



# ARTIFACTS

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For Mops and Pops

## Chapter 1

There are some who view the world through a very small lens and though they live in three dimensions they perceive only two. Armed with this outlook, they operate daily with a fundamental conviction that all that exists does so solely in relation to their own existence and all that happens serves a purpose of meaning.

She is not a small lens viewer, but lying there on the floor, unaware of her surroundings, her subconscious mind begins to replay a scene from her childhood. It was a time long before she had wholly grasped the truth that she was just one on a planet populated by billions, before she had fully realized that the culture she was growing in was just one in an enormous, divergent sea of traditions and beliefs. It was a time when her lens was very, very small and she needs to be back there again, if only for a moment.

Without warning, something breaks her dream memory, scattering the forms and colors into chaos, pulling her through the silent black. What is that? Now she can hear it, someone calling her name, over and over. At first it is faint, echoing as a voice carried across a deep, wide canyon.

"Al. Al."

It grows louder, closer. She tries to answer, to respond, but she can't feel her mouth move. She can't feel anything, can't feel her body's weight, can't perceive her own breathing.

"Al, can you hear me?"

Yes, I can hear you! She yells but the words don't reach beyond the confines of her mind. I can hear you, damn it! Still nothing.

The voice comes again, "Al."

Stop saying that! Stop saying my name. Don't you know how annoying that is? Who the hell are you? She recognizes the voice but can't quite place it, can't put a face to it. Her eyes won't open.

"Al, it's me, Wally."

Wally? Wally who? She repeats the name, trying to jog her memory. Wally, Wally, Wally. Knew a Wally in grade school. Wally Greenwald. Very annoying. Why would he be here? Where is here?

"Come on, Al, talk to me."

I'm trying to, "you moron." Her voice finally breaks through her lips as a dry whisper.

"What?"

She can now sense a hard, cold surface under her body. Feels warm breath on her cheek. Her eyes open slowly and she sees a face, the shape of a face, very close to hers. Her vision is cloudy, gauzy. "I said, 'you moron,' you moron," she mutters.

"Oh, very nice. I walk in, find ya on the floor, bring ya outta whatever coma you're in, and I get called a moron. Very nice." He smiles down at her, raising himself up from a kneeling to a squatting position.

"You must be the Wally I've been hearing so much about. What..." She tries to lift her head but the movement awakens an instant, sharp throbbing. Winces, bringing a hand up to her forehead and covering her eyes. Not good. "What happened?"

"Ya don't know?" he asks. "Don't ya remember?" Rests his arms on his knees to keep balance.

She rolls her head from side to side on the hardwood floor.

"Well, if you don't know, I certainly don't." He stands up, watching her face. "Head hurt, love?"

"Like it got squashed by the tires of an eighteen-wheeler." Slides her jaw around, trying to ease the pain in her skull. "All eighteen of 'em." Taking her hand away from her eyes, she rubs the back of her neck. "Where am I?"

"Uh, you're on the floor. Smack-dab in the middle of the

shop. Didn't ya bring a futon when ya moved in?"

"Yeah, but I thought I'd change it up. Ya know, live a little."

He snorts out a small laugh. "Well, your recall may be shot but at least your sense of humor's still intact."

"Right. Just call me Chuckles." She reaches up, wagging her fingers in the air, and he helps her to her feet with a grunt. Whoa, dizzy. Places a hand on his shoulder to steady herself, then steps gingerly over to a nearby wicker chair and sits down. "So you found me just laying on the floor?"

"Yep, pretty much. Thought maybe you were dead. Then I saw your chest movin' up and down."

"How perceptive of you, Wal. Ever work as an EMT?"

"No need for sarcasm, love. You're lucky I was here."

"Yes, what would I have done if you hadn't come to stare at my chest? Would've been doomed for sure." She looks up at him with a thin smile. "At any rate, thanks."

"Welcome. Want some water?"

"Mmm, please." She leans back in the chair, the dry wicker creaking with the weight. Is this thing strong enough to hold me? Who cares? Not me. Closes her eyes and inhales deeply. What happened last night? Gotta think. What was I doing? Breathing, getting ready to practice yoga. I was...

"Here ya be, love." Returning from the kitchen, he hands her a glass and a bottle of water.

"Thanks." Sets the glass down on the floor, opens the bottle and takes a long swig from it. "Ah, that's good and cold." Shivers.

"So," he begins, crossing his arms over his chest, "ya really don't know what happened?"

"Uh-uh." Starts to shake her head, then stops. Ow. Don't do that. "Can't remember a thing." Need more water. Tips the bottle up and drinks in measured gulps.

"Well, doesn't look like anything's missin'. Cash register's

still locked. Guess it wasn't a robbery." Turns his attention back to her. "Sure are thirsty. Haven't been hittin' the hooch, have ya?"

