

Stitch, Cut & Die, Excerpt from Original Novella
By Heidi J. Boisvert

From the moment I stepped off the plane in John F. Kennedy International airport seeking political asylum from the atrocities in my country, Iraq, the U.S. government took me for an animal. At customs, I was brought directly to Immigration where I waited for what seemed hours before two officers, one male, and one female, signaled me to a small room with mirrors and then demanded that I take off my underwear, bend over & cough, so they could search me. My nervous reservation, which made me unable to lift my chador, was read as non-compliance, and bought me a four month vacation in a detention center where I was caged in an overcrowded facility with criminals and subjected to the verbal antagonism of apish correctional officers. As a physician seeking refuge from the intolerance of Sadaam's tyrannical regime, you can imagine such behavior imposed by a country, which promotes freedom from incivility abroad, came as an unexpected surprise. I thought my choosing "here" over "there" was showing an allegiance with the War on Terror. But this is another story all together. Or is it?

After sending a flurry of letters and hearing no word from my lawyer for months, I received a one-sentence note from the Department of Homeland Security, which sheepishly admitted to an "administrative error," and I was released. Released into the void of America, the middle of Passaic County, Louisiana. I got on a bus, and made my way up to New York City where I had some professional contacts to start what I hoped would be a second life. From the window, I witnessed the poverty, and depravity of America. This was not the lavish America condemned in the Middle East, but a rueful place without industry, without any apparent culture. I began to wonder what actually made America a superpower.

As the bus sped along route 95, heading north, the blurring backdrop of naked trees and billboards cluttered with smiling white people cradling various household products slowly transformed into the sparse desert of Iraq in my disoriented imagination. Soon my mind was racing uncontrollably backwards, culling kaleidoscopic fragments of Kurdish villages I had visited during Sadaam's tirade. Splintered images of displaced people crying out beside torn apart homes, faces contorted with pain and shame, ghostly bodies running erratically with arms flailing overhead. These repugnant shards mixed unevenly with the muffled cries of children, leaving me paralyzed upright in my seat. Were they my children's cries? Where were they now? Hadn't her son traveled with her? Had they taken him for a mole? No, that was a long time ago. He and his father were still in Iraq. My head was now beading with sweat. I felt faint. The Koran teaches that: "whatever you lost, you're going to get back." But when and in what form, we do not know.

The bus careened into what appeared to be a gas station, but my eyes could not adjust. A large, square-bodied figure stormed towards me. I sat up in fright, thinking it was a correctional officer about to pummel me, but then realized it was only the bus driver taking a headcount on his way to the bathroom at the back of the bus directly behind me. I looked outside into the night, and even the everyday objects took on an unfamiliar form. Like the after-dream of the reveler on opium a depression sunk into my soul, and a disquieting emptiness filled in the area around it. I fell into a deep, almost neurasthenic sleep.

[As she sleeps, abstract, almost out of reach, newsclips meshed with family scenes and metaphoric imagery of death (pile of skulls beside ruined architecture) are interwoven into a projected backdrop as we transition to 2nd narrative & scene change.]

CUT TO 2nd Narrative_begins here. Out of protagonist's dreams. Fade up to:

Tierra del Mar travel agency was a front for a headhunter agency that transported poor Filipino men & woman to the Middle East to carry out the dirty work that U.S. soldiers didn't want to do or, more recently, couldn't handle, because of under recruitment. The agency would furnish them with U.S. passports sent from private American corporations backing (and, of course, profiting from) the war effort. When Manota got wind of this opportunity from her neighbor Mrs. Sabundayo while kneading together the ingredients for her infamous empanadas stuffed with chorizo, her hands stopped, and without as much as a thanks for that, she slipped on her sandals, and ran over to the agency, hands still covered in sweet dough, ready to enlist. Manota had a daughter and grandchild in the States, and thought this might be a quicker way to join them, since Visas were being held up and many denied for minor reasons. Three weeks after she signed on, she arrived on a prop plane into the Arab Emirates along with eight others she sort of recognized from around Manilla. The flight was bumpy, and seemed intolerably long. But once they landed, the door opened immediately, she was handed a packet of documents in a plastic bag by one set of hands, and then before she had her bearings, another set of hands shoved her into the back of an Army truck that pulled up alongside the plane on the runway. Inside, a group of people who looked kind of like Indians or maybe Pakistanis (she could never tell the difference even through she knew their religious beliefs divided them) huddled together on the left side. Manota lumbered her way to the back. But just as she was about to place her rather large behind down, the truck released the clutch and made a 360, causing her to tackle half of the frozen in fright team crowded in the corner. She laughed, in her hearty, nonplussed way, which made everyone laugh, releasing some of the tension of uncertainty.

