. Scooters whizzed by, some driven by old women in saris, others with families of four perched on top. Madeline wondered how Bob would react to seeing her out in a strange city, able to get around without him. She finished the strong tea, her head spinning. Across the street, she spotted a sign for mehndi tattoos. Looking at her pale hands and scarred arms, she felt the sudden urge to cloak herself in a new skin, to try something different. Bob would hate it, would tell her she was foolish to sabotage her chances of getting a new job until they faded. But he wasn't there, and she wasn't thinking about a job at this moment.

Madeline entered the shop through a curtain of beads. On the walls hung embroidered cloth with embedded mirrors that sparkled. An acrid smell filled her nose and made her eyes water. She blinked to clear them. A woman approached. Dark brown tattoo swirls laced her fingers and joined in a whorl on the back of her hands. Her liquid black eyes were deeply lined in kohl, and she wore a dark green sari with silver trim. "May I help you, Mum?"

"I'm thinking of getting one of the temporary tattoos. For my hands?"

“Is this for a wedding?” she asked. A thick line of grey roots spliced her dyed hair, but her skin was smooth and unlined.

Madeline shook her head. The woman took Madeline’s arm, rotated it, and ran her hand over the silvery-white lines on the inside of her wrists. Madeline blushed. “My skin is very sensitive. I scar easily. Will there be a problem with the dye?”

“Nothing more than a slight irritation, and only when the mehndi is still on your hands. Have you decided which designs you want?”

Madeline flipped through books of photos and saw hands joined like wings, feet with heels together, toes pointed out. The twirling vines appealed to her, but maybe a mandala on the back of her hand would be interesting. “What’s this?” She pointed to some squiggles in one of the pictures that she knew was the kind of writing she had seen on signs around town.

“That’s a name, Alok, hidden in a design. For a bride. If the man can’t find his own name in the mehndi, then the woman will control the marriage.”

Madeline wondered if Bob’s name were too American to fit into the delicate pattern. Still, the idea of gaining some control in her marriage appealed to her. She decided on a mandala in the center of her palm with a series of vines that looked like fresh thyme running up each finger and a scallop at the wrist with dots and squiggles, like lace gloves her great-great grandmother would have worn out in the sun.

“Can this be extended further?” She pointed to the wrist design in the picture, then traced a curvy line down the inside of her arm, over her scars.

The woman examined Madeline’s arm, and, head lowered, said, “Whatever you desire, Mum.”

“Okay. And can you put the name Bob in there also?”

When she paid and left the shop, her arms rigid at her sides, Bhanu was waiting for her by the car, reading a newspaper and smoking a cigarette. At

first, he didn't seem to register who she was. Then he smiled broadly and nodded approvingly. "Well, Mum, you certainly made good use of your time in Panjim."

"I hope I don't look silly," she said, settling into the back seat of the van. But she knew she looked wonderful.

Back at the bungalow, she found a note from Bob, written in caps: WERE ARE YOU? I WAITED BUT DECIDED TO GO AHEAD TO THE RESTAURANT.

She hurried to the bathroom and rinsed the paste from her arms. The coffee-colored dye had set, and the tattoos contrasted beautifully with her fair skin, like sinuous snakes running up her arms, concealing her scars completely. Striking poses in the mirror, she danced around, weaving her hands like the bejeweled women in Bollywood music videos.

In the restaurant, Bob sat at a table, studying a sheaf of papers. She adjusted her tunic, threw the scarf over her shoulder, and floated toward him. When she stopped in front of him, she held her hands up, daring him to discern his name nestled inside the mandalas on her palms. He looked at her, puzzled, then asked, "Madeline, what have you done to yourself?" She smiled. "That's not permanent, is it? Come on, Madeline. Tell me."

She stood there, her head wobbling from side to side, yes no, yes no, enjoying her husband's confusion.