Bringing the water bottle down, she gives him a heavy-lidded stare.

"Okay, so ya haven't. Just askin'. Gotta admit, it's a bit weird."

"Yeah," she agrees in a quiet tone. "Yeah, it is."

"Maybe I should take ya to the hospital, love. Make sure everything's all right."

"I'm fine. Just need to sit for a while." Rubs her neck again, tilting her head to the side. "Wal, you're not British."

"Hmm, now there's a delusional utterance. Sure sign of concussion. Better check your noggin for bumps." Reaches his hand out toward her.

"You didn't let me finish," she says, ducking away with a giggle. "I was going to ask why you call people love if you're not British."

"Who says I'm not British?" Mildly offended, a look of consternation plays across his face. "I was born in England, wasn't I?"

"Yeah, but neither of your parents were," she baits him, "and you only lived there, what? Until you were four? You don't even have an accent. Well, not a British one at least."

"Don't matter none." Waves a hand at her as he turns away. "I'm just as British as anyone else born there."

"All right, love, have it your way."

"Thanks, love, I will." Moving to the counter, he lifts up the hinged section that allows access and slides through to the back. "Gonna be able to work today?"

She stares in front of her, eyes glazed over, letting the nearly empty water bottle hang by the neck between two fingers. "Yeah, no problem." Her reply is slow, automatic. Blinking rapidly to clear her sight, she places her free hand on a knee



and stands up, cautious. Okay, I got it. "Mind if I take a shower first, buddy? Feel kinda groggy."

"Go ahead. Not like they're breakin' down the door."

Al walks up the stairs to her makeshift apartment, a small two-room office really, that she's just started to renovate. Wally had offered it to her along with the job here at the import shop. The lease at her old place was ending and he promised to waive the rent if she worked on it. It's only been four days since the move, but she's already started to scrape away the loose paint and plaster on the walls and ceiling of one half of the main room. Most of her stuff is taking up the other half, piled in a mound and tightly covered by a plastic tarp.

She uses the smaller room as a bedroom, her double futon folded up into a single, making just enough space for her yoga practice. She'd had to hang blinds over the three by five foot window that overlooks the shop. Not interested in giving the world a free show every time I get naked. Constructed in 1892, the building had originally housed a family-owned department store. Not many of those left. Sometimes she imagines the ghostly figure of the patriarch standing in front of that window, his face grumpy and demanding as he oversees the operation of his business.

Lying on the futon, her MacBook Pro waits patiently for her. "Dial-up," she'd sighed with disappointment when she discovered that her Internet provider couldn't get a DSL connection through. The telecommunication company that Wally uses for his phone service had somehow managed to put up an illegal block and her provider couldn't break through it. Monopolistic bastards. The pokey pace of dial-up will have to do until she can make the time to research plans. The café across the street has free Wi-Fi for its customers, with a range that extends far enough for her to use it here, but she refuses to piggyback without paying something. That would be wrong, wouldn't it? "Stupid ethics."

The bathroom needs a lot of work, both structural and

cosmetic, but it's still functional so she figures she can do that last. The shower, if you can call it that, is just a pipe clamped to the wall with a metal drain recessed into an ancient concrete floor. Makes her feel like she's going to get gassed any minute. Installing the shower curtain kit was a bitch. The mirror of the wall-mounted medicine chest is old and warped, as if the silver had been poured haphazardly, making only select areas useable. She likes to gaze into it, moving her head around to watch her reflection morph into bizarre new forms.

"Into the chamber again," she mumbles, stepping over the low, 1960's pink and avocado tile barrier that rings the shower. Good water pressure. Not altogether bad. Eyes feel achy and hot. Closing them, she lets the warm water run over her face. Grabs the shampoo, lathers up her hair and stares blankly at the wall. Head hurts like a killer hangover. Just my luck to get all of the misery and none of the fun. Hittin' the hooch indeed. She smiles, closing her eyes again. Behind her lids she sees the usual red-pink color, accompanied by the occasional floating dead cell cluster. Tries to follow one but it always swims away. She gives up the chase. Besides, it hurts to do that.

Taking a step back, she stands limp under the showerhead. As the water flows over her, she sees a sudden, blinding flash of light. Within it is a picture of something, a box, a chest of some kind. Her eyes pop open. "Jesus! What the hell was that?" Feels the sting of shampoo. "Crap." Rubs her eyes hard, then attempts to get the image back. Come on, come on. What was that? Nothing.

Hurriedly, she finishes her shower, dries off, wraps her robe around her body, slathers moisturizer on her face, and sits down cross-legged on the futon. Begins her yogic breathing technique, hoping to call the vision up again. Deep inhale, controlled exhale. Repeats ten times. Nothing comes. Her posture falls, shoulders slumping forward. Trying too hard. "Just have to be patient."

