

1minutestories

round 3



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chapter 1 stories

Under the Crescent Moon

The bleating of goats hurriedly crossing the rocky road temporarily drowned out the crackling radio in the sun-bleached café. Old men sat discussing the news of the day: who died, the latest maneuvers of the government, the price of goat's milk and, of course, how many people had been killed by the American Army in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The two old men, both of whom were named Mohammed, sat sipping coffee with infinite patience, watching the sparse traffic slowly bounce by in the dust. They were no longer so young that they could affect world affairs, nor so old that they ceased to want to, so they were left with each other to chat about it and hand down their own dogmas to the younger generations.

The old men would rail passionately about how Israel was the source of all their woes and the great Satan (America) was their slave. Their standard party line was more or less universally accepted by their children and was the official "truth" of the government information ministries. The younger generation, however, had grown up with Internet access and music videos and their motivation was less about who they could blame for their failures and more about how they could become players in the "global economy."

"Here the Americans are complaining about the loss of 3,000 of their soldiers... How many women and children have they killed? They have no stomach for it! Imagine how they would turn and run if we were in the streets of Texas blowing up their houses!" Mohammed said shaking his head.

"They are cowards... Like dogs of the street. If they can gang up on a baby, they will eat it. But if one man raises a hand they all run off, tails between their legs whimpering." His friend answered, wrinkling the leathery skin around his greying eyes. "My greatest disappointment in life is that it did not fall to our generation to strike down the American-Israel axis of evil."

"Allah is great and, God willing, our decedents will have the glory of that triumph... What a beautiful day when that happens and we are all free to finally live in peace and harmony." Mohammed suggested.

His friend drew near as if privy to some great secret. "We may yet live to see that day, my friend..." he whispered, "I hear that America's economy is so dependant on the price of oil, and it is bleeding so badly to support the war that if they are unable to pump oil out of Iraq they will soon suffer total economic collapse and descend into the kind of anarchy and misery they have been spreading."

"*Inshallah!*" they both agree, "I hope I live to see that day. If it required me to lay down my life to make it happen, I surely would."

"When the time comes, my friend, we both will do so together,"

His lifelong friend assures , patting him on the forearm.

Thus the conversation continued to late in the afternoon. The air was just beginning to cool and the clearest of skies was turning to brown. A single star shown brightly beside a crescent moon, a good omen by all accounts. In the street below, a youth's sandaled feet hurriedly plodded along the side of the road. He saw the café and knew his grandfather would be there. He came running in out of the breath, nearly upsetting the coffee pot.

"Grandfather! Grandfather! Great news!" he said panting, clutching a letter.

"What is it, my son?" Mohammed asked.

A gust of wind blew in through the arched entry to the patio as Mohammed, the grandson, drew in his breath. "I made it! I've been accepted! I'll be going to Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio... on a full scholarship!" he said triumphantly raising the letter high. The old man sprung to his feet like a cat and hugged his grandson "*Allah akbar! Allah akbar!*" he shouted, "God is great! Everyone, my grandson is going to study," he added with great pride, "in AMERICA!"

1minutetopic: Living in the Middle East
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: January 2007, Nibong Tebal
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Living in the Middle East

I've been living in Amman, Jordan for over a month now. Life has been good, I don't complain. The money is good. We just started building this dam in the Jordan River and our company sent me as a supervisor in one of the projects at the construction site. I had no family, no wife, no dogs, no commitment, so I went. I like changes anyway and I like learning new cultures.

The culture here and the mentality are so much different than in Greece. The countryside and the climate are also very different than anywhere I have been. I must say I love the desert landscape but it took me some time to adjust to the heat and it is only early April. How will I survive the summer, I don't know. I must carry with me a portable air-condition! But the nights are cool and fresh, with a sweet fragrance from the jasmine trees and I enjoy the nightlife here in Amman, the big city.

There so many new things here, I don't know where to start from: the language, the food, the landscape, the people, especially the women. I wanted to try them all! First, I enrolled in a class for Arabic, offered through our company. Strange language but I like it. My classmates are a couple of Europeans and an American. They are all in our work-team. Funniest thing, the American seems to make the biggest progress in the language. Maybe because he is so outgoing and loose (he is also a smart ass, if you ask me). The Europeans, on the other hand, are just too stiff. When I greet them in the class they look at me as if I killed their mother (goddamn Dutch ice-pricks, it takes more than this sizzling heat to melt the frost in their faces!).