In Manila, those who knew her called her Queen Bee. Not because she was a clever and industrious businesswoman, who always had people around her, her drones, to carry out the work for her, but because the fruits of their cheap labor made her an equally proportioned 4 wide by 4 high. Even as a teenager, when she operated her first business selling stolen newspapers (and later household necessities, like soap and sugar) to the elderly in the neighborhood, she had a natural ability for identifying unexploited markets, and profiting from them. When her daughter got married to an American GI, she began exporting handmade baskets to shops in the States, but she was tired of this. Tired of overseeing everything, since her husband passed away. She wanted to become part of her grandchild's life, and to get away from the mire of puppet politics that would soon destroy the Philippines.

No one spoke English too well, but Manota eventually succeeded in explaining to everyone through convulsed gestures how to play charades to pass the time. She started. She flapped her flaccid arms, and made the call of a seagull. Blank faces drowning in the light of the setting sun, stared back at her with puzzlement. She tried something else. With her hands she pretended to hold a shell, and made the gesture of cracking it open with her beak. A Filipino man with a wide smile, in his early 30's jumped up bumping his head on the low roof, shouted with a giggle: seAghoul. Manota recognized Sanggano. He was a reputed hoodlum, and clown. Trouble trailed him. Maybe it had something to do with his glass eye, which gossip suggests his father scooped out during a drunken rage. As he began to do his impression of a cat, darkness slowly descended over his arched silhouette. Understanding boundaries were never his strong suit. So, when no one guessed, he leaned over to one of the youngest Indian woman, who seemed painfully shy and tried to rub against her, then reached out his right arm, like a paw, to claw at the man to her left. The Indian man, who had been ignoring the activities, focusing on a small book in between his hands, in perfect British English exclaimed, "Keep your uneducated hands off my sister, you dog." A quiet soon followed. The truck was slowing down. They must almost be there. Through a hole in the canvas, Manota tried to get a glimpse of her surroundings, but she couldn't see anything. Just darkness, dust, and two pairs of stringed army boots chasing the tailpipe. The truck came to a screeching stop. Bodies jerked towards the back, the passenger door opened, then slammed shut. The truck floored the gas, and they were swiftly borne away again. No one laughed this time.

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Cut to 1st narrative:

New York was alive even at 4 in the morning when the driver announced the bus was pulling into Port Authority. The sky was still a nightingale blue-black. I strolled along the streets around Times Square lined with lurid peepshow shops and neon lights illuminating advertisements of sensuous, over-sized women with large lips and even some men sprawled out like lounging tigers

until it was a decent time to call Ali & Zakia, classmates of mine from medical school who had settled in the states in the early 90's. They lived in Queens, but neither of them practiced medicine any longer. Ali was a taxi driver, and his wife worked as a dental hygienist during the day, and sometimes as a telemarketer on the weekends for extra cash. Their oldest son, Hashim, was now in high school, soon to be in college. Once I arrived, they said I could stay in Zakia's brother's room until I got settled, since he had been deported indefinitely shortly after 9/11 when he went to mandatory registration. It felt good to speak in Arabic, and to share a familiar meal of grilled whole lamb stuffed with rice, almonds, raisins and spices, but my friends seemed changed somehow. Not completely Americanized, but not Iraqi either. I doubted that I would ever be able to acculturate as naturally as they. Something inside of me resisted. The residue of my harrowing experiences in Louisiana created a certain distrust of America, which I could not so easily exorcise.

The next morning, I found the apartment empty. So, I got dressed quickly and decided to explore the neighborhood. Many people walked on the street dressed in the traditional clothes of their respective countries, and the sounds of Indian music blended easily with Latin beats. At the corner of Jackson Avenue and 82nd Street, I discovered a Ramahallah Halal Meat Market and across the street was Al Aqsa Deli where I stopped to buy some food for dinner and a local paper. On my walk back, I flipped through the pages to find the classifieds. And there it was, my scarlet letter.

Lab Assistant Needed. Work with world-renowned doctor specializing in organ & tissue research. Flexible hours, Good pay.