Taking off her robe, she inspects her body in the full-length mirror. No bruises, no cuts. Gently pats her head with her hand. No bumps that she can feel. Sighs loudly. "What happened to me last night?" No idea.

She forces herself to think about something else, something benign and boring, as she dresses. Clear the mind to prod the memory. Works most of time, when she can't remember the name of an actor or the words of a song. This time it doesn't. Clarity is obstructed by expectation. What can ya do? Can't force it, right?

Dabbing and smoothing cover-up under her eyes, she moves close to the mirror, peering intently at herself. There's something in there you're not telling me. A memory. A clue. "A sign that I'm not completely wacko," she sighs out, giving herself a disgusted look. Presses powder on her face, then walks out of the bedroom and back downstairs to the shop.

Man, this place is packed to the rafters with such great stuff. Wally's import shop, otherwise known as World Imports, has been in the same place for nearly twenty years, positioned on the main thoroughfare in an old neighborhood that has lived through several booms and busts. Another boom time was just beginning when the recession hit, but Wally still manages to do pretty well.

Wally, she muses. She'd felt comfortable with him right away, the minute she'd seen him, talked to him. Like they'd known each other for years, more than years, more than one lifetime. Strange. Not many people you can say that about. "Too true," she whispers.

She wanders through the shop, just as she had done four weeks ago when she first stepped into it. Touches the face of a hand carved, black West African mask hanging on the wall, slowly running her fingertips over it. Fascinating. Such beautiful, delicate work. Moving on to a rack hung with malas, prayer beads from Nepal, she brushes them with the back of her hand. Takes one off the rack, holding the string between the fingers of one

hand while cradling it below in the palm of the other as it hangs. Lets it drop in a heap and closes her hand around it. How many times will these beads be counted, keeping time with the rhythm of mantras? Lifts it up to put it over her head.

"Uh-uh, Al," Wally admonishes from behind the counter. "That ain't jewelry, ya know. Those are sacred beads."

"Why, Wal, I had no idea know you cared." Looks at him with real surprise. "Thought you were just in it for the money."

"Not me who cares, love. Can't have ya runnin' around with malas hangin' from your neck. Bad for business."

"Huh." She half smiles, putting the string of beads back on the rack. "So I wasn't wrong."

"No, not wrong. Not right either." He bends down behind the counter, grabs a buffing cloth and tosses it to her. "Wipe 'em off, would ya, love? You've handled 'em for too long. Whoever buys that string may come to feel it's not theirs."

"Okay." Takes the mala from the rack again, holding it with the cloth. She rubs each bead in turn, methodically cleansing them for the future buyer, then hangs the string back up. "You really believe that, Wal?" she asks, walking over to the counter.

"Told ya, it's business. Still, never hurts to cover your bases." Winks at her. "Besides, look who's talkin'. I don't do yoga." He says this in a haughty tone, rocking his shoulders back and forth.

"Don't make fun!" Hits him on the arm and laughs. "It helps me to relax, to focus, so I'm not so stressed out."

"Stressed out," he says, incredulous. "What have you got to be stressed out about? Anymore, I mean. That's why ya took this job, remember? To get away from the whole career thing. Step off the crazy PR ladder."

"I believe my exact words were 'jump off the crazy PR ladder.' At any rate, yoga's not something you just get rid of. It becomes a part of your life." Wow, that sounded pretty moon-brained. "It's a tool, a coping tool." Better.

He looks up from his inventory list with one eyebrow raised, obviously expecting to see her making some sarcastic face, but her expression is serious. "Okay, Al."

She looks down, a little embarrassed, then shrugs. Whatever. "Well, those windows aren't gonna clean themselves. Better get to it." Walks to the back of the shop and disappears into the kitchen hidden there behind a handwoven Iraqi Kurdish kilim rug.

Concentrating on his inventory list, Wally hears the ring of the bell as the front door opens. "Mornin'. Be right with ya." Jots down a delivery date, then lifts his head to greet the customer.

A man about his age, baby boomer, in one of those classic conservative, tan colored trench coats walks up to the counter.

"What can I do for ya?"

"Hi, um," the man says, his tone edged with a slight nervousness, "my wife came by yesterday and returned an imported chest we bought from you some weeks ago. I'd like to get it back."

"A chest? I didn't see any chest."

"But she said she returned it to you," he insists, his voice rising sharply. "What did you do with it? I'm not paying for it a second time!"

Wally puts his hand up, palm out. "Now let's just calm down, all right? Al must have put it somewhere. Just let me check, okay?"

The man's eyes dart around the shop. "Okay," he agrees, facing Wally again and composing himself. "I just, I just really like it. I didn't mean to be rude."

"Yeah, I know ya didn't. Be right back." He walks off, shaking his head, skirts behind the rug and into the kitchen. "Al, did a woman come by yesterday to return a chest of some kind?" he asks to her back. "Some guy's here freakin' out about it."

