

## THE CRIMSON DANCE

Guru Dan Fennel ambles across the maple floorboards of Yoga Sky Studio. His elegant toes scatter cushions and stroke the cheek of a young disciple, supine on her mat. Dan had traveled from Madras to Seoul on foot. On the way, he threaded into his string of malas: dharma transmission, monk ordination, chakra distillation, as well as the heirloom of the Lineage Xun Yun. In the snowy heights of Nanga Parbat, he'd conquered the heart of a famous dakini and appropriated her secret teaching, the Crimson Dance. A vitamin bomb for starving souls, Dan Fennel flies from meridian to meridian releasing the prisoners of the mind and delivering them to the gates of Eternal Dawn.

I look very alien in this debonair attic, in my black outfit – sneakers, biker's shorts and sports bra. People here at the seminar wear baggy tunics of blurred rainbow, barefoot and unabashed of their dirty heels: hippies of various ages, a shaggy married couple, an organic mother in felt gingham. I imagine fleas scurrying in their dreadlocks.

I'm used to the fresh honest sweat of the fitness club, the tangy taste of gym equipment in the air. My abdominals ache from the sit-ups, my biceps and triceps from barbells, my gluteus maximus from lifting weights. Here, muscles on hairy arms coexist with substantial bellies. Sandal wood incense mingles with the sweat of unwashed bodies to produce flavors I don't know how to interpret – I'm a rare guest to Kreuzberg, the home of Berlin's granolas. My address is Grabower Straße in the east, a student hostel in an ugly tower block.

The murmurs subside and the course participants sit cross legged on the blue and pink cushions. Dan's legs are pleated in the lotus position.

“Dear yogis and yogini,” he begins with a trained flourish, “you are here to dance your way to eternal bliss. But before you even start, remember one thing: our rainbow has only one colour – crimson.”

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Lev turned twelve the year I was born. He gave up playing yard soccer for ironing old bedsheets repurposed as nappies, after our mother had scrubbed off my shit with laundry soap. He ironed thoroughly, on both sides, as the hygienic rules prescribed in the era before Pampers.

When I was a toddler, Lev cuddled me and lifted me up in the air. He told me exciting tales of Baba Yaga. When I was able to follow more complex plots, he read me *The Wizard of Oz*.

Lev always kept me close to him at the best school in town where he became a young and popular math teacher. He was such a good teacher that even the doorstops in his classroom learn differential equations. All the females in school, from six to sixty, were unrequitedly in love with him.

When I entered pre-teens, Lev custom-tailored his behavior for my age. We romped about and pinched each other in tasteful understatement of sibling love. He loved to drag me to the mirror, blocking my arms with one hand and moving my black curls from my temples with the other to reveal the protruding ears, a flaw I was ashamed of on my otherwise pretty tanned self. “Dumbo, Dumbo!” he jibed. I growled and kicked him with my heels, trying to get his balls but would always miss. I was half-offended but I knew it was just an exercise for me, a challenge to keep my self-esteem high no matter what. At school, I was the most popular girl: there, Lev never forced me to wear my locks up.

But then – “Nina, you are predestined for something very special,” Lev would say, stopping the rough-housing abruptly. “You will understand what your vocation is very soon, just listen to your inner voice.”

It was Lev rather than my mother who first told me all I needed to know about the menstrual cycle. To take the edge off puberty, he bought me Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, and we discussed all the characters in great detail. Once, when I was sleeping over in his rented apartment, Lev showed me my first porn on a videotape, just for the sake of my understanding the mechanics.

“True lovemaking is nothing like this though,” he commented. “Porn is artificial light: screw in the bulb, put the plug it into the socket, press the switch. True lovemaking is a light wayward and free, and it comes in many forms: sunrise, sunset, rainbow, polar lights: if *he* can give you one of these, then he is your man, and you are worth all the princes in the world.”

Lev left me on the threadbare living room couch facing the screen. Naked acrobatics in the sauce of artificial groaning could not drown out his newlywed wife Lana’s crooning, live in the flesh, quietly, then louder behind his bedroom door.