Anyway, to cut the story short, the food is great and they have very good restaurants here. My favorite food is the "Mansaf", the seasoned lamb with aromatic herbs cooked in yoghurt. I could eat a whole flock of this shit. I like their spices, in general. My visit here has been a gastronomical adventure. I usually go out with two guys from work, Mustafa, a native who shows us around and Steve, the American smart ass. Don't take me wrong, Steve is a nice guy to hang out with. We've had a good time so far. He knows all the bars in town. It's just that he is too cocky and show-offish sometimes that gets into my nerves; especially his way with women.

Mustafa on the other hand is a very quiet, low-profile guy who is married and has 4 children. He is constantly smiling, even when he goes through the worst of hardships and he is the most hospitable person I've ever seen. They say that the Greeks had the "Xenios Zeus", the god of hospitality. Well, this god must have been born in Jordan! The other day, a big cement block fell and smashed Mustafa's ankle at the construction site. We all run terrified to see what happened. It scared the shit out of me and my face must have been whiter than cow-milk, as was everybody else's. Mustafa turns around, with the calmest of faces and says to me: "So, where do I take you out today, efenti?"

Honest to God, I thought this guy was on drugs. Maybe they all do drugs here. Maybe the spice up their lamb with some weird grass, that's why it tastes so good! No, seriously, maybe it is the climate or their religion. I still haven't figured it out. Anyway, I sent Mustafa to the hospital immediately and told him to stay home as long as necessary. So, I started going out with my good buddy Steve. And this is where the problem started. You see,

Steve, being a blond American stud, attracted women like flies in cow-shit (or something like that). Well, one of these women proved to be my door to Heaven and Hell. For the first time in my life I was in love. For the first time in my life I was also in real pain.

It all started a few days ago when Steve and I were sitting in a bar. These two women were sitting at the table across from us. It was obvious that they were checking us out and were making comments. Steve did not waste time and waived them to come to our table. They took their drinks and walked toward us. One was fair-skinned and had short, blond hair. She was wearing a T-shirt and blue jeans and introduced herself as Sarah. Steve had definitely set his eyes on her. The other lady looked like a native, dark skin, long black hair and gorgeous green eyes. She seemed to be shy because she avoided eye-contact as she introduced herself. Her name was Myriam.

It did not take long until Steve and Sarah were leaning across the table towards each other, whispering love words over their sixth round of drinks. I could not believe how Sarah was holding up with Steve. On the other hand, my partner drank no alcohol. She seemed satisfied with her anise tea. Instinctively I switched from beer to coffee, the kind with ginger they have here, awesome! I don't know if it was the ginger or the infatuation with this woman's eyes that made me decide to break the ice.

"So, Myriam, you don't drink alcohol", I said.

"That is right, it is against my religion", she replied with a soft, almost erotic voice in that Arabic accent that made my heart pound hard.

"I see. Well, you look like a pretty modern girl to me", I went on with the caffeine and ginger spicing my wits now. "At least you don't wear a yashmak or a burgha. You mean you have never tried some alcohol?"

"Never. Besides, my family is very religious and very strict on traditional values. I would get into trouble."

With that last sentence, a bitter smile escaped the lips of my middle-eastern beauty. I realized at that instant that family values prohibited more than drinking alcohol. A cold wave run through my spine. I knew at that moment that I was falling in love with that woman and I wanted to date her like nothing else. I summoned all courage I had and asked her:

"Doesn't your family object to you going to bars and meeting people?"

"Only with people they trust and never for meeting guys ..."

"Guys like me? I mean foreigners?" I interrupted her in a polite voice.

"Yes, I am sorry ... I have nothing against foreigners but I am not allowed to speak to foreign men alone ... you see, I only do it because Sarah is here, she is a good friend of the family, she is Lebanese, and ... I only do it because I like you ..."

The last two words came at a whisper I could hardly hear. But I heard them alright and they stirred a fire deep inside me.

"Look Myriam", I said, "I like you, too. I like you a lot. And I would like to see you again..."

“Sssh!” she said. “Not so loud! People may hear us. Some people here know my family. We should actually go, it is getting late”.

Myriam blushed and could not hide her embarrassment. It was obvious that she had feelings for me and her heart was trying to fight her emotions, fearing the social repercussions. I had to see her again.