She stands motionless, stunned, eyes fixed ahead of her, staring at nothing. The bottle of glass cleaner falls from her

hand and bounces off the floor with plastic fluidity. "A chest?"

## Chapter 2

16 hours earlier...

"Al!" Wally yells from the front of the shop. "I'm takin' off, love!"

"Leavin' right away, are ya?" she asks, emerging from the kitchen. "Gotta hot date?"

He leans on the counter with his right hand, head cocked slightly. "And how is that any of your business, young lady?"

"Isn't. Just thought I'd ask." Meandering up to him, she runs a dust rag along the edge of the counter. "Besides, if you were going on a date, I figure you'd deny it anyway. The answer you gave, while technically not a denial, is proof enough for me."

His brow furrows. "Well, what kind of logic is that? If I..."

"Wally," she interrupts in a flat tone, "it was a joke. Ya know, joking with you?"

"Oh, right, good, joking. I like jokes." Puts a hand on the doorknob as he starts to leave, then half turns back. "If ya really wanna know," he says, looking down and sheepish, "I'm going to my philately club meeting. We meet once a month."

"Stamp collecting? Very cool."

His head snaps up in surprise. "You like stamp collecting?"

"Well, no." Twists the cloth in her hands. "I mean, it's not something I'm into, but I can appreciate the interest. Ya know, the history, the romance, all that good stuff."

"Very funny."

"I'm not kidding! Really, I'm not," she says, bringing her voice down to a sincere level. "Believe me, Wal, you'll know when

I'm kidding. Although, ya didn't catch that last one, so I may have to modify my delivery." In one rapid movement, she slaps his leg with the tightly wound rag. "Now git!"

"Hey!" Gives her a crooked smile. "All right, wacky, I'm goin'. See ya tomorrow then." He opens the door, takes one step out, then reverses his course. "Hup, forgot to check the back door."

She puts a hand on his upper arm, forcing him to stop. "I'll do it."

"Oh, okay. And can ya make sure that everything in the kitchen's off?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't use the oven, unplug the iron, no parties. Got it. Now go." Pushes him gently out, closing and locking the door in his face. "Bye-bye now." Waves at him through the window. "Have fun with your little stamp buddies."

He laughs, walking off toward the alley, where his less than pristine 1978 Buick Electra 225 is parked.

Turning away from the door, she flicks the switch that turns off half of the overhead lights. The waning rays of a early September sunset reflected in the windows of the building across the street draw weak streaks of orange-red across the wood floor. No more customers today. Let's make it official.

"The business day has ended!" she shouts like a town crier, holding the dust rag lightly between her fingers and flouncing it out in front of her as if it were a delicately embroidered hanky. "No legal tender shall be exchanged for these fine goods henceforth! My Lords and Ladies, please retire to your respective domiciles until such time when business may recommence!" She bows extravagantly, feeling giddy. All is good.

Ambling toward the back of the shop, she takes a right around the center display case, stopping in front of some shelving attached to the wall. Man, this place gets dusty. Reminds me of Dad's old workshop. The air was always filled with microscopic particles, a free-floating mix of sawdust and rust. The rickety



wooden shed was overcrowded with ancient tools, coffee cans of twisted nails and screws, pieces of wood and metal in varying sizes and conditions, all salvaged from garage sales and junkyards.

"We can use these for something," he'd tell her mother every time the complaint was issued about his packrat ways. Then he'd turn to Al. "They just haven't figured out what their next life should be." He'd smile. "But they'll tell me when they're ready." Most remained mute, never attaining reincarnation.

Lifting the lid off a handmade Brazilian pot and setting it aside, she dusts the bowl with careful, smooth strokes, gazing inside it. Wow, that orange is amazing. Is that a natural pigment? Looks closer. How'd they do that? She places the pot back on the shelf, takes hold of the lid by its top knob and flips it over. Same orange. A matching set. Amazing how something so fragile can go undamaged for so long. All right, now I'm nervous. Cautiously rests the lid on top of the pot.

Sidestepping, she picks up a smaller, lidless pot and begins to dust it. Obviously thrown on wheel. Not as old or well made. She turns it over to look at the price. "Seventy-five dollars? Is he crazy? No way would I pay that for this piece of..." She stops her rant, hearing a noise behind her, a thud coming from the front of the shop. "Wally?" Unconsciously, her shoulders rise up as she listens, intent. Tilts her head, giving one ear the advantage. Hears a drag, like someone moving furniture. She puts the pot back and turns around, but the wide cylindrical support pillar is blocking her view. Hears the drag again. Okay, creepy.

Tiptoeing forward, she passes a Buddha statuette and gives it a glance. Yeah, yuck it up, laughing boy. Pokes her head around the pillar and sees a woman outside the shop, bent over, struggling with something, dragging it along. What's she doing? Can't see what she's got.