I was waiting for my vocation to be revealed but the voice was quiet to inaudibility. One day it seemed to whisper “actress”, another day, “doctor”, “fashion designer”, “psychologist”, “programmer”.

Lev had met Lana at school. She was a new English teacher – the prettiest, smartest young woman in town. When they married, all the females at school boycotted them for months. This amused Lev and Lana to no end. They were a gorgeous couple. They called themselves L&L. Despite the ten years age difference, Lana and I hit it off at once. She was the positive to my negative. We were of the same height, same stature, similar features, but she had silky

blond hair and I, dark and curly. Lana was a language genius but a nitwit in science. I was top of the class in science but it took me ages to learn five foreign words.

Lev wanted children at once but Lana argued that she could not possibly have them in a country with medieval medical care. As inflation followed default, teachers found themselves working for peanuts. She had to take on more and more private students to make ends meet. Lev was too passionate about his work to tutor at home. He was forever busy with project after project: a class trip, a school play of his own composition and direction. He tried to persuade Lana to stay, but Lana got ever more restless, ever paler, shriveling like an anemone in our harsh Eastern-European country not clean or good enough for the Oxford English she had learned from expensive imported cassettes.

We applied for refugees status at the German Embassy. It took two years to get the emigration permit. Meanwhile, Lev had already braced himself for the changes. He was talking optimistically of opening a private school in Germany, where he would be director and Lana head of curriculum.

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L&L's teacher diplomas were not recognized by the local bureaucrats but Lana managed to find a job at an expensive private school where qualifications were crucial while the diploma issue was not too strict. Lev, however, failed and the employment office offered to train him as a programmer. He agreed and studied his new profession with his usual perfectionist passion, finishing the course with highest grades and finding a good job with an internet pharmacy.

I was enrolled in the town's comprehensive school for the A-levels, struggling with a baby's command of German for months, language coming upon me slowly, like a car with

two flat tires. My new classmates ignored me, or gossiped about me behind my back. They would often fall silent when I entered the classroom.

Boys treated me as a different, incompatible species. I fancied Max, a lanky boy who was not as arrogant as the rest in the class, and he looked like Salinger's Zooey as I imagined him. Max wasn't squeamish about me; he just didn't know I existed.

Lev waved off my laments. "They will admire you in the end," he said. "You'd better concentrate on your studies so you get a good GPA." Lana gave me a lot of advice about getting more recognition but, for some reason, it didn't work for the German teen environment – they were just too different.

Because of my tan complexion, the drama teacher gave me the role of Hermia in "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Whenever I was on at the rehearsals, my classmates would double over with laughter and forget their own lines. It was not my comic talent that accounted for that, but my heavy accent. After several futile attempts at defending me, the drama teacher reassigned the role.

Although I still had enough knowledge of math from my old school to get the highest grade, I did my A-levels with an average score that was far below the criteria necessary to study medicine.

"I thought we'd discussed what Franny stood for," Lev said, "I hoped you'd got the message. I didn't mean you should go to such extremes, but Franny's impulse is right. Strive to nothing short of perfection. However, what you have hitherto achieved is just self-indulgent mediocrity." Words formed on my tongue to justify myself but instead, I burst into tears.

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"A Crimson Dancer is afraid of nothing, not even of death," Dan Fennel claims. "In the East, everybody is used to it, it's not a big deal. On the waters of the Ganges, you can often

get a wonderful view of a random hand or foot, leftover from a cremation, licked but not entirely consumed by fire. To immunize yourselves from fear, find a dead body to contemplate. I'm sure there are chances for such contemplation even in our safe western world. Think of highways, for instance."

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Lana and I defined my type as Deep Winter. We sat poring over the latest issues of Vanity Fair and Cosmopolitan in the library until we hatched a chic style. It took one thousand euros for my prom dress to materialize. Ruby red, my dress featured a sequined bodice and a huge organza pouf skirt that glided across the floor. My corsage had a huge Bird of Paradise on it.