She turned to Sarah to break up the awkwardness of the situation. Sarah and Steve were making out, so much for a trusted family friend! Myriam was rushing to get out of the bar. She dragged Sarah from the table and from Steve’s arms. She was looking around cautiously, as trying to avoid being seen by other people.

“Will we see you again?” I asked both women. “Maybe tomorrow, same time same place?”

“Sorry dude!” said Steve. “Tomorrow I have a date with Sarah, you’re on your own pal!”

I knew that Sarah was my only contact-point to Myriam, I asked for the day after and Sarah reluctantly agreed. Myriam was speechless and facing the floor. She was trying to hide her agony as did I.

Finally, she looked at me with glistening eyes and said “Goodnight. Till next time”. Then they were gone.

I could not close an eye that night. It was like time stand still and the only thing I could think of was Myriam’s green eyes. The next day seemed like a year, even Steve noticed my absentmindedness in our Arabic class.

“Buddy, are you OK? You seem a bit spaced off” he remarked, examining my face. Then he punched me at the shoulder and said “Dude, wish me good luck, I’ve got a hot date with Sarah today. Boy, is that chick hot or what?”

I did not say anything. I waited for the torturing hours to pass until I saw Myriam again. The next morning I saw Steve and I wanted to ask him how his date went. I did not need any cheezy details from his score, I just wanted to know if Sarah had mentioned anything about Myriam.

Steve was distant and he was trying to avoid me. When I pressed him for some news, he said the following:

“Dude, I don’t think it is a good idea to see Myriam again. Sarah is very worried. She said that she was not allowed to see Myriam yesterday. I think Myriam is in trouble, I think some of her folks are pretty pissed off at her talking to guys at the bar. You know these Muslims, they’re nuts! Dude, fuck that shit! Forget the bro! How about me and you going out drinking today? Let’s get shit-faced!”

“Sure”, I said just to have Steve off my back. “I will pick you up.”

I was frozen and I was empty. My first thought was to leave the country, ask for a transfer back home. I wanted out of the project, I just wanted to leave and forget her.

But no, I would stay. I was going to hunt Myriam down even if that meant my death. I did not care about her folks, I was prepared to steal her and drag her out of the country.

There was no escaping now. I was in the edge between Heaven and Hell. I was going to act fast and let fate decide.

1minutetopic: living in the middle east
Contributor: Ioannis Kontodinas
Completed: November 2006, Athens
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Life in the Middle East

Raf shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. The frigid wind stung his face, sucked the breath from his nostrils and made his eyes tear. He hunched his shoulders to lower his chin into the collar of his jacket as he wondered for the thousandth time why his father had decided to settle in Dearborn. Sure, he knew all about how his uncles Kamal and Yousef were already here with their wives and kids but, holey shit, couldn't he have looked at a goddamn map before he bought the tickets. If grandpa was so out of his head about olives why couldn't he have moved the family to fiigging California?

A car slowed and a voice yelled. "Hey Ray you goin' to play Time Quest at Boomer's with us tonight?"

"No, man. I got to baby sit my grandpa tonight while my dad goes to the Arabic Chamber of Commerce meeting tonight." Raf blinked his teary eyes and sniffled.

"Bummer, man. Teresa Paretta is going to be there," his cousin Jamal's voice took on a lilting teasing tone that made Raf want to gnash his teeth. "She is one hot little mama and she beat the socks off Boomer last week," yYelled Dominic Beacher from the ancient Toyota's back seat.

"Yeah well, you guys will just have to keep living on in fantasy land. Teresa won't give you two losers the time of day unless I'm with you."

He heard Jamal laughing, "Dream on, man," as the car pulled away in a choking cloud of blue smoke.

Raf hurried up the front steps of his house as the first snow flakes began to dash themselves against his face.

"Hi, grandpa, I'm home!" he yelled as he shook himself out of the heavy parker. He poked his head into the over-heated living room where his grandfather sat tucked up in a mountain of blankets, watching the street. "Where is everyone?" he asked in Arabic.

The old man turned his head to greet his grand son, "Your mother is over at Yousef's. Nur is having some crises again. Your father already left for his meeting and the minute Fara heard your key in the lock she took her phone conversation elsewhere." He tugged a faded blue scrap of cloth around his neck. "How was your day?"

"Okay I guess except for the f.., foul cold. You want anything, a cop of coffee or something?"

"No, no, sit down and talk to me before you start your homework. The television isn't working and your sister's ear is permanently attached to her cell pone."