The woman stands up, very near the display window, running her fingers through her shoulder length hair and breathing heavily.

She looks down at what she's been hauling, then into the half-lit shop.

She must not see me. Kinda in the shadows. Starts to walk slowly toward the front. Don't wanna freak her out. I'll just take a step into the light so she'll notice me, then open the door and ask her what's up. Moves forward until her body is fully illuminated by the street lamplight coming through the window.

Catching sight of her, the woman lets out a startled yelp and darts away.

Al reaches the front door, tries to open it, but meets complete resistance. "Shit." Quickly, she unlocks it and hurries out. "Hey! What's going on?"

The woman slams down the hatch of her idling Subaru wagon, pausing briefly to look at Al. Rumpled and disheveled, her silk blouse is buttoned incorrectly, causing it to hang askew. Her capri kakis reveal a large scrap down her shin, a bit of blood just starting to weep through the wound. Saying nothing, she yanks open the car door and gets in.

"Hey!" Al shouts again, but the woman drives off, leaving her standing there, puzzled. "What the hell?" Turns to see what she was dragging. A chest, about four feet wide, three feet high. "Okay, that's an odd way to make a return." Tries to lift it from underneath. Ugh, heavy. She debates whether to leave it there until tomorrow, when Wally could help her carry it in. Can't do that. It might grow legs.

Going back into the shop, she kicks off her mule sandals by the door. Get better leverage without 'em. Jogs back to the kitchen, pulls a quilted furniture blanket out of the pantry and trots back outside. Steps on something sharp. "Ouch!" Wipes the bottom of her bare foot on her pant leg. Here's hoping that was glass.

She opens the blanket and lays it down on the sidewalk. Wonder if she did a lot of damage. Ya wanna return somethin', return it, but there's no need to wreck it. Squatting, she shoves a

portion of the blanket under the middle of chest, between the legs. Stands and lifts up one end. "Holy bejesus," she grunts, "heavy is right." Awkwardly, she slides the blanket under with her right foot, shifts her weight, grabs the top layer of gray material with the toes of her left foot, pulling the blanket until it's under the second leg. Lets the chest down. Moving to the other end, she performs the same actions in reverse and eases the chest back down.

She stands with hands on hips, catching her breath, then bends low and starts to drag the laden blanket along the sidewalk toward the front door. "Ah God." She leave something in here or what? Hope it's what. Not in the mood to find a dead body. Or a dead anything.

After several minutes of concentrated effort, she finally gets the chest into the shop just enough to close the door. Falls back to sit on it, letting her head hang forward as she breaths deeply through her nose. What was all that? Crazy. Well, better see what kind of shape it's in. She raises her body up to standing, arms limp, and rolls her shoulders back. Switching the overhead lights back on, she bends from the waist, leaning over to examine the chest.

Pretty simple, really, but elegant lines. The frame is a darkly stained wood. She walks around it. There are panels on the top and all four sides of what she thinks is bamboo. Don't see any nicks. Not fresh ones, anyway. Whoops, spoke too soon. There's a piece of bamboo missing in the back. Doesn't really look like it should be that heavy, does it? Well, now ya gotta look inside. Okay, here goes. She lifts up the top, unaware that she's holding her breath, and sees nothing but a bright, salmon colored lining that's filled like a pillow.

"All right," she says, lowering the top back down, "it's fine. Time for yoga."

Heading upstairs, her thoughts return to the unknown woman. Very weird. Looked the high maintenance type. The kind that makes

sure you're open so she can give you a good talkin' to, letting everyone in a three-mile radius know that she's unhappy and refusing to leave until something is done about it. Might even threaten you with bad word-of-mouth. "I've got a good mind to tell all my friends not to shop here," she mocks, wagging her finger and pursing her lips. What a waste of energy. If I ever get like that, shoot me.

In her bedroom, she changes into leggings and a tank top, lightly snapping the elastic of the built-in athletic bra under her breasts. To the genius who invented this, we salute you. Picks up her rolled yoga mat from the corner, unfurls it and lays it flat, lining up one side with the edge of a hardwood floorboard. Don't want to be out of line, now do we? This little compulsion is one of the few she still allows herself. Used to be pretty neurotic. Not to the point of chronic obsessive behavior, but enough to drive herself nuts. Enough for her to want to be free of self-imposed constraints. Still working on that. Sits down on the mat, cross-legged, Ardha Padmasana. Can't do full Padmasana, lotus pose. Foot doesn't want to stay put on top. Still working on that, too.

