

April 11 Tues

I have been chasing *IT* around the world for the longest time. I traversed the Prime Meridian from pole to pole. Then I arced up the 180-degree longitude. I didn't find *IT*. So, I circulated the globe against the wind and against the sun. Still, I didn't find *IT*. At length, fagged out of my mind, I decamped to a pit stop at 74 degree 0' 23" West and 40 degree 42' 51" North, in New York, an island off the east coast of America.

As a soi-disant globetrotter, I am the anti-Joan of Arc. Not that I oppose Joan; just that I am an anti-heroine, for, she altered the history of a nation; I can hardly command my destiny.

In my entire wanderings, I have yet to feel at home on one inch of soil anywhere on earth. Garapan was the same. At times, forgotten names from a hazy somewhere popped into my memory when I walked its streets. I felt a strange nostalgia that lingered till in time it passed. I packed my bags again. Maybe I will go to Bouvet Island next to see if the perennial permafrost is a better match for my perpetual forlornness.

So, there I was at Kennedy Airport amidst the scrum of passengers, making my way to the taxi-stand. Another sojourn to footnote countless others. Moons ago, it wasn't that hard to hitch a ride into town. Are my salad days over? Yet how old am I? As I waited my turn for a cab at dusk, I opened my passport, again wishing that my date of birth wasn't an estimate by the nuns who took me into the orphanage. Although spry, I feel seasoned out of time.

April 13 Thurs

The Greenhouse, a budget hotel on East 14th St. is decent and clean, without frills. I've stayed at better, and I've stayed at worse. Not caring one way or the other where the wind blows, I had tagged, at random, the Big Apple as my destination.

Yesterday I took advantage of 'pay what you wish' and hit Museum Row on 5th Ave. This morning I strolled to Union Square where Hare Krishna adherents pranced among street vendors offering all manner of tchotchkes. Six Black teenagers induced admiring gasps from the spectators as they performed hip-hop acrobatics on the promenade.

The jollity contrasted with my gloom. I took leave of the crowd and meandered east. When I turned at the back of the boat to wave a last goodbye to the orphanage, the only home I'd ever known, I wept with sorrow. But I had to go. Yet my endless quest for *IT* has brought me no closer to an idea of what *IT* is.

I saw the tavern on East 12th St. For some unknown reason, out of all the countless ones I had passed as I traipsed across town, this nondescript bar beckoned. I paused to read the sandwich board taking up a portion of the sidewalk. "Happy Hour specials, \$4 drafts and shots." As I started to go around it, a grievous sense of loss inexplicably washed over me. I halted, and turned my gaze up to the signage. *The Whiskey Parlor*. The gold letterings had long lost their luster against the sun-faded green background, which was peeling off in segments. The rundown façade and the stained, frosted window were hauntingly familiar. Just then, two working-class men walked out of

the red door. I caught a glimpse of the dingy inside. I hesitated. Then, as if hexed, I sauntered into its dimness.

It was four-ish. Notwithstanding its shabbiness, the bar did not feel seedy. The swarthy man behind the counter gave me the gimlet eye as I hastened, with trepidation, to the rear. I was wearing my all-season black peacoat over a black tee, and denim jeans. Was I dressed wrong for the venue or the occasion? I settled in a chair, two seats removed from a wizened guy with whom I exchanged a nod and a smile.

The bartender sauntered over. I asked for a Pinot Grigio.

“A PIN OF WHA?” he raised both his tone and an eyebrow.

I thought my pronunciation caused the head-scratching because I lisp when I am nervous; people would ask me where I’m from, and guessed from my accent I hail anywhere from Siberia to Saipan.

I tried again in staccato syllables, “Can I get white wine please?”

I’m not sure if my jargon gave me away, or whether my vibes were out of sync in the joint. The crewcut man snapped, “Next time, just say ‘wine.’ No need to go all Upper East Side on us coz this ain’t that kind of place.” He dug into a tank of ice, shuffling bottles of ales aside, yanked a wine-sized bottle, and poured me a glass of Rose.

“Thank you, sir.”

He stopped frowning. “You from around here?”

“No, I’m just passing through.”

“Where you from?”

Not for the first time, I was overwhelmed by a sense of rootlessness. “Palau.”

“Welcome to New York.” A smile flickered on his face.

I looked around as I nursed my drink. A redhead middle-aged man was regaling his ragtag buddies, swaying out of time to dying notes of Ashlee Simpson’s “The Boyfriend.”

The bartender refilled my glass. “From Dean,” he jerked his head toward the ancient guy.

“Thank you,” I raised my glass in a toast.