Raf knew where this would lead: into the endless reminiscences of the old country but after the artic blast outside the room felt good for a change. "Sure, I'll sit with you 'til ma comes home," he said, knowing that he didn't really have to listen. He just had to give the appropriate prompts one his grandfather got started. Raf walked over and took the seat opposite the old man, noticing how small he had become, like a small brown raisin.

The light from the window, without the incessant blue flicker of the television was soft, almost soothing. Raf was tired. He had played basketball for a while after school in the gym, and the walk home against the wind got to him. "Why couldn't the family have settled in some place warm like Florida or California? It's starting to snow again," he grumbled as he leaned his head back into the well-worn dent in the back of the chair.

"Family. You don't understand about family. You and your sister have no idea about what home really means," the old man sighed almost to himself. "When I was a boy, family meant everything: they were your friends, the people you depended on, the people you worked with, they would be there from the day you were born to the day you died."

That sounded a bit ominous to Raf. It was bad enough here in Dearborn with everyone sticking their noses in your business. Everyone feeling they were free to comment on your personal choices. What would it be like to have the whole town on your back all the time?

As he considered this his grandfather had rambled on.

"You haven't lived in the same house your ancestors lived in for generations. You don't even know where you will be in five years, where your cousins will be. Here, in Michigan? You might even live some place far away like California, or Amsterdam."

"Grandpa, Amsterdam isn't even in America." Raf interjected, trying to conceal his annoyance at the old man's ignorance.

"I know, I know," a wizened brown hand waved away the objection. "That's where Samier is going, to Amsterdam."

That got the boy's attention. "Which Samier, Samier Mustapha, or my cousin Sami?"

"Yusaf's son. That's why Nur is in such a state." The old gray head shook and Raf noticed a wetness gleaming in his grandfather's faded eyes. "Samier wants to accept a job in Amsterdam far, far away from his family, because he has no roots, no idea of home."

"When I was a boy, young men didn't leave their parents without their father's approval, didn't break up their family."

Samier had been like an older brother to Raf. He was the one who taught him how to shoot hoops, helped him pick out clothing that wouldn't make him look like a nerd and stick out at school. He was going to Amsterdam. *Well*, he reasoned, *in less than two more years I'll be off to college*. But he still felt a twinge at the thought of not having his cousin to talk to when he got into a jam.

His grandfather had moved on to the pomegranate tree. What was it with that tree? Raf wondered. "What's so special about that tree grandpa? You talk about it as though it was a member of the family."

"In a way it was. My grandfather planted it beside our door. When I was your age, on hot nights, I used to lie on the roof listening to the breeze in its leaves, while my older brother -- he died in the war -- used to tell me about what he read in his books. He was always reading and we would watch the stars come out one by one in a beautiful clear sky. And

when the house was hot we would eat our evening meal in its shade. The red fruit hanging down, beautiful, ah, so beautiful.”

A smile curved his lips at the memories of his youth, and for a moment Raf caught a glimpse of the handsome man he had been in his prime. Maybe it was the dim light coming in through the window slowly being frosted over, or the heat of the room, or the long walk in the cold wind catching up with him but the boy found that for the first time he could see -- really see -- the scenes his grandfather painted in his mind.

“My father would come home from working with the olive trees, with the sun shining on him. A big man he was. And my mother and sisters, carrying out jugs of goat milk and bowls of rice and plates of cucumbers and tomatoes still warm from the garden. You never saw such cucumbers and tomatoes, Raf. What your mother gets at the store here, they are nothing, nothing like real tomatoes and cucumbers. My older brothers and uncles and cousins would come and eat with us and after mother cleared away the dishes they would sit there and tell stories and discuss important things together, while they smoked. Little birds singing in the pomegranate tree while bees hummed in its flowers.

“These were men who knew who they were. And when I sat there with them I knew who I was, who I would be as a man, where I would raise my sons. My life stretched out before me like the shadow of that tree.” The tear slid down his whiskery face. “All gone now, and we are scattered like the sand in a strong wind. All gone and we are the lucky ones. Most of the family were sent to refugee camps. Some died there of disease or misery or home sickness. Some died fighting for their homes. Many were just lost, lost like so many scraps of paper blowing away in the wind. Gone, all gone now.”

Slowly the sad eyes closed and his chin sank to rest on the fold of blanket. His hand twitched in sleep.