Lana put some French hair gel into my locks to make them taut and bouncy. She dusted my face with a shimmery, translucent powder. She had trained me to walk in my new high heeled shoes for a week before I flew up in them, gravitation-free, onto the assembly hall stage to be handed my mediocre A-levels diploma. The boys gazed. The Aryan bitches' jaws dropped.

Before Bryan Adams' question of whether anyone "Ever Loved a Woman" dissolved unanswered in the air, I was swept away into Max's old Volvo, away from the crowded official feast. His parents were not at home but their bar was stocked with a half-filled bottle of Irish Cream.

Max was already an experienced lover. I didn't even feel the pain of the transition that Lev had told me about. I couldn't decide whether it was polar lights or rainbow but it was definitely not an electric bulb. The following morning, as the sun rose, Max was even better than in the short hours. When I came for the third time, my inner voice shouted, "Fashion designer!"

We exchanged our mobile phone numbers. I waited for his text. Lana and I decided to keep the adventure a secret from Lev until the continuation of my romance was secured. I waited

for two weeks, then gave up and wrote Max a text message. I waited for another week. He didn't reply. Instead of "fashion designer", the inner voice chanted, "Loser."

The Cable TV was showing "Boogie Nights", the glitzy world of the porn. Dirk Diggler and his wonder dick, Amber Wave, Roller Girl – they didn't even have their A-levels, yet they were so exciting, and shone in a genuine way.

"I wish I could fuck life away like this," I said.

"Haven't you already screwed in your first bulb?" Lev inquired.

Lana opened her mouth to say something but changed her mind. She looked at me guiltily. I was not angry at Lana who hadn't kept my secret, but I was furious with Lev. I didn't burst into tears. I clenched my fists.

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My carriage had gone down a different siding, parting with Lev's locomotive. I went to study at Berlin University, majoring in psychology and informatics.

Berlin and I hit it off at once: hustle and bustle, unassuming, anonymous. Here, my dark looks were an asset again, and I was insatiable. Max had certainly turned the motor over under the hood of my sex drive. I understood that this was my one trusty specialty. I learned to wring my fun out of even recalcitrant, untalented species. I didn't give a damn whether it was a rainbow or artificial light. My men came from all walks of life. I met them at night clubs, lecture halls, cafés and public toilets. I knew professors, janitors, photographers, rabbis, philosophers, professional beggars.

I didn't visit L&L often. "How is your unbearable lightness of being?" Lev used to greet me at the door.

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At twenty-six, I started my diploma paper on artificial intelligence, at the thrilling, cutting-edge intersection of psychology and informatics. Also, I decided it was time for a real relationship. I stuck with Nils, a summa cum laude physics PhD.

Nils serviced me in tiers, proceeding downwards from the top of my head, as if ticking off a list of caresses that he had read about in the how-to books on sex. But he was so generous, buying me everything I fancied. I always drove his little Suzuki, since he was scared of the Berlin multi-lane craziness. I paid nothing for our kinky, edgy, irregularly planned apartment in Friedrichshain, three rooms and a wardrobe room adjacent to the kitchen. I prided myself in assembling an IKEA bed and chest of drawers. I bought fake Tiffany lamps and even painted a picture, an abstract smearing portrait of myself, in Picasso style.

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“The Crimson Dance is practiced naked and floating in midnight space,” Dan Fennel instructs. “To take off, you must cleanse yourselves of the mind soot. Crimson Dance is an act of love. Wouldn’t you go to the shower before going to bed with a paramour? Only you’ll need more than a superficial scrub. I know a little Ganges goddess whom we shall invite to do the cleaning. Sit down in a boat with her. She’ll put her hand inside your belly and part your skin. She’ll take out your intestines and rinse them in the sacred river.”