“Skoal.” He waved me next to him. My first instinct was to resist. But it’s not like I was going to start an unholy romance with him, so I complied. We nattered away about forgettable stuff, like our favorite movie stars, Keanu Reeves for me, Woody Allen, for him.

Halfway through, a thirtyish guy appeared on the other side of Dean. “Who’s the pretty young lady, Dean?”

Dean turned to me. “What’s your name, dear?”

“Mimi,” I muttered. It is my tendency to put swains at arm’s length to avoid a debauched fling; there is little chance of me sustaining a relationship since I am a gypsy on the constant move.

“She said ‘Missy,’ Bohimi.”

“Hi, Missy,” Bohimi raised a glass in my direction. Perhaps in my eagerness to convey ‘not smut,’ I overreached myself, for he scrambled the second he drained his beer.

Soon, Dean was nodding into his drink.

“Yo, Cuddles,” Redhead bellowed through Depeche Mode's ‘Precious.’ “Another round please.”

‘Cuddles,’ a fitting moniker, given the bartender’s rotund, short stature and his pregnant belly. I was surprised by how current the jukebox collection was.

For a minute, the coterie’s shindig entertained. Soon, my melancholy gnawed again. The wanderlust once intimated an answer; now it is merely tedious. I no longer remember the once-compelling hint, so vague has it become, like an enigmatic dream that slips from memory upon awakening. Sometimes I surmise that I dreamed myself up, that I am verily insubstantial, that there is no one behind the persona.

But the coolness of the wineglass in my hand imparted an undeniable solidity, and a spark of *IT* flared briefly. I would come again to The Whiskey Parlor before I take off for... who knows where next.

April 15 Sat

Cuddles was manning the bar again. Two geezers, wrapped in their zipped-up jackets, were following the news on TV, their half-full glasses sitting on wads of greens on the counter.

As I was sipping wine, idly taking in the ambiance from the mid-section, I spied a damsel in her twenties, like me, at the short end perpendicular to the main bar. Her long blond hair, highlighted with raven strips, was Parisienne chic. I regarded her with fascination as she tossed the tress to the side with nonchalance. Or when she again blew the bangs off her forehead, or when she ran a hand through the purposely unblown hair. Her allure beguiled me. Trendy to the hilt in her flowery chiffon, she was more charming than beautiful, more vivacious than exquisite. The three-quarter sleeves showed off her porcelain skin to advantage. One leg draped over the other, exposing satiny ballet flats. Why she didn't make more of a stir, I cannot imagine.

Once again, I retreated into my fantasies where, this time, I was just as well-favored.

The door squealed open, heralding a gust of cool air. The jukebox was playing "Drunken Angel." Lucinda Williams blared, "Sun came up, it was another day...."

I looked up – the perimeter of the entrance was framing a silhouette bathed in the nimbus of the setting sun.

It lingered on the threshold for an everlasting second, as if trawling for someone. Before my very eyes, the contour sublimed into a cloud of diffusing mist and metamorphosed into a radiant cottony cocoon.

Then the frozen form came alive. Time dissolved. The looming shroud ballooned, encompassing me in a wave of nostalgia. When he was directly behind me, our overlapping auras

merged and mingled in a hungry embrace, twirling together up into infinity. It was as if we were seeking each other out in a respite between acts. Then the moment evanesced. The curtain parted, and we were again performing on stage, at a dive bar in the East Village of New York.

As the figure moseyed, cool as wine, past me, the cloud of pixilation unspooled into a thousand pins of molecules that solidified into the shape of a six-foot man in a black army jacket over black shirt on black denim jeans. My pulse tingled. Is it possible to fall in love at first non-sight, with a patina?

He halted next to charming faux Parisienne, a hand squeezing her arm in greeting as he slid into the seat next to her. “Drunken angel, you’re on the other side,” Lucinda sang. From a distance, I saw the lips curled up in a smirky pout when he smiled, and the dirty-blond locks that fell just above his shoulders. He split the difference between the rugged versions of Jeff Buckley and Neo.

I saw them butt heads as they giggled at some private jokes. She threw her head back at something he said, her impish laughter showing off straight but not perfect teeth. With utter blasé, she pulled up the scoop neck of the dress that had again slipped off her shoulder. Her chirpiness spellbound him, his rum-soaked chuckles often erupting into guffaws. They were such a matching couple.

“What’re you reading now, Skyler?” the breezy Blondie inquired during a lull in their otherwise nonstop gabfest. Thus, I knew the heartthrob’s name. Hers I had gathered earlier, was Ursula.