Raf sighed. This was the first time he had really listened to his grandfather’s story. He had to wonder what it would be like to live such a simple life, one tied to the land and to tradition and family in a way he would never understand. What life he might have lived if things had been different in the Middle East.

1minutetopic: Living in the Middle East
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: January 2007, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Almond Cookies and Head Scarves

Greta started out of a light doze when her doorbell sounded on a dark, cold winter afternoon. Puzzled, she didn't recognize at first what had woken her and stretched a bit. Eventually, she ruled out the telephone and shuffled to the door to see if anyone had rung her bell. After unlocking the door and shrinking back from the cold blast of wind, she stuck her head out and looked down the corridor. Standing tensely a few feet from the door as if she were poised to spring away like a frightened doe, a young woman in a long, black winter coat and orange scarf looked back at Greta with wide-open startled eyes.

For a chilly moment, the two women stared at each other.

The young woman was the first to regain the ability to move, and, smiling enthusiastically, walked up to Greta with her hand stuck out for a shake.

"Well," she said, "I guess someone is home, after all. Hi, my name is Kim. I'm your neighbor. Well, I mean, a distant neighbor. I live on the end of this block. I am your nearest *present* neighbor today. It seems all intervening neighbors are away for the holiday."

While she was talking, the young woman was flitting around like a little bird, gesturing back to her apartments and all the apartments between. Greta, still not completely awake and a bit daunted by the rapid, unexpected gush of monolog coming from the girl, could only manage to blink in response. The girl obviously took this as encouragement and stuck her hand out again even further, grinning wildly.

Automatically Greta shook hands with the girl. Before their hands had even come to a standstill and released one another, the gush began again.

"Well, it is very nice to meet you. Very nice indeed! Nice to see a friendly face during the relative quiet of the holidays, isn't it. Anyway, I was hoping I could invite you over for some tea. I just baked some cookies and thought it would be nice to have some company. I mean, anyone else stuck here over the holidays is probably also interested in having some company, too, so I started pushing doorbells and you are the first person who is at home!"

Here she beamed with what seemed to be pride. "So, would you like to?"

Greta had the presence of mind to say "Excuse me?" but her voice sounded like she was clearing her throat or like she hadn't spoken in a long time.

Kim ducked her chin down an inch or two and, with an even, steady stare, announced very clearly, "Would you like to come over for some cookies and tea?"

Greta was an old woman, but she didn't necessarily like to be treated one. So, without thinking about it further, she said "I'd be delighted. Just let me get my things on."

She put her coat on and, pleased to have remembered, she put the apartment keys in her coat pocket and patted them. The janitor would not like to have to come up here in this weather to unlock her apartment again. Pulling the door shut and locking it, her satisfaction withered when she realized that she had come out in her house slippers. "Oh well," she thought, "We are just going down the corridor. No one shall notice. Besides, it is an old woman's prerogative to wear her house slippers out in the corridor."

She turned towards the girl and smiled to let her know she was ready. Kim chattered on as they walked down the open corridor to her door. Greta didn't really follow anything that was said, as there was an icy wind blowing off the snow-covered parking lot and she was too busy pulling up her collar and cursing the winter under her breath.

Arriving at the last apartment on the corridor, Kim opened the door and held it open. As she entered, Greta noticed first the glowing warmth of the room envelop her and the emptiness of a room that didn't seem to have any furniture.

The young woman vanished into the kitchen saying something about getting the tea together. Greta looked around and found a coat rack nailed to the wall by the door upon which to hang her coat. The floor of the room seemed to be covered with towels and throw rugs. There were a few pillows clustered on one side. It gave the impression of the impoverished life of a student coming from a poor family. Just when Greta was thinking what she had that she could give to the girl to make her life easier, she noticed a bunch of furniture stacked along the wall way in the back of the room. She didn't have time to consider this thoroughly before Kim came sailing back into the room with a tray full of tea cups, plates, cookies and a huge tea pot shaped like a cabbage, which she set in the middle of the floor.

Greta wandered over and looked down at Kim who seemed just then to realize that something was wrong in the apartment.

"Oh! Perhaps you would like a chair? I can bring one out if you would be more comfortable that way?" She jumped up and began extracting a chair, "In the Middle East, she continued," most people sit on the floor because they don't believe in furniture, except, of course in the sitting room where special guests are received."