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Lana asked Lev for a delay in childbearing because she had been promoted to Head of Curriculum. She was working on new concepts, always away at pedagogical conferences. Lev was very proud of her. Only now, Lana confided, he started a new streak of petty gripes concerning the lunch packages she made for him, “What nitwit would put dried dates in a



Gorgonzola sandwich? You eat gorgonzola with fresh figs, it's a culinary axiom, write it down if you can't remember.”

It took Lana two years to get established in her new position. Her job was secure. She could relax now, and it was time for a family expansion. But she needed a rest from the stress, and her friendly colleague recommended yoga.

Lana and yoga hit it off instantly. Her lithe body was created these contortions. After the beginner's course, she just kept going. She did the classic Hatha, the playful Anusara, the athletic Ashtanga, the cushioned Ayengar, the sweaty Bikram, the snake-spine Kundalini, all down the alphabet list of the existing yogas. She was already becoming anxious when she heard of an off-list, very rare, almost extinct variety, the ancient Crimson Dance that was yoga's precursor and required thousands of hours to master. Luckily, the only available facilitator of this practice was coming to Berlin shortly.

For Dan Fennel's weekend course, Lana stayed at Nils' and my place. She came back stunned, fulfilled, dancing crimson all about the apartment – a slow, weird, erratic thing. She said the guru had taken a fancy to her and offered her the gift of his exclusive tutelage.

It didn't take Lana long to devise a trick to see the guru in private, an ostensible reconnaissance trip to London at Easter break. I saw my sister-in-law off at the Berlin Schönefeld airport.

Of the reconnoitering she did nothing at all. She didn't even go to London, having made a detour to East Sussex straight from Gatwick, where Dan picked her up in his aptly coloured crimson Citroën to carry her off to his forest lair.

She came back speaking in half verse, telling me of such secret practices for the initiated that I was jealous. They practiced in the forest with deer staring them in the eyes, they practised while he was driving them to the chalky cliff coast, they did it lying on the cool sand at the teal North Sea that had “raised its skirts to flaunt vulvas of brine”, perfunctorily covered

with a patchwork blanket, packed like herrings in a tin. “Is my manhood exposed?” Dan would ask in a tone more exhibitionist than concerned.

They continued the sessions via email and Skype. Dan’s paramount rule was to see their connection as pure business, a vehicle for Lana’s spiritual ascension. If she were to fall in love, the tutelage would be terminated at once.

Lev was startled by Lana’s rekindled lust. He saw it as a good sign: she was ready to conceive, after all. Propitiously, Lev had made considerable progress in his company as well. He had been appointed Executive Manager, with a dramatic salary increase. He was brimming with ideas on improving the technological processes, personnel development and increasing sales.

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“Enough theory,” Dan Fennel murmurs in his finely tempered voice. “We must release our bodies into space. But first, we must fill them with sacred fuel. Imagine two bees munching their way into your stomach through your skin, leaving two tiny holes,” They buzz inside you then leave through some other place. Then four fleas fly into your stomach; then sixteen. They fly in and out, multiplying, until there is nothing inside you but golden flutter and sonorous treble. We’re charged and are willing to dance.”

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I liked Nils more and more. Yes, he was no genius in bed. But I knew how to take care of that. Much more importantly, he never found fault with me, never scolded me for procrastinating in my diploma paper. We started calling ourselves N&N. We started to talk about children. I almost stopped seeing other men.

I wanted a Canary Islands vacation but Nils didn't like planes, so I drove us to the Baltic Sea. When I was changing highways, from the A11 to the A20, I saw his face twitch in a way that was new. I could hear his heartbeat. His sweat besprinkled my cheek. He started choking. He grabbed my right arm which was on the steering wheel while going one hundred fifty kilometers an hour, and urged me hoarsely to stop. I nearly lost control of the car but managed to careen it to a stop at the hard shoulder.

Hashimoto thyroiditis is a disease unpleasant to discover but quite manageable when treated. On a hormone tablet a day, Nils would live a hundred years without much discomfort.

On the bill that Hashimoto issued to Nils, there was only one item: his libido. After work, he would lie on our IKEA leather couch watching German comedy shows until he dozed off.