The very next day, I hopped on the 7 train to Flushing, Queens for an interview. From outside, the building looked like an old shoe factory. Rough, blackened brick with large frosted windows, and a metal loading dock at the back, but on the inside, I was greeted by freshly painted white walls, and an array of metal surgical cabinets. The sterile scent of a dentist's office with a hint of burning plastic permeated the entire environment, including my monstrously large, and stoic guide, Mordecai, who transported me through the maze of closed doors to the supervisor's office, Dr. William Millard. Dr. Millard was a hospitable man, with a strangely cheerful disposition. I showed him my papers, and the letters of reference I managed to keep in my possession from respected doctors in Iraq. He was evidently impressed, because he hired me on the spot, and asked that I return tomorrow morning promptly at 8:30 am to begin. I asked what the job would entail, but he replied that I would watch a training video conducted by the famous inventor, Dr. Gunther Von Knox, in the morning that thoroughly described the process.

I left feeling exhilarated. So, this, this is the America I had heard so much about; the land of constant possibility, of self-realization! Well, not quite. In the morning, I reported on time, my picture was taken, I was given my photo

ID, along with a blue lab outfit, and then I was ushered into a dimly lit room with a plasma screen. The video began. A pale-skinned, albino man with a black brimmed hat began to speak in front of an operating table with a thick German accent. The camera zoomed in to a close up of a corpse. Skin stripped. A title faded up: Plastination in 5 Easy Steps. Then cut back to the Doctor who talked in an infomercial voice about the brief history of his invention with b-roll footage of his Disney-like international exhibitions where bodies are shown suspended in athletic poses at different gallery spaces filled with gawking visitors carrying wine glasses. Fade out. Another title pops up: The Steps. Cut back to the doctor holding one surgical gloved finger up. Step one: the body sample is soaked in a solvent. A small window appears in the upper right hand corner with the surgical gloves holding a hand and forearm being dipped into something to demonstrate the process. 2 fingers pop up. Step two: the sample's water is slowly replaced by solvent under freezing condition. Again the small window reveals the action, but the process appears to be in fast motion. 3 fingers pop up. Step three: the sample is placed in a bath of liquid plastics. The right window shows a photo tray of blood red liquid. 4 fingers pop up. Step four: when a vacuum is generated acetone starts to boil & liquid plastic takes its place. Again the film is sped up, and we see the blood red color adhere to the sample. 5 fingers pop up. Step five: the sample is cured with gas, light or heat. A dramatic flame from a welding tool alights on the sample. The doctor chuckles here. Last title pops up: The Future: The Museum of Man. Here a 3-D architectural model fades in and spins around. Then a montage of men & women's faces from various ethnicities generate a changing composite as the doctor's voice calls for collective action to restore anatomy to the democratic science it once was.

[old sci-fi film that demonstrates the steps here on screen, as protagonist with her back to the audience sits in shadow & watches at 45% angle. Door on right.]

I was in the midst of taking down some notes about the process when the video suddenly ended, and I was taken on a tour of the facilities. The factory itself resembled the structure of a body with discrete parts. There were 8 large main rooms, which possess a single word, or sometimes two, on the door, indicating the various stages in the process: cleaning, cutting, dissecting, preserving, re-engineering, packaging & shipping/receiving. Within each of these main rooms there were cubical stations divided into subcategories: skeletal, muscular, nervous system, circulatory, respiratory, reproduction, urinary and integument. Groups of about twenty-eight workers plodded away in smaller subgroups of four, and moved as if in choreographed silent unison. I was dropped off in "cleaning," which is a euphemism for skinning. Evidently, you had to work your way up to shipping/receiving.

I had worked as a physician in impoverished village clinics, but never had I smelled something so rancid, so repellent. One of my new colleagues must

have read my disgust, because she brought me a surgeon's mask, and placed a small plastic red box in my hand. Her almond-shaped eyes seemed kindly, as if telling me it was not as bad as it seemed; we support each other. Mildly comforted, I followed her to my designated seat and what resembled an operating table without a mattress or white sheet, number 27, and she pointed out my locker of the same number where I could place my things.

As I made my way back to my workstation with my red box, I surveyed my co-workers. The motley crew consisted of women, mostly, from every discernable part of the world; Pakistan, Korea, Peru, China, Mexico, Somalia, Nigeria. I wondered if any of them had papers, or possessed the proper credentials for the highly specialized work they were required to perform. They resembled a United Nations of zombies fixated on their prey. I sat down, and waited for one of them to show me what to do. No one even looked in my direction, so eventually, I opened up my red box, hoping that inside I would find a manual with detailed instructions. Instead, I found a number of surgical tools. I've listed them here in full for the reader's amusement.