Starts her practice as always by pressing her palms together at chest level. "Namaste." Then, with shoulders back, arms extended and resting on her thighs, chin tipped down, and eyes closed, she begins deep, ujjayi breathing through the nose, restricting her throat slightly. Inhale, belly and lungs expand, chest opens. Exhale, natural contraction. Inhale, there is strength, there is flexibility, there is peace. Exhale, natural contraction. Inhale, there is strength, there is flexibility, there is a bright light. Wait, what?

### Chapter 3

"That's all I remember, Wal. I swear." Al has run through the events of the previous night, which have come to her in a steady stream of memory. She sits on a stool in the kitchen, her face tense with confusion.

Leaning against the doorway, Wally sighs. "Doesn't tell us much, does it, love?"

"I'm sorry." Slides a hand down the side of her face hard. "I just can't remember anything else. Just the light, then nothing. Then you waking me up when you found me this morning." She raises her eyes, somewhat wary.

He stands silent for moment. "Well, we have until tomorrow to come up with somethin'." He'd managed to stall the man who'd come in demanding the chest. Apparently, the wife had returned it last night, but now it was nowhere in the shop, just plain nowhere. And it wasn't the kind of thing you could easily hide. Wally had told the man that it had some damage, that he'd like to fix before he gave it back.

"You believe me, don't you, Wal?" she asks, plaintive. "I wouldn't lie to you. You know that, right? What would I do with a chest?"

"Well, ya certainly don't need two, that's for sure." He smirks, but she obviously hasn't heard him. "Al, it never occurred to me that you were lyin'." Squats down to her level. "Don't worry, love," he says gently, "we'll find it." Puts a hand on her shoulder.

She searches his eyes for a few seconds, letting her gaze move back and forth between them. "Okay, Wal." Hangs her head. "We'll find it."

He pats her arm, pressing his lips together in a small

smile, stands up and steps out of the kitchen.

Left alone, she sits stock-still, posing questions she knows she can't answer. What the hell is going on with me? Why can't I remember what happened next? Bright light. What bright light? Coming from where? I've heard of blackouts, but this is ridiculous. Shakes her head to clear it. Well, I can't just sit here. Standing, she picks up the bottle of glass cleaner she'd dropped earlier. Still holding the roll of paper towel in her other hand, she notices divots from where her fingers gripped it tight, crushing it. Need to relax.

In the shop, Wally stands behind the counter, a coffee table-sized book open in front of him. Leans on his elbows, concentrating deeply as he reads, then looks up as she approaches. "What did the chest look like again?"

"It had a wood frame, with a dark stain. Had panels on all sides and on the top of bamboo. About so big." Cleaning supplies in both hands, she opens her arms wide, out then up, to indicate its approximate size.

"Did it look like this?" Rotates the book in her direction and points.

"Yeah," she says, excited, "just like that."

"Not bamboo. It's runo. Like bamboo but stronger. Comes from the Philippines. The frame is pine."

She waits for him to continue but he doesn't. "Very interesting. Why does that matter?"

"Not sure it does. Just tryin' to get some kinda handle on all this. These books," he says, swinging his arm back casually, "could be a start, at least."

Behind the counter is a wall of bookshelves, reaching from floor to ceiling. She hasn't had time to get a good survey yet but she's glanced at them. There are catalogs of artifacts, like the one Wally's got, as well as books describing the history, spiritual beliefs and myths of different cultures.

She places the glass cleaner and roll of paper towels on the

counter. "So what are you saying? Do you think the chest had something to do with my blackout?"

"Maybe. Don't really know." Rises up off his elbows. "I do know people don't usually return stuff by dumpin' it front of my shop."

"Good point. Do you have any books on the Philippines?"

"Think so. It's gonna take some time to find. They're not in any order. Lucky I came across this one as fast as I did." Slaps the open book with the back of his fingers.

"Great. Can't wait to see your music collection."

"Very funny. Why don't you start on that end," he suggests, pointing toward the back.

"At the beginning? Good a place as any, I'd say." She lifts up the hinged section of the counter, goes behind it and walks to the very end of the wall of books. "Um, Wal, ya got a rolling ladder or something so I can get up to the top?"

"Got a ladder. Doesn't roll though. I'll get it." He walks to the kitchen, headed for the backyard.

Leaning back on her hands, her eyes pan over all the books in front of her. "What have I gotten myself into?" Is it possible that something in the chest made me black out? It was a lot heavier than it looked. But I didn't see anything in it. Other than the lining. Something invisible? What am I saying? Someone broke in, knocked me out and stole it. "But why?" Was there something in the lining? Drugs? Money? Dunno. Haven't got a single bump or bruise to prove it either. Rubs her forehead and takes a deep breath. "Okay, time to hit the books." Pushes herself forward.

"What's that?" Wally asks, carrying an old wooden ladder under one arm.

"Nothin'. Just talking to myself again."

"Sign of senility, ya know, love. Talkin' to yourself."

She laughs. Feels good. "Yeah, yeah. Just give me the ladder, old man." Grabbing it, she winks at him.