I felt unused, and I put on weight. One evening, for the time of the stupid show, when Nils didn't need me anyway, I sneaked out to the fitness center. I started with my abs, then my buttocks followed. Soon enough, I liked myself in the mirror much better.

I was sweating away on the ellipticals when I spotted a very interesting specimen on a treadmill opposite. There was an appealing nutmeg note to his aroma. We tacitly got off our contraptions, and receded into the shadows of the locker room. After we were done for the first time, we introduced ourselves. His name was Nodirbek.

After the second time, he waited for me to get dressed. We talked some more. It appeared he was the son of an Uzbek diplomat. Nodirbek saw me off to my front door. Clean and pristinely perfumed, I fell onto Nils' couch, into his drowsy cuddle.

I bounced back and forth for months. Nils was so unsuspecting that I lost all caution, or maybe, I secretly hoped to be caught. I left my smartphone with all its sexting notes lying around. And one evening, Nils met me at the entrance door with "Who is Mr Barbell?" He

had finally picked up my smartphone when it buzzed and treated himself, ad nauseam, to my biceps-abs correspondence.

Nils didn't want to break up. He wanted me to fight for him, to beg for forgiveness, to make earnest never ever again promises. We both cried. But I knew that every innocuous little argument would from that point on end with a sly barbell reminder, and I packed my things.

My part-time student job only afforded me a hostel. I missed the Friedrichshain apartment close to so many stylish cafés and lovely boutiques, and for Nils' little Suzuki I'd so much loved to drive. I sold all my pretty things on eBay. The lace lingerie, high heels, studded leather purses were gone, half-heartedly packed, at one eighth of the price Nils had paid. Now I wore Vaude jackets and sports bras. I was almost in love with Nodirbek. We shared the same talent for sex. I started calling us N&N.

I thought about my diploma paper a lot but I couldn't bring myself to grapple with its intellectual bulk. Its topic had long since lost its glamour or relevance. So I shifted my focus to indoor climbing. I hit thirty, but everybody mistook me for a teen.

Nodirbek defended his Master's thesis cum laude, and found his first job. He was desperate to marry me, earnestly, sighing into my navel, but he was even more desperate in not wanting to upset his parents. He wanted us to move in together but I set a condition that he inform his parents of my existence first. It took him a year to brace himself for this feat.

His mother feigned a heart attack on Skype, and his father said, maintaining calm and level voice, "So well then. If she really loves you, come to Uzbekistan together. Marry her and she will learn our Uzbek values, cook *plov* and revere her parents-in-law. If she doesn't want to come with you," the Uzbek diplomat continued, "she doesn't love you enough. I'm an extremely liberal father, Nodirbek, I'm making you an offer my family will curse me for but fatherly love is cruel love. Come to Uzbekistan at the end of the year. We'll get you a

beautiful Uzbek virgin of excellent stock. If you don't like her, I, in my unheard-of generosity, will bring you another virgin to meet. And if you don't like her either, there will be the third and last, whom you will have to marry whether you like her or not. And then – you are free to return to Germany. An Uzbek wife will guard you against all ill, and the percentage of your salary to transfer to your family monthly will be lenient indeed, just fifty-one. Look at your mother, she grew as thin as a straw worrying about you, you little selfish punk, think of her health.”

Nodirbek sulked. He didn't call his parents for a month. But then he was summoned on skype again, where his mother feigned a second heart attack. Full screen, Nodirbek saw orderlies carry her usual big bulk, not straw-like at all.

Nodirbek hopped onto the very next flight to Tashkent. Before the turn of the year, he married the very first Uzbek virgin shown to him. They live two streets away in Berlin, for what his forty-nine per cent salary affords them. When we meet at Walmart, he pretends not to know me.

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The Head Manager showed Lev three complaints from his team members: “peremptory”, “verbally blunt”, “forcing changes”.