Materials:

Thimbles
Needles
Pliers
Dental floss
Linen thread
Razor Blade
Exacto Knife
Leather cutting shears
Fleshing knife
Carrier's knife
Drawknife
Tracing Paper
Masking Tape
Pencil or tailor's chalk
Beeswax
Measuring tape
White Surgical Glove
Miniature Hacksaw
Soup Ladle

On the bottom of the box was a folded up paper neatly sealed with red wax that possessed the following words:

Welcome Assistant:

Your job consists of freeing the muscles from their enveloping tissue; the integument, superficial fascia, and the deep fascia, and then separating them, so as to display the vessels and nerves, which lie beneath them. You must learn to wield the knife with an ease and dexterity that will ensure the sensitive preservation below the tissue. While the muscles and viscera of the abdomen often claim our first attention, it is critical that the “cleaner” commence with the extremities. Below are some diagrams that must be carefully followed in order with precision.

[Include Diagrams here from Deer Skinning Site overhead as she pulls out, places around table and looks through]

An insidious beeping suddenly came from the back of the room as I struggled to make sense of the elaborately sketched diagrams. Startled, I racked my neck around, and soon discovered that the sound signaled the freight elevator was about to open to make a delivery. As the giant mouth of the two doors pulled apart, Mordecai appeared and rolled out a steel trolley lined with life size cocoons enclosed in a plastic green bag bearing the hazardous waste symbol. As he approached each table, he swung a sack over his left shoulder, and then with the practiced grace of a tango dancer, cradled the body and placed it down on the table. When he began to walk in my direction, I gasped, and my heart started to pound uncontrollably, forcing me to leap up out of my seat. All the eyes around me appeared to make a mockery of my horror. My face burned with shame, as I suddenly recalled with an unredeemed dreariness of thought, the sensation I experienced when the director of the medical school ordered me out of the forensics lab, because of a similar shriek. I could never distance myself as easily as the other medical students. Like a child, I had to cover up most of the body with a sheet to pretend it was not a body before I could dissect it. No matter how hard I tried to teach myself not to see, it was impossible for me to achieve a defensive barrier between myself, and the dead.

Inside the plastic, the body was cold, and naked. A shudder gripped me as I peeked in, and became aware of the face. The face always carried with it a particular source of anxiety for me. The eyes, even when closed, seemed to stare back at me in anguish as if expressing post-mortem pain at my touch. Fellow students would tell me that my discomfort would recede once the skin was breached, but I could never get past the skin. Without the skin the body would become less recognizable, less human. And now, I was being directed to pull the skin off and entrusted with the power to transform this human being into a thing. A commodity, so that it will be safer for others to see. For Shiites, to rip someone’s face, means to cut out the “self.” It was intentionally performed as a ritual of war against enemies. Without skin, the enemy was no longer real, and therefore, could not hold power over you. I sat transfixed for a while, gathering the strength to violate the body before me.

As I plunged the knife into the epidermis of the abdomen, my mind began to reel, distancing me from the body, the room, even the building, in an attempt to rearrange the scene to annihilate my actions capacity for triggering sorrow. Disgust. Instead I saw myself as I was back in our home, in Iraq, stitching and cutting clothes—clothes for my daughter’s school. It was working, the mirage of my daughter’s sweet cherub face was soothing, but my lack of attention caused a watery substance to suddenly spurt all over the front of me. I reached for the soup ladle, and began to hurriedly scoop out the excess fluid. As my arm repeated this act, I could feel my inner life empathically being hollowed out in tandem with this anonymous person. When the cavities were fully emptied, my body grew slack, and in slow motion, my limbs buckled under me as I swooned to the hard, cement floor.

CUT BACK TO 2nd NARRATIVE

[sound of hitting the floor should coincide with screech of the truck halting]

The truck halted again. Manota listened, and moved to peek through the hole again when a U.S. soldier abruptly lifted the flap, and sarcastically joked, “Okay, we’re here. Party time!” As he and a second soldier with a baby face, probably no more than nineteen, helped the passengers climb out, he continued to speak with a loud, and hyper-slow drawn out Southern accent, “Listen up. I’m Lieutenant Burke, and this is Sergeant Hare. We’re your tour guides here. We tell you what to do, when to do it and how to do it. You report to us everyday at 05:00 hours to get your assignment for the day. Jobs rotate here, so no one gets bored, and we become well-rounded individuals. Get it? There are 3 meals a day, listen for the bell, and lights are out at 22:00. Well, that’s if we have electricity. Those tents over there on the left are your homes for the duration of your stay, and on the right behind the barbwire is the Zoo, where we can study the behaviors of our enemy. So, if you keep your mouth shut, and you do as your told, we can have you packing with papers as early as 3 months. Any questions? This is your last opportunity to ask.

