

# The Opening

The old man had never been to the bar before, and he spoke to no one as he walked in. He smiled while he browsed the memorabilia on the walls ... posters advertising concerts and sports events from decades gone by.

When he stepped up to the bar, the owner-bartender said “What’ll it be?”

His eyes scanned the row of tap handles imprinted with beer logos, and he said, “Maybe that dark ale there.”

Three young men with beards and long, black hair walked in and opened instrument cases on the stage. They tuned up, climbed up and began their set. The old man went out and danced. Alone.

A young woman with long, straight black hair was standing next to the cocktail table where he had left his drink. She was wearing a black sleeveless knit top imprinted with “I Love Weed”. In very small print below was “CA” ... obviously a double-entendre playing on the name of Weed, the northern California town.

He walked over between songs, picked up his glass, leaned to her and said, “You and me both.”

She said, “Plus about 99.5% of the people in this bar.”

The music and his dancing started again, and when the next song ended he stepped back. She said, “I would join you except for this”. She pointed down to a professionally-bandaged foot.

“Ouch! What happened there?”

She told him about an accident with the family dog.

He went back to dancing with whoever would join him, and after a song ended he walked back to the woman with the bandaged foot and said, “Let’s just dance our hands.” He put his hands out, and she took them. After they moved their hands around together, she started moving her feet too.

He leaned down and said, “Is that gonna be OK?”

She nodded, and they danced the whole song. Afterward, he said, “I know who you are” and stroked his hand across her bare shoulder.

He danced alone and with others for the rest of the night until, without saying anything to anyone, he walked out and disappeared down the street.

The next night he showed up again. When the bartender handed him his drink he said, “If anybody asks, you can tell them anything I said about myself was a lie. But anybody who dances with me tonight, their life will change forever.” The music had already started, and he began dancing alone again.

People talked at the bar. People drifted from the bar and talked to people standing around. Some moved to the booths and talked to people sitting there. He kept dancing, and by the time he disappeared at the end of the night, every woman in the bar had come out and danced with him.

As events developed in the following months, his two visits became the subject of much conversation, but he was never seen there again.

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Aisha was naked! Her veil, her burqa, everything was gone! Her arms and legs and even her hair were exposed as she stood amid ropes and pulleys and boxes all painted black. Even the walls were black! Men walked past. Would they think she was a prostitute? Where was the

village? Was this a dream? She touched her arms; they felt real. How did she get exposed this way? Would her husband beat her if he learned of it? Where was she, and who were all these strange people in this black room?

No one seemed to notice; not the men, and not the other women ... who were also undressed in lewd ways. Some were whispering; others were looking at flat objects in their hands. The woman next to her turned and said, "They're about ready for you out there."

Panic began to rise. *What should I do?* But the body took over. It said, "Is that last chart I gave you loaded in the queue?" Her body knew what to say and do! She would stay quiet; maybe in time she would learn what this is about.

"Yes it is, Megan. Larry is introducing you, so you need to step out there and get ready."

Her body walked to the edge of some huge drapes hung from somewhere in the darkness. Ahead was a large, flat area where a man stood in front of a thin object reaching the height of his chest. A very bright light was shining on him, and the words he spoke echoed as if he were a giant in what seemed to be a very large room. He raised his arm toward where she was standing and said, "And so, without further ado, I give you the woman who inspires us all ..." He leaned forward, smiled and spoke closely into a stalk jutting up. "...and I don't mean just because she signs all our paychecks ..." A roar of laughter arose from the darkness. "... Megan LaCrosse!"

The sound of many people clapping overwhelmed everything while her body stepped out and strode across the wooden floor. Walking produced a new sensation in the place reserved for her husband. How could this be? Surely her husband would beat her when he found it! Even if he didn't, the First Wife would discover it, and she would arrange for her to be cut again. They said when she was a little girl the horrible pain was only once in a lifetime, but now this?

The body seemed unconcerned about such things. Even propriety meant nothing. Her body stretched its bare arm toward him and grasped his hand with hers. Her other arm reached over his shoulder, and he placed his across her shoulder in the same way. They looked out together into the darkness and smiled, brazenly unabashed about their obscene display of adulterous affection in this public place.