“Maybe in Eastern Europe where you come from, this is normal behaviour. We know you wish the best. But here, people are sensitive, brought up to respect themselves and others, and are not used to their dignity being challenged so vehemently. We appreciate what you have achieved – our sales have really soared, but as heavy as my heart is, I can't afford to keep you at the helm.”

Lev returned to his former desk only to write a resignation letter. He came home, and he had hardly opened his mouth to tell Lana of the changes, when she interjected with an announcement that it was not too bad, since she had decided not to have children at all; she'd

had enough of them at school. Lev paused and took a deep breath. “Then you will have time to look around you and see what a pigsty the apartment has turned into since you started your mumbo jumbo,” he said.

Lev went to the employment office to ask for a work placement in a kindergarten. The counsellor raised her eyebrows but said that there were plenty, and if he took the dramatic salary decrease in stride, he wouldn’t have to wait long for a job offer: there was a severe lack of pre-school teachers.

As luck would have it, very soon Lev was on a new job honeymoon. He was gaining reputation town-wide: a bear of a man with huge tender hands, standing out among his exhausted, testy female colleagues. Love oozed from Lev like honey from a hive. His toddler charges never disobeyed.

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In her pre-Fennel days, Lana used to visit me in Berlin in the first week of summer school break, to pamper herself with what she self-consciously called a fashion-horse race. I was glad she decided to resume the habit. I loved the way she chatted non-stop, a kind of decompression after the stress of the academic year. But this time, she was reticent when she stepped off the Intercity Express.

“Dan won’t teach me anymore because I broke the rule,” she said. She had been just a couple of centimetres short of enlightenment.

Instead of the bourgeois Kurfürstendamm, her usual pre-Fennel destination, she asked me to take her to the eclectic Bergmannstraße. We swam along with the tourist throng, past ethno delis, antique and fair trade stores. We ate tofu curry at a vegan restaurant. Cheeky sparrows kept pecking at our fingers, demanding their Berlin bird tax from our plates. Out of tune with

the previous meal, at noon, Lana ordered us two glasses of Irish Cream, then another two, and we headed towards the subway in a lilted stagger.

Lana spotted a long red skirt on an outdoor clothes rack of the Ying&Yang Shop, snatched it off the peg and pulled me into the shop and into the dressing cabin. She took off her tunic and jeans. I was holding the skirt for her to slip into. But instead of trying it on, she took off her bra and undies as well.

It was the first time I saw her stark naked. I threw the skirt over the curtain. Lana had turned our symmetry upside down, and I had to fix it at once: my positive to her negative, I took off my own clothes. In the wavy mirror, our colours ran together, transferring the blood of her blues into me.

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Lana continued her spiritual journey on her own. Dan had taught her enough that she knew the route and she even invented some extras. She bought sunglasses with crimson lenses. She lived on tomatoes and radishes. She prepared her classes under an infrared lamp. But soon, Lana understood that without Dan's supervision, she couldn't progress fast enough. She decided to double the exercise time, practicing in the early hours, when Lev was asleep, coming to school with a vacant face, crumpling with fatigue. But this also failed to accelerate her progress, so she started skipping work. At first, the school administration was mildly surprised that Head of Curriculum should behave like a stray pupil, but it didn't take long for them to lose patience. Lana was fired.

She roamed about the town, trying on bijoux jewelry or wrapping herself in silk shawls at a local department store. She looked for dead animals to stare at, found sparrows and hedgehogs, and even a run-over fox. She took to dancing naked, in the parks, on tram stops, in supermarkets. Every time the police brought her to the mental clinic but she was always released for lack of beds.

Lev tried tenderness, persuasion, rebuke. When all this proved in vain, very reluctantly, he applied his IT expertise to open Lana's email account, to treat himself, ad nauseam, to the two years of her crimson correspondence.

It cost him all his will power not to make any comments as he issued Lana a key to the pre-furnished two room apartment he had rented at the other end of the town, ready to move in.