Manota raised her voice, “What are we expected to clean out here? The agency told me I would be doing laundry. Is there even any water?”

Burke retorted, “Now, granny, what kind of question is that?”

Manota came back quickly, “A practical one.”

Burke noticeably amused, “I see. You want to know if the wool’s been pulled over you head. Here’s the thing. Let’s get one thing straight. You’re our servants. You’ll be cleaning out the prison, picking up and caring for injured

soldiers and civilians, driving trucks for supplies, unloading and organizing supplies, cooking the meals, doing the dishes, and yes, you'll be doing our laundry as well. Is that a clear enough list for you?"

Manota, grumbled, and bit her tongue, to repress the murmur burgeoning under her breath, "arrogant little bastard." Noticing her annoyance, Burke turned towards the others, "Now, does anyone else have a problem with that? I sure as hell hope not, because if you do, see this," pointing to his gun, he fires a shot at a rock, "I won't hesitate to return you to the dirt where you came from." He turns his chin towards Hare, and they laugh with abandon like a pair of wild hyenas.

Sanggano watched the officers' comedy routine with a smug detachment and spat on the ground, but the Indian clan looked terrified; their shoulders hung forward in resignation as they picked up their spare belongings and trudged behind the two soldiers towards the barrack. Manota was already plotting. In her head, she continued the conversation, "We'll see about that. I'll have you eating out of the palm of my hand in a few weeks, sweetheart."

[Lights fade out in a circle on the TNCs walking towards the back of the stage, and simultaneously fade back up in NYC on protagonist seated at the operating table in the same position, although time has obviously passed]

CUT BACK TO 1st NARRATIVE:

By the end of the month, I managed to brainwash myself sufficiently and the violent process had normalized. My average was about 10 bodies a week. Yet while my hands performed the role of the silent executioner, my heart continued to sicken. Self-alienation settled in permanently, and I had become a husk of my former self. I stopped questioning why I came to America, why I left my husband, why I was working in this carnival atmosphere preparing bodies for public consumption. I even offered to work double shifts to dull my senses, and to further instigate a total erasure of consciousness. Until one night. It was nearing the end of my third double of the week. My eyes were stinging, my neck ached and my hands were beginning to grow numb from extensive contact with frozen flesh, when I came across a tattered piece of fabric left in the urethral cavities of the female body I was skinning.

The pattern was hard to follow, and some areas were frayed, but the fabric was distinctively not American, maybe Southeast Asian, although the subject's body revealed more of a European built. It was hard to tell exactly, since the corpse arrived decapitated. I had been directed to prepare this body to be cut up and dissected for specific parts only, of which I will spare the reader the details. The delicate feeling of the texture between my raw fingers inspired

wonder. A slight thrill of mystery. Where was this body from? What were the circumstances of her death? She couldn't have been older than 40. I carefully placed the material in a plastic bag, and slipped it into my purse on my way out. I showed it to Ali when I got home. He, unlike me, had excelled in forensics. He said he would try to do some tests to see if we could trace the cells.

The next day I had off. I usually caught up on my sleep, or tried without much success to contact my son, but instead I asked Zakia where the local library was to see if I could find a match for the pattern. She suggested that I might have better success at the main research library on 42nd Street, which had a vaster selection of old, and rare foreign language books. From the bottom of the steps, the library was quite an imposing structure, and the stoic lions guarding it reminded me of the foyer of the National Museum in Baghdad, which now rested, no doubt, in unprotected ruins.

I searched textiles from many different countries, and found a number of threadbare books filled with patterns that were close, but they were from entirely different regions around the globe—Ethiopia, Somalia, Nepal. It was difficult, therefore, to narrow the fabric down to a particular ethnicity or religion. I returned disheartened, but found a warm dinner prepared. Obsessed with mysteries, Hashim offered to do a search on the Internet for me. I asked him if he could teach me how to use it. Ali came in late, but reported that he had spoken to a client of his, a businessman, and a friend, whose son was studying genetics at NYU. Maybe he could give the material to him, so that it could be put through a state of the art lab. I didn't think this was a wise idea. Zakia didn't either. She suggested that she could bring some plates, silica beads and small vials of KMnO_4 (potassium permanganate) and hydroxylamine in 3M TEAC (tetraethylammonium chloride) solution from the dental office, and we could run some basic tests on the sample ourselves. If anyone inquired, she would tell them that Hashim had to do a science report on DNA for school.