He released her and walked away. The applause subsided. She stepped forward, and her voice echoed throughout the hall. "Thank you, Larry. Thank you for your kind words," she said, looking off to where he was walking into the curtains. She turned back. "And thank you all, not just for being here today but for being at your workstations, doing what you do day in and day out to keep us in the leadership position we have enjoyed for the last decade. This isn't about Megan LaCrosse, this isn't about Crosssystems, it's about you and the magic you create every day."

Some applause broke out and grew. When it ebbed she said, "I won't take a lot of your time because I do want you all to get back to work ..." Some laughter arose. "... but you have worked hard and you have worked smart, and I want to highlight some of your stunning successes this past year. I also want to point to a few challenges I see facing us in the months ahead."

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Megan peered through her veil. Shrouded figures were moving silently between buildings of baked mud. A shrill horn blasted in the distance, and she jumped to the side of the street. The cars do not stop or slow down ... unless they are seriously damaged from running over a goat or a woman who failed to get out of the way. A dust plume obscured everything for a few seconds, and when she could see again and looked across the street, three men with white cloths draped over their heads were standing, talking to each other and holding guns.

It was hot inside her burqa, so she hustled home to escape the blistering sun. Inside the courtyard, she bowed before the First Wife as she hoisted the jug of water off her head and set it on the table for the rest of the women to cleanse themselves.

*I don't know where this is or how in the hell I got here, but it's obviously not Oregon!* she thought as she watched the women perform their ablutions. She bowed and left for a small room to relieve herself. Her fingers discovered scar tissue where her clit should have been. *A mutilated body? Oh my god ... what else? I didn't see any gyms. I didn't see a Starbucks. Where is my administrative assistant? What about the jet? No helicopter? No horse ranch? No limo? No lover? How about dancing on weekends? Do they even have any weed around here? Did I die while I wasn't paying attention, and this is hell? Can I run this movie backward?*

Nothing ran backward; everything ran forward, and when she re-entered the large room one of the women handed her an empty ewer and signaled for her to go fill it again. She picked it up, bowed, went out the door and put it on her head for yet another trip to the well. Worries about lovers and limos became distant and irrelevant. What mattered was the blistering heat while walking to and from the well, the weight of the jug on the way back, and the increasing soreness of her bare feet.

Memories and thoughts flowed freely while she walked: apparently her name was Aisha. Apparently she was from a village near here, apparently her father married her last week on her thirteenth birthday to the owner of the large house where she was carrying the water, and apparently a man here can do anything, even take your life, if you don't please him. Megan faded into a dream; Aisha was the urgent reality.

By the end of the day she had made more trips than the fingers on both hands. Her calloused feet were as tired as every other part of her body, so after she finished serving the First Wife and the other three, she plunged her hand into the bowl of rice and lamb to pull out a fistful for herself and collapsed on her blanket on the floor.

She lay with her hand over her mouth, coaxing grains of cooked rice through the crack at the base of her fist. She chewed the grains and savored their taste and texture as her teeth turned the pellets into paste. Occasionally her mouth detected some meat fibers, and it gave them special attention between its molars, which ground out the precious proteins so nothing would go to waste. When her stomach received the bounty, it began working overtime, extracting nutrients to be sent to the muscles and organs crying out for more.

Safiyya scooped more rice into a bowl and brought it to her. She set it down and said, "Here, you should eat more." She brought a cup of water and set it on the floor. "Drink too. You must keep up your health."

Dear, dear Safiyya! She had been the youngest before Qasid married her, so she knew. Surely they all knew the pain of being the new wife, but only Safiyya acted like she cared. Aisha reached up and touched her arm. "Thank you," she said.

"It will grow better in time," Safiyya said. "You will see. Someday maybe we will all win a prize and be happy. It happened in a story my mother used to tell me."

Aisha said, "If we won a prize we wouldn't be able to do anything with it."

"Yes, that's true. Sometimes I think of many things I could do if I just had the chance."

"We have no power to do anything except for Qasid, though."

"Yes. No power," Safiyya said, "No power". She turned and left.

On the evening he called for her, the First Wife escorted her by the arm down a hall and through a door. The door clicked behind, and she stood in his magnificent quarters for the first time. He was sitting naked on a huge bed, looking down at a lighted screen ... part of a hard

object nestled between his knees. It was split open like a large, flat version of the clamshells the traders brought from the ocean, and his finger moved around on the lower part. What should she do? He didn't look up, he just kept staring at the images on the screen and moving his finger around.