When the chair was set on the rugs and offered to Greta, she sat down upon it. Before she knew what was happening, a dinner plate was balanced on her knees and loaded up with cookies and a cup of tea.

As they drank tea and ate cookies, Kim kept up a steady, charged stream of talk, explaining the cookies were almond, the tea was jasmine and the shiny brown cylinders were dates. She could also mix up some orange-pomegranate juice as well: she had gotten the recipes off of the Internet.

Bemused, Greta learned the following:

That the apartment was always this warm – summer and winter – as the previous tenants had somehow baffled the meter and Kim never received any heating bills (and was not about to report the situation).

That Kim was studying Economics at the university. This part of the monologue was peppered with lots of details about programs and professors that eluded Greta.

That Kim was fascinated by textile sculptures, but had decided against studying art because there was no money in it (a decision heavily influenced by her father who was paying for her education).

Occasionally, Kim would fire a question at Greta, who could manage about a sentence and a half before the young woman began talking again. Thus, she disclosed that she was born in Germany, in Planegg bei Munich, she had learned English as a child in school and improved it teaching at an American high school and that she had immigrated to the States twenty five years ago.

Greta didn't like to interrupt but managed to ask a question by raising her eyebrows when Kim was talking about her father and nod towards the stacked up furniture at the back of the room.

"Oh, that!" giggled Kim, "my father doesn't have anything to do with that. He'd freak if he saw it, actually because he hates Arabs. You see, I decided that, since I was going to stay here over the break (my parents are in Barbados, anyway), I might as well use the opportunity to learn more about the world. I picked the Middle East, you know because we know so little about the people who live there and it is such an important region. So I decided I would learn as much as I could and, because, I would never be allowed to travel there to see everything with my own eyes, I would try to reproduce life in the Middle East as precisely as I could here in this apartment. I read several articles on the Internet and checked out lots of books from the library." She waved at a stack of oversized books that Greta had not noticed before. "By looking at the photos of peoples houses, I saw they don't have any furniture and decided to try to live without mine for the holiday to see what it is like. Except for my bed. I tried just to live in this room and sleep on the floor, but it was so uncomfortable I couldn't fall asleep. They must have special mats to which I do not have access, so decided that it was OK to sleep in my bed. But for the rest of the time when I am not cooking, I stay in here."

She went on to say that it wasn't so bad and that she had read a lot about the state of women living in the Middle East. "Did you know," she said aghast, "that some women are sequestered in their house for their whole lives. First in their fathers's house and then in the house of their husbands. But I don't really see how that can be. I mean, how do they go shopping? Someone has to do it and I don't really imagine some macho Arab man going out with his string bag for bread and eggs. And I also read that since some societies are strictly homosocial, the only activities that women are allowed are female-only tea parties in the afternoon. But if that is so, how do they get to the tea parties at

their friend's house, if they can't go out of their own home? I thought that maybe there were underground passageways between houses, but I didn't read anything about that."

At this point, Greta noticed that Kim was still wearing her orange winter scarf on her head, tufts of artificially red hair poking out at the temples, and it occurred to her that the fashion rule decreeing that red hair clashes with orange clothing was clearly no longer in effect. And that this was probably Kim's idea of a Muslim head scarf. Greta doubted that women in the Middle East wear thick, knitted, woolen scarves, as the weather would be warm enough to prevent this, but she didn't say anything. Looking closer, she noticed that the young woman seemed to be wearing her pajamas over a pair of jogging shorts and large, dangly earrings, which actually did have a Middle East flair about them.

By the time that Kim had spouted some facts about women in the Middle East, including something rather hideous thing vaguely referred to as "female castration," showed Greta several books from the big stack and gushed approvingly at the wall hangings in several of the photos, the tea was exhausted and the pile of cookies were reduced to the polite one or two that must be left uneaten (the date supply had been hardly touched), Greta decided that it was time to take her leave.

Kim seemed surprised but was quick enough to help Greta into her coat and even offered to walk with her to her door.

"No, dear, I can quite manage on my own. I am old but not that old." She shook the young woman's hand and said, "It was really delightful, this lovely tea you prepared. Next time, I hope you will come visit me in my home for some tea and cookies. It won't be so exotic..."

Kim had been batting her eyes, swooning with the idea that she had made a new friend. Now she was pumping Greta's hand and promising she would come for a visit soon.