After dinner, we watched CSI: Miami, to please Hashim & Ali, and then caught the end of Al Jazeera news. The usual propaganda pulsed on the screen; the body count, what the Americans were doing to destroy our ancient civilization, false starts towards democracy. I started to nod off. Then a woman with a round and severely weathered face, around my age, appeared, eyes filled with tears. The arid, and vast land behind her made my heart hurt with an undefined pain, which drew me in more closely to listen. In broken Arabic, she shared that her husband and son had gone missing along with other males from the village months ago during an air raid. She assumed they were dead, but recently rag-picking children from a neighboring village came through with a wagon selling clothes they found in exchange for food. Among these clothes were her husband and son's tattered belongings and those of other missing

members of the village. She and the woman of the village were seeking help to find them. They might still be alive somewhere.

[Audience witnesses this newscast. To emphasize the focus, lights will fade down, and family will appear in silhouette watching. Eventually, the family will fade out entirely, and the TV will be the prominent focus of the audience.]

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Return to 2nd narrative

[Pull out from CU of TV to reveal a woman sitting in the dark watching the same news cast on a bed, fade up stage right]

“Doubt it.” Alessandra Balluci sighed to herself as she watched the news in her dilapidated hotel room in Baghdad. She jotted down a few notes, then picked up the phone and dialed. “Rol, did you see that news piece about the women from Saidi village whose husbands clothes turned up? We need to go there early tomorrow; I have a hunch there’s another angle to this story worth exploring.”

Alessandra possessed the traits of a bulldog, stout, compact and bold with a loud, unrelenting bark. The New York Times assigned her to Iraq at the start of the war in March, 2002, because of her conservative views on Islamic Fundamentalism. What they didn’t know was that, as a reporter, she was an unscrupulous observer with a partisan heart. As a result of witnessing this immorality play from inside, she had cultivated two identities. On every story she covered, she would send the conservative, highly edited, version that the Times wanted, and expected, and she would also host her own blog under a male pseudonym, George W. Fallacy, which revealed the POV, and some images, the government didn’t want the U.S. people to see. More recently, she’s been dressing herself in a chador, and asking Roland, a French cameraman whom she met in Afghanistan covering the uneventful Desert Storm in the mid 90s, to shoot her talking to people on the street and reporting on Iraqi-centered concerns. She then streamed provocative 2-minute segments on YouTube as an experiment in silent public opinion swaying. Since networks typically don’t want to hear from those affected by the Bush Administration’s rash actions; she’s taken it upon herself to be the everywoman, or voice, for the Iraqi people—examining the daily pain of others, close up.

If the New York Times were ever to discover what she was up to, she knew that she would be fired, and stuck in Iraq without a return VISA to the U.S. But she didn’t care; she had no allegiances, and she could always seek refuge in Italy. Beside this is not the first time she has done something risky. Danger, and conviction, in fact, defined her journalistic style. During El Salvador in the ’73, she went undercover, and joined a guerilla-organization to get a more intimate

portrait of the fanaticism, and the quiet heroism behind social movements, and their eventual demise. Her colleagues in Latin America called her the “weed;” Herba mala, nunca muerta.

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Cut back to 1st narrative briefly. [*Pace of intercutting can speed up here. Time is now in sync.*]

When I went back to work the following day, I started to pay closer attention to each subject’s features and physical condition upon arrival. After seeing my first episode of CSI, I was intrigued by what constituted evidence. Traces of death’s handmaiden are often left on the skin. Playing detective would be my secret game to pass the time more quickly.