His eyebrows lift in bemused surprise. "Well, the old man is gonna look through the inventory book and receipts. Figure out which chest those people bought. Might be able to find out more."

"Sounds good." She struggles to get the ladder upright and secure. "Don't go too far though. I need you to catch me should I decide to jump."

"All righty."

She starts up, cautious. Not a big fan of ladders. The feet are wedged against the wood pedestal of a glass display case. Hope it holds. It will. The case is bolted to the floor, for God's sake. Don't be such a wuss. Watching her feet, she takes it one rung at a time. Making good progress. Not too bad. Hits her head on the tin ceiling. "Ah, damn! Damn, damn, damn!" Brings a hand up to the back of her head.

"What, what?" Wally asks, urgent, from below. "Ya all right?"

"Yes," she says through gritted teeth. Okay, mellow out. "Just smacked my head."

"Oh. Careful up there."

"That's the plan, buddy." Steps one rung down and begins to read the bindings of all the books on the top shelf that she can comfortably see without sending her body hurtling to the floor. Buddhist Rituals, Navajo Beliefs and Myths, Catalog of Ancient Greek Artifacts. Boy, he wasn't kidding. No rhyme or reason. Getting the feeling that my two art history courses aren't gonna be much help either.

The phone rings.

"Wal, can you get that?"

"I'm on it." Picks up the receiver. "Yello, World Imports... Yeah, there's an Al Thompson that works here. She's indisposed at the moment." Looks up and grins at her.

Who would be calling me? She starts down the ladder, then jumps from about two feet up. Ah, terra firma. Facing him, she watches his profile drop from a smile to a blank stare.



"Yeah, okay," he says, monotone. "I'll tell her." Hangs up.

"Well, who was it?"

Remaining silent, he turns to her.

"Wally, what is it?" Don't like that look. "Tell me."

"That was DHL," he answers. "They were calling to let you know that the crate you shipped last night is on schedule and will arrive in Manila tomorrow morning."

"What? But how..." Wally's figure fades to the background of her sight as the memory of the night before begins to play in front of her eyes. "I was getting ready to practice yoga," she says, her voice calm and even. "I was upstairs in my bedroom, breathing. My eyes were closed." In one subtle movement, her expression shifts to deep concern. "There was a light that surrounded me, seemed to be everywhere. I opened my eyes."

Putting both hands on her shoulders, he moves her slowly out from behind the counter, then sits her down on the wicker chair. She seems oblivious. He grabs the bar stool that he keeps behind the counter and sits himself down on it, watching her closely.

"The light was coming in through the window that overlooks the shop. I stood up, walked over, looked down. The chest," she stutters, "light was pouring out of it, streaming out in bright shafts. The top opened by itself." She stops, closing her eyes tight.

"Al, you don't have to tell it all at once." Reaching out, he touches her arm.

Startled, she jumps, opening her eyes. "No." Shakes her head. "I have to tell you. Please, just listen."

"All right," he says softly. "Go on, love."

"I came downstairs. The light was blinding, but it didn't hurt my eyes." She gets up, walking over to where the chest had been sitting the night before. Miming her actions, she explains, "I knelt in front of it. I wasn't afraid. I felt something inside me, in my core, here." Puts a hand on her abdomen. "It told me what I had to do."

Wally sits, listening, with a look of trepidation.

"I... That's all I can remember right now." She turns to him, her eyes filled with frightened confusion, stinging with the threat of tears. "What's happening to me?"

He gets up from the stool and kneels down next to her, resting a hand on top of her own. "I don't know, love. I just don't know."

She studies his face intently. "But we'll find out, won't we? You'll help me?"

"Of course I will. We'll figure it out, love. Don't worry." He pats her hand several times. "Ya know where we have to start, right?" His gaze moves out over the bookshelves.

"Right, books." Smiles weakly.

"Yep. They're not going to read themselves, ya know. Then again, the way things are goin'..." Winks at her. Standing up, he sticks out a hand and helps her to her feet. "Ya gonna be okay, love?"

"Yeah. Just need to blow my schnoz." Sniffling, she walks to the back of the shop and disappears into the kitchen.

"Well, what next?" he asks himself. "Shamans appearing out of nowhere? Who knows? Certainly not me." Shrugging, he picks up the bar stool with one hand and moves it back behind the counter.

"I just had a thought," she says, emerging from behind the kilim rug, a tissue clutched in her hand. "If that voice, or whatever, told me to ship the chest to Manila, maybe I booked it online. I'm gonna take a look at my e-mail and see if there's a confirmation or something." She starts up the stairs.

Flipping backwards through the inventory book, he says, "Not just sayin' that to get outta goin' through all these tomes, are ya?" Squints at an entry, then turn the page. "'Cause if ya are, my level of respect for ya would have to come down a notch or two."