Silk was everywhere on his bed; beautiful, lustrous silk. They said in her village silk was a source of power to those who owned it. Only those with great power had it, so it must be true. A red silk robe lay on the floor. He was so great he could treat even such a powerful thing with contempt! She stood in front of the door for a very long time, watching him. Sometimes he would reach beneath the fat on his belly and stroke his member.

"Come over here," he said, waving a hand in her direction but keeping his eyes on the screen. She stepped forward and stood at the edge of the bed.

He glanced up and said, "Take your robe off."

She pulled it over her head and stood naked in front of him, holding it in her hand.

"Get up here on the bed and lie on your back." When he saw it, he added, "Drop the robe on the floor."

She lay back on the silk, savoring the luxurious power flowing into her skin.

"So," he said, "You are the new one. Do you know what to do?"

It was her moment. It was the moment of her life! It was the chance to be and do what she was on this earth for! She brought forth the lessons she had been taught as a child: how to please a man. She used her fingers as her mother had shown her, and it grew just as she said it would. None of the other wives had told her anything ... as if they hoped to keep her from becoming his favorite. None except Safiyya. When word came down and the First Wife was coming near, she had whispered "Use your mouth". So Aisha used her mouth, and his member grew very large and hard.

"Lie back now and spread your legs," he said.

He smothered her body with his fat until he raised himself to line it up. He pushed in. He pulled out. He bellowed. He rolled off and smashed his hand against the side of her face.

She looked at him, raising her hand to cover the stinging in her cheek and the ringing in her ear.

"You are not a virgin!" he yelled.

"I have never been with a man before," she said.

His other hand hit the other side of her face. "You are a liar too!" His face turned red. "You whore! You have defiled my bed! Your family has disgraced my family! Your father will pay! He will pay dearly!"

"I have never been with a man before," she cried with a cracking voice into the hands she brought over her face. She began to sob.

"Get up! Get out of here, you stinking pig!"

She rose from the bed and stooped to pick up her robe.

"No! Leave your robe where it is. Go stand naked in the corner and wait for my men."

He picked up a small black object from a table next to the bed and put it to his face. He said, "Come in here now. I have some garbage for you to take out."

The door opened, and two large men entered. They were wearing pants ... the same as the men who carried guns.

"Take this whore somewhere and do whatever you want. In the morning, take it out and get rid of it. Never let me see this pig again."

The men grabbed her arms just below her shoulders and pulled her through the door. They laughed as they hauled her between them down the hall. They called out to their friends as they took her, naked and shaking, across the courtyard to a small building. There they threw her on the floor, and for the rest of the night men filed in and out, laughing and having their way.

When light came in the sky, two men picked her up and walked her outside. Women on their way to the well looked away when they saw her. More men gathered as they walked. She looked around, and children were following. One was carrying a ball; they were the same children who had been playing soccer yesterday in the street. They were dancing around, but they were staying back. Except for a few giggles and whispers they stayed quiet.

The group arrived at the place at the edge of the village. It was the place women talked about in hushed voices ... the place with large rocks piled beside an open, flat space on the dirt. Someone tied her hands behind her back. Someone tied her ankles together. Someone pushed her and made her fall. A family of striped hyenas chattered and howled in the distance.

A man picked up a big rock and held it over his head. He shrieked with laughter as if he were a soccer player who had just kicked one into the goal. His laughter became a "Yee-hah!" and he threw the rock down.

One of the sharp edges struck her just above the knee. A loud crack and a scream ripped through the quiet morning air.

A rock shattered her shoulder. The scream faded to a moan.

A rock hit her chest. It knocked her breath out. Sucking for air, she paid no heed to the pain or the cracking of her ribs.

A rock hit her face. She spat out some teeth. She could no longer see. It didn't matter. She saw this once when she was a little girl ... a woman stoned outside the village. It was terrifying, but it didn't last long. All the women seemed relieved when the battered body stopped twitching. Then her mama took her hand and led her home.

The sounds became methodical: men picking up rocks and throwing them down. Thump, thump, thump. Adulterous women, women seen speaking to men who were not their husbands, sometimes even showing their faces ... this woman was far from the first, so the men knew what to do. Thump, thump, thump.

The hyenas would come down as soon as everyone left. They would tear everything apart and haul it away, so even if the men didn't finish completely it didn't matter.