I didn’t really expect to find anything out of the ordinary, but the two, and a half bodies I made my way through that day possessed a similar marking; a large rectangular-shaped flesh cut about 2 inches deep on their left buttock area. I thought this was a very odd coincidence, but couldn’t imagine what it meant, symbolically. I walked around my co-workers stations eyeing their subjects’ bodies to see if they, too, had a notable chunk of flesh missing. As one of the masked woman behind me struggled to flip her subject’s body over, I observed the same gash. Because the room was always donned in an uncomfortable silence, I hesitated to initiate a dialogue. My curiosity, however, was stronger than my vanity, so I quickly whispered with the side of my mouth, “Why do the bodies have squares?” She did not seem to understand English, so I pointed to the area and tried to contort my face into a quizzical position. She shook her head and averted her eyes. Evidently, even this subtle interaction was a no, no and drew attention. The kind, almond-shaped eye woman from the first day, Elvia, whom I was now informed was, in fact, the Cleaning Division supervisor, came over to see what was wrong. I asked her the same question. She told me that sometimes Dr. Milliard, a retired plastic surgeon, took skin samples to test for healthy cells used in skin grafts. A logical response, but I wasn’t convinced. So, I pursued her with another question, but Elvia was not interested. Just as I re-opened my mouth to ask her where all the skin goes that we clean, she turned on her heel and marched back to her station. But an unnamable sensation more thrilling than before was beginning to cast its net upon me, and tirelessly spooled me into its entangling web. Elvia’s cool disregard left me in a wondering stupor. Why were we asked to scrap off the skin, and place it carefully inside a large, seal tight, metal canister that Mordecai picked up periodically throughout the day after he dropped off the bodies? This spiraling intrigue impelled me to find out where Mordecai brought all these canisters.

I had to work a double again. So, I decided to take the opportunity to walk around the premises during my break between shifts when I knew Mordecai wasn’t lurking about. As I strolled through the corridor, I got the sneaky

sensation that I was being watched, but I proceeded anyways. If confronted, I would say that I needed some exercise. I could hear my own footsteps distinctly as they hit the linoleum flooring. It was hard to tell there were people with a heartbeat in here. The hallways possessed the deadening disquiet of a mausoleum. One narrow passageway led to the next, like a labyrinth, nothing distinct, only rows of numbered doors. I looked at my watch. There were five minutes until my break finished. I decided to head back, but as I turned back, a silver shimmer caught the corner of my eye at the end of the corridor. A large unlabelled metal door stood at a dead-end. It had a handle that resembled a freezer from the fifties. I touched the door. It was cold. I tried to pull the handle back with both my hands, but could not. It was locked. A waft of chlorine passed by my nostrils. This must be it. I was determined to get inside, but I could hear someone coming, and it was time to get back to my station. I didn't want any questions asked, so I waited until the footsteps passed, then carefully made my way back to the Cleaning Division.

[extend the edge of the stage through filmed travel of character through factory projected on all 3 sides of stage]

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Cut back to 2nd narrative to pick up thread.

Roland picked Arianna up at 6 am sharp the following morning in the company Land Rover. The sun was already impenetrable. As they left behind the known roads of the city for unknown terrain, Arianna reminded Roland not to go above 2nd gear, and to stay on the tarmac as much as possible to avoid the deep potholes, especially the ones filled with water or debris, which often contained landmines. They drove in tense silence. Mental focus was all encompassing when navigating such conditions and the hard to see tripwires that were recently strung across the road by competing Guerilla forces required even more attention. It took them a good three hours just to find the place. And then when they arrived, they were not sure they were in the right village. The place was deserted. A few gaunt-looking cattle roamed. No children played, and an eerie sensation braced them. Thinking out loud to herself, Arianna mournfully asked, "What do people do with their time when a village is demolished? Do they go on with the day-to-day pantomime? Do they continue doing the laundry and preparing the food? Roland shrugged, "I imagine so. These details are all they have control over." Finally, they caught sight of two old women crouched on the side of the road under a lean-to trying to avoid the heat. Roland asked in Arabic if they knew where to find the woman who lost her husband and son, and appeared on the news. He pretended to be holding a camera on his shoulder. Their eyes cautiously followed Roland's arms, then they looked at each other for a moment before turning to point towards a stone house with animal skins drying on top of a blanket.

They called in through the doorway without a door, but only heard their own echoes returned. Walking around the small village, they observed that all the homes had a sort of temporary look, as if the inhabitants were prepared for a bulldozer. They never found the woman, but a group of curious kids, none older than thirteen, soon gathered and followed them around crying out, “drive, big monster!” Roland asked if they knew where the place of the clothes was. They offered to bring them there, if they could get a ride in the truck. Roland said sure. As they jumped in, Arianna noted how strange it was that high tech culture seemed to trickle in first before electricity and water. Was this how democracy would be installed? One of the kids, Ahmad, who was missing the lower part of his leg, probably from a landmine, hobbled toward the truck behind the others carrying a Nintendo Gameboy in his hand. He said a soldier had given it to him. Tattered, dirty, and no doubt traumatized, they all somehow retained a child’s sense of delight in the unknown, the new, giggling, as they bounced around in the backseat descending from the plateau where Saidi was situated into Aliyawah.