She gives him a sidelong look, stopping on the third step. "Don't be silly, Wal. Why would I do that?"

"Right, right."

Won't find anything anyway, she thinks, ascending the stairs. DHL probably screwed up. Happens all the time. There must be tons of people with my name. Just the wrong phone number is all. I've heard of weirder coincidences. Could happen. Steps into her bedroom. "Yeah, in a parallel universe."

Sitting down on the futon, she unplugs the phone from the jack and plugs in her MacBook. Starts to dial-up. While she waits for it to connect, she breaths deeply, eyes closed. So what if I did ship that chest to Manila? Doesn't mean I'm crazy. Her eyes open. Been connected for thirteen seconds. She navigates the desktop and launches Mail. The window opens and she sucks in her breath as she sees account and shipping confirmation e-mails from DHL.

Heart beginning to beat faster, she clicks on the shipping e-mail and begins to skim over it. Thank you for using DHL... Yadda-yadda-yadda... Shipment has been scheduled for pickup at 20.00 hours. "Jesus, I really did do it." Lets her head flop back. "Ugh."

"Al, you online?" Wally shouts up the stairs. "I need to use the phone!"

"Sorry! I'll disconnect!" She does, leaving the e-mail open. Stares at it without really seeing it, her eyes clouding over, the words blurring. No time for that now. Shakes her whole body to wake up. Gotta tell Wally.

Jumping up from the futon, she opens the blinds and looks down through the window. Watches him as he talks on the phone, making subtle gestures with his free hand. He must think I'm insane. Certifiable. Turns to make her way downstairs. Not that I haven't thought that before, but this is beyond the beyond. Reaching the top of the stairs, she pauses to take a calming breath.

"Yeah." Wally's voice floats up from downstairs. "Says she doesn't remember anything after that... That's right... Yeah,

okay. Thanks, man." Hangs up.

Her eyes widen in alarm. Who was he talking to? Does he know more about this than he's letting on? Come on, this is Wal-ly we're talkin' about here. Starts a slow descent of the stairs. Right, but how long have I known him? A month. Is that long enough to know him well enough? Now you're just being paranoid. Way too much TV. "I agree," she mumbles, stepping off the last stair.

Trying not to hint at the fact that she's overheard him, she walks straight up to the counter and in front of him. Waits patiently for him to look up from the inventory book.

"Oh, hey," he says, finally noticing her. "What'd ya find out?"

Do I trust him? Think so. No need to lie then. "I found a shipping confirmation e-mail from DHL. Apparently they picked up the chest here around eight last night." Studies him hard to see if his expression changes. It doesn't. See, he knows something he's not telling me. You don't know that. Now just chill. She rests both hands on the counter in an effort to ground herself mentally.

"Okay then. At least that's somethin'. I found the chest in the inventory. Matched it with this sales receipt dated five weeks ago." Waves the slip of paper out in front of him. "According to this," he continues, pointing to the entry with his index finger, "the chest is about forty years old. There's a note here though. Says that it was made from recycled material. The remnants of an old house. Pretty typical practice."

"Why would you write that down?" she asks, trying to keep her suspicions at bay.

"Customers really get a kick outta that sorta thing. Ya know, the history behind an object. Makes it easier for me to sell somethin' if I know more about it."

Makes sense. "So you're saying that we don't really know anything about it."

Wally nods, then shakes his head. "I mean, no, we don't."

"I see. So where do we go from here?"

"Not sure exactly."

"Me neither." She sighs through her nose, tilting her head side to side and rolling her shoulders back. Just a little tense. "Wally, when an item comes into the shop, you give it a good going over, right? I mean, you've never had anybody try to smuggle something inside something they've sold you, have you?"

"Whaddya mean, like drugs?"

"Maybe, or cash or a more valuable artifact."

"Can't say that I have. Unless ya count the occasional creepy critter stowaway. Ya know," he snorts out, laughing, "this one time, I got a shipment from Thailand and you would not believe what came crawlin' outta... Hey, ya all right, love?" he interrupts himself. "Your eyes, they're, the pupils are completely dilated."

"I feel fine." She brings a hand up to touch the corner of her eye with her fingertip. "What's wrong with my..." Falls forward.

"Al!" He catches her by her shoulders. The bell on the front door rings and he looks up. "Ah God. Thank God you're here. She just fainted or somethin'. Help me with her."

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JUST FOUR DAYS LATER, SHE BEGINS A JOURNEY THAT WILL REQUIRE HER TO BECOME IMMERSSED WITHIN THE MYTHS, LEGENDS AND SPIRITUAL BELIEFS OF THE CULTURES FROM WHICH THESE OBJECTS COME AND ULTIMATELY FACE HER OWN UNRESOLVED EMOTIONAL ARTIFACTS.



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