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The thump, thump, thump of the rotor blades was soothing, along with the whine of the turbine in back. Megan opened her eyes and looked across the table to Celeste. "Wow, I must have dozed off!" she said, turning to look out the window at the farmland rolling below.

"You push yourself too hard, Megan. Really, you should take a few days off and go somewhere."

"How long before we land on the building in Bellevue?"

Celeste looked at her GPS. "Looks like the Columbia River is coming up pretty soon, so we'll be in Washington State. Maybe 45 minutes, maybe less, depending on how air traffic control routes us through the SEATAC sector. I can ask the pilot if you want."

"No, that's OK. It's not that important. I want to change the meeting agenda. That's important."

"Change it to what?"

"I've decided we're going to rename the Foundation, and we're going to bring more focus to the mission. Forget everything else; I want to bring the Board up to speed about this."

"New name? What's the new name?"

“Instead of Institute for World Peace, I want to call it Peace of the Justice.”

Celeste smiled as she tapped the words into her tablet. “Cute. I like the play on words. What’s the mission now?”

“Same mission: promoting world peace. But, you know, you can’t have real peace until you have justice.”

“I think everyone knows that, Megan.”

“Do you know what the single biggest injustice is in the world today?”

“There are so many things, it would be hard to say.”

“It’s only hard to say because we live here in comfort like this. We have no idea what’s going on in other places, and I want my foundation to expose it. If we open it to the light of day, it will wither and die.”

“You still haven’t told me what it is.”

“Women, Celeste. Women. The way women are treated in the world. That’s our new mission: letting people know ... letting women know they don’t have to accept it.”

“You’re the boss, but just to play devil’s advocate, isn’t that something a lot of groups are working on already?”

“Yes they are. Ours will be special because we have a connection. It’s not just numbers and facts; we know how horrible it really is.”

“We do?”

“You remember when I had you drop me off at that little bar in Medford?”

“I wish you would stop doing things like that, Megan. You never listen to me. What if someone discovered who you are? No bodyguards? You could easily get kidnapped.”

“What’s the point of being a billionaire if you have to stop being a woman?”

“But you could take the jet and go anywhere! You could fly to LA or New York ... or even Paris or Tokyo. You don’t need to hang out in slummy bars in little towns!”

“You know how I feel about rich people ...” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “All the jewels and clothes ... plastic faces, plastic men.” She looked across the table again.

“Slummy bars and little towns are where real people live, Celeste. Life comes from people, not puppets.”

Celeste stared to the other side of the cabin. “So anyway, what happened in the bar?”

“An old man was dancing by himself when I walked in. I ordered a drink, and the man next to me said I should go dance with him. He said the old guy told the bartender anyone who danced with him would have their lives changed forever. I thought it was funny and he was kind of cute, so I went out and danced with him. At the end he kissed me on the cheek and said, ‘I know who you are.’”

“See? That’s what I’m saying! It’s dangerous!”

“No it’s not! He didn’t say *who* I was, he said he *knew* who I was. Who am I, anyway? Am I just the owner of the world’s biggest business software company, or am I a fountain of life like everybody else? I sure hope it hasn’t gotten to where I’m no longer the latter.” She stopped and took a deep breath. “Anyway, you didn’t let me get to the point of the story.”

“Which is?”

“Which is another woman lives with me now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Is this some secret affair? You need to tell me when you do something like this, Megan!”

“You’re looking at the other woman.”

“Megan, you know how hard I work for you. Please don’t play games.”

“No games. I am no longer just Megan. I’m now also Aisha.”

Celeste stared. She looked down and tapped her tablet. “Your appointment with Dr. Woolf isn’t until Wednesday. I’ll call and see if we can get it moved up.”

“Cancel Dr. Woolf, Celeste. I don’t need a shrink any more. All the stuff Dr. Woolf and I were working on, that’s history.”

“Oh my. This is serious, Megan!”

“It’s serious, but not because I’ve gone nuts. It’s serious because I’ve gone to Africa and come back.”

Celeste put down her tablet and stared again.

“You don’t need to look at me like that. Everything’s fine. But it’s like the old man said: my life has changed, and so has Aisha’s.”

“You need to tell me everything, Megan. Otherwise, I can’t help you.”