As I observed Ursula and Skyler, I felt as if my own good time was lacking without the grace of their enchanting company. It struck me then, that my life was stilted. That the traveling had become a chore rather than a pleasure. That I coveted the bohemian exuded by those two. That I had traveled the world over, but I was still clueless about matters of the heart. Right there and then, I suffered two unfamiliar longings: I wanted to know what it's like to be as carefree as she; and I wanted to know what it's like to love and be loved by someone like him.

April 18 Tues

Skyler, minus Ursula, was rapping with the bartender, a fiftyish woman, with his back to me. My heart throbbed with turbulence as I crossed the threshold. I paused at the jukebox, my self-consciousness mounting, pretending to check out the tracks when in fact I was trolling for sangfroid. I bit my lower lip, brushed my hand through my long, brown hair... and abruptly stopped because it felt like a mimicry of a gesture that belongs to a lady far more alluring. When my frenzy tapered, I whirled around to the row of empty seats.

He had vanished. Had I conjured up his presence out of desperation? I plopped on a chair, swinging from ecstasy to misery. As I stared at my wine in disappointment, an unfamiliar hombre came in and plonked down to my right. The bartender took his order, then went to the back again to resume her chat with a customer.

“Hi, sweetie!” the newcomer slurred. His scarred kisser aroused alarm and disgust. Spunky as I am, I am still a single woman. What if the East Village IS different? What if the broods in hoodies who whisper “Crocodile?” at passers-by ARE dope-pushers, rather than the colorful personalities I envisage them to be?

I flashed a smile, and pretended to focus my interest on the picture of Frank Sinatra pinned to the adjacent wall.

“Oh, don’t be such a party pooper. Talk to me.” he jutted his head uncomfortably close.

I squirmed to the other side.

“Leave her alone,” surprise of all surprises, a voice that sounded just like Skyler’s commanded from the direction of the bathroom, as he cracked his knuckles.

“Why, you own her?”

“She’s my girlfriend.”

I spurted a mouthful of wine and coughed.

“You ok, dear?” Skyler wrap his arm around my shoulders. I was taken aback by the demeanor that left no doubt that he was more than willing to take it outside.

The boozier took off like a shot and was gone in a New York minute.

I quaffed my wine a little too fast, unable to stop hacking. Skyler patted my back, peering at the door, in case the troublemaker came back. He slipped his hand under my peacoat, no doubt just wanting to give my back an effectual pat. He overshot, and next thing, his palm was grazing my spine. I tingled. “What a smooth back,” he uttered as his fingers caressed it. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He pulled his hand out of my shirt when he realized his faux pax.

No, *I* am sorry, as our wild kisses in my imaginary boudoir came to an unceremonious end.

“Raven,” he turned to the bartender, “another round, please,” he waved his thumb between the two of us.

Still by my side, he leaned his elbow on the bar. He gave his rum and coke a languorous stir. How quickly the baddie reverted back to a heartthrob. He took a good look at me. Is he the lascivious man my mom warned to stay away from? (IF I had a mother, because I presume that is what mothers do: warn their daughters about lechers, including those you fancy.)

“I hear you’re an explorer.” He slugged down his drink, not taking his eyes off me.

“How’d you hear that?”

“People talk at The Parlor.”

I rubbed the dripping condensation on my glass. “Yes, I’ve been here and there, but it is not all glamour.”

“Glamour, shlamour.” His voice was gentle. “It is still remarkable. I imagine it’s not that easy for a young woman to travel alone.”

I remember thinking then, that in my odyssey I had seen some beautiful sights, made some wonderful friends, and went on the run from some con artists, derring-do that I sometimes embellish in my telling. Not one person had been genuinely curious enough to ask for the unvarnished version. Yes, there were times when my courage abandoned me, when I despaired and was ready to throw in the towel. So, what kept me going? *IT*.

Sensing that I was drifting into glum territory, he kindly changed the subject, “So where’re you from?”

“Palau.”

“Palau?” He fingered his glass. “Is that why you’re so pretty?”

What?! I choked again. Choking seemed to be my predominant reaction of the night. How is beauty associated with a region? Yet I was elated. Even so, I thought I should pretend to be self-effacing because modesty demands it. Perhaps I have journeyed too much for too long, picking up praxis here and there, my reflexes so practiced they are no longer heartfelt, but calibrated to suit local customs. More fundamentally, I myself don’t know who I am. I turned to observe a bunch of co-eds stumbling in, so he could not see me blush.

“Not as pretty as Ursula.” Straightaway I clamped my lips, mortified by the envy.

Skyler seemed oblivious to my misstep. “Ursula is fetching,” he acknowledged. “You, are exotic.”