Rounding a large boulder with the word “Imshee!” sprayed on it, one of the older kids, Ossan, the apparent leader of the pack, pointed and shouted against the wind, “See.” A gapping hole, resembling a landfill, came into view. Little bumps scattered the length of a football field.

“Let’s switch, I’ll drive, you shoot,” Arianna directed. Roland pulled up the handbrake, got out, and reached into the backseat for his camera bag as Arianna slid into the drivers seat. A few of the boys seemed amused by this action. As they got closer, Roland popped his head back in from the window on the passenger side, and exclaimed “it looks like a human-sized ant farm!” Approaching the area, they could see people milling about small mounds of dirt carrying sacks on their back. Through his lens, Roland saw eight men and women dressed in fatigues, stopping at each mound, then bending down to check the number on the stake stabbed into the dirt. Releasing the bag from their back, they would dig inside, and then pull out a fist full of clothes. Each set of clothing also had a number. When they found a match, they would place it on top of the mound. Roland set off to capture this activity from a better angle. Arianna surveyed the wider choreography from the truck while she changed into her chador. Her eyes landed on a round figure conducting the flow of work from the back of an Army truck. Thinking it must be the woman from Saidi, who received help from the U.S. Army, she slid out of the drivers seat and headed directly over towards her, signaling to Roland to follow her.

When she reached the truck, she discovered it was not the same woman at all, but an Asian woman. “Who are you? What are you doing here?” Arianna inquired.

Manota, unnerved by her abrupt question, “Name’s, Manota. On a special mission from the U.S. government.”

Arianna followed with another “To do what? You’re not American, are you?”

Manota retorted curtly, “None of your damn business. It’s classified, code red. And who might you be, princess?”

Arianna responded matter-of-factly, “A journalist with the NYTimes.” Flashing her press pass, “Arianna Fallaci.”

Manota scratched her head, trying to decide how to handle this situation diplomatically without revealing critical information about herself or what she was doing, but before she could string a coherent sentence together, Arianna continued, “You’re a TCN, aren’t you? Where are you stationed?”

“At Camp Resurrection near Yezidis,” Manota answered.

Arianna remembering, “Right. I heard about the exploited labor practices going on at contingency bases. Is it true that the soldiers treat you very badly?”

Manota saw her chance to turn things back her way. “Sure. There’s a bunch of us here from the Philippines. But you should come out to the barracks and watch the abuse the soldiers heap on us first hand. The living conditions are terrible, worse than Guantanamo.

“So, what are you doing here with the clothes?” Arianna pursued.

“Well, nothing major. The Physicians for Human Rights are arriving tonight and have asked us to prepare the area for what they call “Clothing Day,” so they can run autopsies on the bodies below, and do DNA tests on the matching clothes.”

“But why are they set out like this on display?”

“In case any family member recognizes the clothes, they will do a blood test on them, and then they can reclaim the body for proper burial. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to round up the troops, because we’re expected back to greet the physicians when they arrive, and make sure their quarters are clean.” She put two fat fingers in her mouth, and whistled, then waddled over to Sanggano, and confided in him, “I’m worried about these reporters. She’s the alligator that could spoil all our plans. Keep an eye on them.” At the center of the mound, Sanggano gathers his gang, but instructs Cosme to hang back inside the backhoe machine when they leave.

Returning to the truck to start the engine, Manota called out to Arianna, “Come on by the prison early tomorrow morning, say 8, and you can capture some of the routine torture we go through. Might make a great story!” Then

she stepped on the gas, and skidded away towards the slow-rising hills, leaving them in a cloud of dust. In her rearview mirror, she could see Arianna & Roland walking back towards the mounds to set up for an interview as kids foraged through the clothes around them, like carrion, to find salvageable scraps for sale.

The sun began to dip below the horizon, extruding shadows besides the mounds. Roland felt the shift in light, looked at his watch, then called out "Cut. Ari, we have to head back; I have to shoot a press conference at 4."

[Fade out on kids rummaging through clothes, Fade up to New character = model or 20something obsessed with cosmetic surgery; an Upper Eastside Beauty Nun]

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