“Here’s all I know: I can’t talk about dates and times because time seems to mean nothing, but I found myself in a dusty village somewhere. It reminded me of Saharan Africa from when we did that promotional tour. Or it could have been somewhere in Asia ... you know, Iran, from what I hear, or one of the -stans. It was a little village in a desert, that’s all I know, and I was the youngest of five wives married to a big, fat man. I was a slave ... his sex slave and a slave to the other wives. When he sent for me the first time, he discovered my hymen was broken, so he threw me away like a piece of garbage. I spent the rest of the night being raped I don’t know how many times, and in the morning they dragged me out to the edge of town and stoned me to death.”

Celeste dropped her jaw and stared. “And this was Aisha? You were in her body?”

“Yes. Apparently we switched or something, although we were still in our own bodies too. I know, it doesn’t make sense, I’m just telling you what it seemed like.”

“How long has Aisha been in your body?”

Megan’s voice changed: a slightly different timbre, a slight difference in how some words were pronounced. She said, “Ever since we were backstage before I gave my presentation.”

“Wow, really? This is confusing, Megan!”

“I know it is, and I am sorry.”

“So Aisha is part of you now, and she never really got killed?”

“I am Aisha, Celeste!”

“Yes, and you’re still alive. But you’re Megan too, right? I mean, you gave the presentation and everything.”

Megan’s voice came back. “Yes, that’s true.”

“So who got stoned to death?”

“Both of us, Celeste, both of us. Sorry I can’t explain it any better.”

Celeste glanced out to the mountains and rivers passing below. She looked back and said, “So that’s good, in a way. You’re back, Aisha is you, and so now she doesn’t have to put up with that slave stuff any more.”

The voice changed again. “I’m free,” she said, “but my sisters aren’t, and my friends. And all the girl babies they will have.” She paused and frowned. “The slave world is the only one they know, Celeste. Girls are taught freedom is evil; this is how I grew up, so I’m telling you, I know! Most of them, even if they learned how you live, they would be afraid to be free. They are in a trap, and they are treated like animals ... just one step up from the goats and the camels! I was one of the lucky ones; I displeased my husband right away, so he had me killed. The unlucky ones they work to death, or they die from having babies ... especially when they are too

young. A friend I grew up with, her father married her to a rich man when she was nine, and she died having a baby when she was eleven. My whole life I was taught my only purpose was to please a man. After puberty I had to keep myself hidden until my father could find the man he wanted to marry me. After that it was even worse; I had to live inside a shroud.

“I was shocked when I first came into Megan’s body. The women showing their faces and hair? The way they talked freely to the men and showed themselves? I thought they all must be prostitutes!” She looked down and shook her head. She raised it and continued, “... but it’s upside down. In your world, women are free, and in my world we are the prostitutes. We are people, though! The women and girls where I lived, they are no different than us here, and if we don’t do something no one will.”

“And so your Peace of the Justice Foundation ... what will it do?”

Megan’s voice came back. “I don’t know yet. I want the Board to think about it and develop proposals for our next meeting. Education, I suppose, although it would have to be something really innovative because of the way, like Aisha said, most of the women would be too afraid to listen ... at least in that part of the world. This isn’t just about Africa, though. I’ve been thinking about this ever since my address at the annual supervisors’ meeting, and I was googling it just before I dozed off. It’s happening in this country too, Celeste, especially with religions. Probably everywhere in the world, so the Foundation’s mission will be global. Maybe we can develop a grant program to get specialists working on the education thing. I’m just thinking out loud here; we’ll see what the Board comes up with. Maybe a prize too ... you know, like the Nobel?”

“If you do a prize, what will you call it?”

Megan looked around the cabin. “Yeah, that’s good. What would we call it?” She closed her eyes and brought her hand to her forehead.

Aisha pulled her hand away. “I know!” she said with a sparkle in her eyes. “We will call it the ‘Safiyya Prize’. Safiyya is my friend.” She sighed and settled in her seat, adding, “My dear, dear Safiyya. Now you will have your prize!” She smiled and pressed back against the cushion, letting the vibration ever so gently massage her back. She caressed a pillow by her side. “This is silk,” she said. “Silk is full of power.”

Celeste was tapping on her tablet.

“Here’s something else to type in, Celeste: I want to sleep only on silk from now on. Only silk sheets. Great tasks are ahead; I need great power.” She smiled and nodded at the snow-capped mountains passing below. “Yes, great power, Safiyya, great power.”