“Huh?” It has never occurred to me to consider myself as such.

“You are... it is hard to tell your ethnicity. You’re Pacific Islander plus.”

“Plus?”

“Plus dark, plus light and all the shades in between. You could be Uyghur, or Turk... wait, here’s a better analogy. A cousin of mine is married to a guy who is half-Hawaiian and half-Japanese. Their daughter, you can’t tell if she is White, Pacific Islander, or Asian, or all of the above. With those soulful dun eyes of yours, you are like that and more. There is no race you can’t, in the right light, pass for.” He planted his face inches from mine. I was so dizzy I forgot to breathe. He pulled back, eyes still on me. “You are all the colors of the world.”

I held my tongue. The conundrum had at one time preoccupied me, a conundrum which had, among others, prompted this global adventure. That seems like eons ago though. The original impulse has waned. Yet I am still questing for *IT*.

“Well?” Skyler looked at me for confirmation.

“I don’t know about my origin. I’m an orphan.”

All at once his palm reached out for mine; the gesture reduced me to a quivering wreck. He didn’t ask further. Neither did I elaborate.

The warmth lingered when he removed his hand, a warmth that morphed into a criminally forbidden heat. He was more luscious by half up-close, his day-old stubble and the slight tilt of his lips giving the impression he was shooting an aftershave commercial. Suddenly overwhelmed by

a confused constellation of gratitude, admiration, shyness... and lust, I became tongue-tied, too bashful to face him, too disconcerted by his nearness. Afraid that he would find me boring, I muttered, "I, I got to get going."

"To The Greenhouse?"

I nodded, and quaffed the wine, grimacing at the acidity.

"I'll walk you there." My heart took such rapid wing I forget what I said in reply. "It's on the way to my place in Gramercy."

For a while, we strolled in silence past storefronts, restaurants, and clusters of bar patrons spilling onto the sidewalk. In front of a pizza parlor, a hobo begged, "Spare some change for a vet?"

Skyler extracted two dollars from his pocket.

"Isn't it better to buy him the pizza instead?" I asked.

"He might prefer something else. The money is given without conditions."

Midway on the slow track, on 1st and 13th, we looked up at the moonless sky, for no apparent reason, then turned to smile at each other at the same time. Did my feet touch the ground, or was I walking on air? All too soon, we reached the hostel. He cracked a winsome smile, then waved goodbye.

April 19, Wed

Sunlight flickering through the curtains woke me up this morning. I kept still, not wanting to rouse from the dream of Skyler that had sailed through my fitful sleep, residues of which lingered.

From out of nowhere came an urge pulling me downstairs. Why, I can't say, somehow presaging that something out of the ordinary was in the air. I heaved out of bed in a hurry, changed, and took the two flights of stairs down to the empty lobby. A slip of paper juttred out from between the corners of the storm door. I intuited that it was from Skyler.

Indeed, my name scrawled across it. In that instant, I believed in an intelligent universe. It read, 'Mimi, call me. Skyler' followed by his number. Wow! My heart pounded. Such touching quixotic charm! Just like the melodramas I devoured in my youth; like the bodice ripper paperbacks I couldn't put down. The hero always appreciates the manful thing to do to capture the heroine's affection. He goes to the ends of the world for her sake. He sacrifices his own comfort for her honor. He slays dragons and brings home the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Powerless to thwart his compelling, pure, sincere and fervent love, her resistance crumbles. Of course, they live happily ever after.

I cut a caper back to my room, passing another lodger to whom I gave a profuse wave. Life itself was a motion picture, Skyler the knight in shining armor, and me, the surprised, speechless heroine, but acutely, and profoundly grateful for how the drama was unfolding that very minute.

For three hours, I practiced saying, "Hi, Skyler, it's Mimi. I got your message." "Hi Skyler, Mimi here, what's up," and a hundred and five other variations of canned script.

At around two, confident I had my lisping under control, I called him. For all the groundwork, the sound of his voice over the phone still threw me. How I jabbered through the conversation, I can't say. We agreed to meet next Tuesday at three.

April 25 Tues

The moment I entered the café at St Mark's, I spotted him from out of the throngs of patrons, on the red cushioned banquette in the back. Toggled out in his signature black jacket, black shirt and black jeans, he was bent over a book, long legs crossed at the ankles, his hair tied with a bandanna ala Axl and Roses. His du jour was duende because unstudied and natural. Gosh, does any man have any right to be this ambrosial? I turned into a boulder in the middle of a bullet-time river of incoming and outgoing customers, the sounds muting into the distance. A small girl bumped into my leg, bringing me back to the modish café. Transfixed, I ambled toward him, savoring every pace, every glimpse. Without even half trying, he was Lower East Side snappy. He made sartorial black magically colorful.