Lana failed to learn her new address. She kept returning to the old L&L domicile in the middle of the night after a day of non-stop outside practice, racking the keyhole with an unfitting key until Lev had to let her in before the neighbors called the police. "Clean of mind soot, my rainbow has only one color, my uterus washed, I'm charged and am willing to dance," she would chant on the doormat, addressing her wedding portrait on the wall that Lev didn't have the heart to take down.

It was on her birthday in early May that Lana finally made her ascension – on the A9 highway on-ramp, stark naked, inflamed by sunset. Balancing on the median, she performed the Crimson Dance with the perfection of a thousand hours – until a tractor-trailer tumbled by. The air it displaced sucked her svelte shape onto the road toward the oncoming rush hour of more wind and speed. The sun tumbled down into the fast tide, blinding the drivers who never knew what hit them. Fragile skin torn open and squished to a pulp, the blood splattering out, mixed with the red rays squirting in all directions, filaments flapping, tendons ripping, bones cracking, a crimson heart bouncing away on the waves of traffic.

Lana arrived at the gates of Eternal Dawn escorted by twelve enchanted souls, making the headlines of all the tabloids nationwide. The traffic camera recording of the multiple car collision was leaked on YouTube. Before my mind could stop me, my forefinger hit the playback button, and of the millions of views, one hundred were mine.



The afternoon nap time was over. I waited for the toddlers to wake up, enveloped in the thick flowery-snotty scent you can only encounter in day care – the essence of pre-sin joys and sorrows, a toy lost or found, a mother leaving or coming back.

Lev emerged from the dormitory. He dodged to fit into the door frame. On his left arm sat a drowsy two-year-old, her eyes sticky with sleep. I blocked Lev's way. He bent around me as if I were a tree. In each of his two eyeglass lenses, I saw my portrait: dismembered, Picasso-abstract.

Lev put the girl on the dressing table and took off her soiled diaper. He rolled the diaper together, threw it into the garbage bin. The girl smiled blissfully as he wiped and powdered her, talking to her in the soft voice I thought I'd forgotten. He flipped a new diaper around the girl's bottom and closed the Velcro strips.

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"Time to get up, Crimson Dancers," Dan Fennel proclaims. "All is allowed – forget about shame. Open your shoulder blades like wings, and off you fly." Out of a deftly hidden CD player, subterranean sitar music rises like hot steam. To force myself to dance, I imagine the sitar catechize, "Have You Ever Loved a Woman?" and whirl about in a sort of waltz.

I know from Lana it is Fennel's habit to wander through the course room and give the participants assistance with breath and movements. Thus he chooses his private disciples.

I read up on self-defense and signed up for his workshop. I can't kill him but I can hurt him, disgrace him: a cortisone liniment for my conscience.

Dan glides about the studio, patting the pregnant woman's belly, directing her husband's shoulder blades as if to release dormant wings, rubbing the gingham mother's brow of the as if scraping free the third eye.

He keeps me for the dessert. He skulks up to me, imitating my movements.

“Don’t miss a chance at a custom-tailored enlightenment, foxy lady, I have a vacancy at the moment,” he whispers into my ear, twirling the skin on the nape of my neck as if tuning a violin. “It’s like flying first class to a five star hotel.”

He snuggles up to me and I feel his hardness against my hip. He smells like the predator cages at the Berlin Zoo. I can’t fathom how Lana didn’t spend her Sussex weekend throwing up. I strain my muscles to kick him in the balls but he catches my leg in mid-swing, “What passion, what temperament, a wild mare to tame,” he whispers, “the likes of you learn fastest and best.”

I reach for his solar plexus. I open my mouth to sputter the prepared curse. But the “f”s stick between my teeth and slump back, a residue on my vocal chords. Yoga Sky whirls like the zodiac wheel, among dreadlocks, sweat and dingy feet. Something stings me, twice, in my stomach, four times, more and more, till I can’t count. Sonorous treble is everywhere inside me, it tickles until I bulge with golden bees. My intestines contract against my wish, and pop out for a wash into the sacred river. I’m lost in the pleats of Dan’s spacious yoga pants.