When my shadow came within an inch of the table, he glanced up, shut the book and lay it down with surprising reverence. Tinted figures riding a chariot illustrated the cover of 'The Bhagavad Gita.' For a fleeting moment I was floored, but my instinct recognized the mysterious in him. I intuited his enigma held the key, if not to *IT*, then to a portal to *IT*.

He rose to his feet and kissed me on the cheek. "So glad you came, Mimi." And he calls me Mimi, my name, not Missy, my bar moniker.

"I'm glad you invited me. Thank you for walking me back to the hostel the other night."

"The pleasure's mine."

Now I wished we were at a drinking hole because I needed a few shots to steady my nerves.

"What can I get you?" Skyler stood up to await my choice.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I spied the Bhagavad Gita. “Ceylon Tea, please.” Not quite India, but close enough. Oh wait, maybe Darjeeling, but he was already bringing up the rear of the order line.

Back at his seat, he sipped his cappuccino, bemused as I kept plopping the tea bag in the mug. I stopped the reflex action and brought the brew up to my lips. He took in my nervous exploit with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Don’t you have to be at work?” I asked.

“It’s my day off. I work at a print shop. Not a very upwardly mobile career, I’m afraid.”

It had not crossed my mind to speculate on the nature of his job, but that it would be non-traditional, I was certain. “You’re young, you have time.”

“I’m twenty-seven.” He drank from his cup. “What about you?”

“Same. I guess.”

“You guess?”

“The nuns found me with nothing but the clothes on my back. They reckoned I could be two, or three, or four, so settled for three. My guestimate age is twenty-six.”

“I’m sorry.” His concern so moved me I lowered my gaze as I wrestled with a chaotic cauldron of emotions.

“Here,” he handed me a napkin. “Dab your eyes.”

We sat in serene silence, unruffled by the flurry around us while I collected myself. By and by, when my heart stopped trembling, I straightened up and gave him a smile. To break out of the weepy mood, I asked if Skyler was a nickname since everyone seems to have one at the bar.

“Nope, Skyler is my real name. Skyler Ishana Reamer.”

The name fascinates as much as the referent. “Ishana, as is Shiva? It is so celestial,” I breathed.

Bemusement burst out on his face as I regarded him. “Sky... Shiva... your parents must be very wise and spiritual.”

“Or, the nominal choice is a remnant from their hippie trail to India,” he laughed. “Do you want something else? The cannoli are exceptional.”

I shook my head and stop twirling the mug. “How’s Ursula?” The status of their relationship aroused my curiosity. True, everybody talks at the Whiskey Parlor, but I had never unearthed a morsel of scandal to suggest this or that.

“Fine,” he answered, all smiles.

A bolt of jealousy stabbed my heart. I forced a matching smile which I hoped was not too crocodilian. “Oh, good.”

What am I doing here with a guy who’s off-limit? Yet, although I questioned my judgment, what if what I truly wished was to take cover in blissful ignorance? What if knowledge meant guilt; what if guilt prevented me from seeing him again? To escape the dilemma, I contemplated the blue and gray weave of his mantilla, the nose Keanu Reeves would envy, the kissable lips... before I caught myself and darted my eyes down in embarrassment.

When the flush subsided, I hefted the Bhagavad Gita and flipped through the pages. “Do you agree with the Veda that devotion is supreme above all else?”

An impressed look lit up his face. “Krishna tells Arjuna that his idealism is subjective, as subjective as the reason Arjuna’s enemies/kinfolks invoke to justify their revolt. So, I guess, as Krishna emphasizes, the best course of action is to carry out your duties with devotion and with no attachments to the fruits.”

I forgot to blink as I considered him break out in a chuckle so fulgent my heart skipped a beat. “When the light shines on the path to Liberation, Mimi, I will follow, regardless of the price.”

The manner he searched deep into my eyes, the timbre of his voice – it was as if he meant the declaration for me alone.

Suddenly, I had an epiphany. Now I know why our destinies entwined. By making Liberation the aim, rather than the more commonly sought Enlightenment, he has shown me that it is okay to walk the path less traveled. Reality is bigger than our consensus notion of it. The filters through which I’ve contemplated *IT* could be more supple; I should stand ready to, judiciously, transcend conventional parameters. His heuristic approach has braced me to visualize greater magnitude in which to spread my wings and soar in Freedom.

The messenger, and the message he delivered, captivated me.