Greta regarded the girl as she gushed on and decided that, although a bit given to fantasy and misinformed about the ways of the world, she was a sweet girl and would probably outgrow all this silliness eventually. Before she turned back down the corridor to her own apartment, Greta gave a little wave and said, "Thanks again, dear, for the tasty tea. And good luck living in the Middle East!"

1minutetopic: living in the middle east
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: November 2006, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Returning North

The northern region of Iraq

Admittedly, the border region had been a trifle chaotic of late. The Kurds, to the north, were largely independent, although loosely allied with the so called coalition forces currently occupying Iraq. The rebellious factions in the central region had been getting progressively more aggressive attacking targets towards the north and, as we all know, it's hard to judge the intentions of a driver in a truck at 1400 meters.

He had made no mistake, nor was he 15 months earlier when he gunned down a coalition armed personnel caravan, killing a childhood friend and a couple of gay soldiers. Actually the poorly made armor produced by a concern just outside of Umberslade was to blame.

Reginald Peavey had followed standard operating procedures and had requested and received permission to engage the target before he flipped the safety off and pressed the fire button of the 20 mm gun. The target was believed to be a truckload of explosives on its way to destroy an allied checkpoint. It was based on information of the highest quality and had been cross checked with an allied information network for confirmation. Reginald was sure he was doing the right thing sending a few more scumbags to meet their maker and saving some of George Bush's or Tony Blair's boys.

Unfortunately the defense contractor responsible for the target-threat cross-referencing database was not allowed to farm the software development out to a much cheaper foreign subcontractor and developed the whole system in Sussexshire. In order to meet the price goal of the system they had to take certain shortcuts which resulted in occasionally faulty operation.

When the truck carrying Jelal and his brother Mohammed and two of his cousins was hit it felt like they had struck a mine. The vehicle shook and it seemed that the whole thing was exploding around them... But it didn't stop. They didn't have time to react and there was nothing much they could have done anyway.

After several seconds it was finally all over. The truck had been completely destroyed and ground to a halt a few meters off the crude roadway in the dark. Jelal instinctively threw himself out of the smoldering wreck. If it was an ambush, the rebels or robbers would be there in a few seconds to finish him off. His only hope was that they would be seriously disappointed by the seriously shot up food and clothes they were hauling. Of course they never came.

After several minutes of not dying, he slowly started to assess the extent of his injuries. Had multiple lacerations, but thanks to the poor quality of the metal jacket used on the British manufactured ammunition which prevented the consistent splaying, he had no fatal injuries.

He collected his senses and painfully crawled back over to the wreckage. His cousins had both been hit several times and were dead, but Mohammed was still alive. Slowly Jelal was able to move Mohammed out of the wreck. They lay there on the sand beside the smoldering wreckage looking up at the stars. He knew they would have to get moving

soon... their only hope for survival was to sneak back North before daylight... But in their condition it was going to require a miracle.

"Curses on those who are to blame for this" Jelal thought "May they never see the starts... May it always rain on their heads. May they be banished to a small, cold, forgotten island far from humanity." And his wish was granted in the form of an accursed, god-forsaken little hell on Earth called... England.

The political makeup of the Middle East, as it exists today is an expedient device of the British. The various states were constructed out of pieces of preexisting empires in such a way as to insure strife and political unrest for decades. It was thought best to cut the previous political entities (such as Kurdistan) into smaller units and combine them with dissimilar units extracted from other _____. The idea being if you created countries with enough domestic unrest, they would never become a threat to the British Empire. Thus you have Iraq made up of Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish and yet some how Tony Blair seems surprised that they are at each other's throats.

Mohammed stirred interrupting Jelal's moment of righteous cursing.

"Did we win?" he managed to mumble.

"Dear God, what? What are you saying?" Jelal _____ back.

"Well..." Mohamed drew in a painful breath, "Last time I woked up in this much pain, flat on my back, staring at the starts, we had just won the midnight camel races."

"No,! No! We've been attacked and _____ and Mohammed have been killed!"

"That's much worse than winning the camel races..." Mohammed added thoughtfully.

"We must get out of here or we will die, too," Jelal said looking into the darkness around them. "And if we get out we'll live forever?"

"What? No! Of coarse not... Just... Longer. Can you move? Can you walk?" Mohammed tried to sit up, but it was too painful, so Jelal pried him up to a sitting position, causing him excruciating pain from all his wounds.

"No," he croaked.

"Do not worry, Brother... I will help you. I will stay with you to the end, I swear it!" Jelal vowed, his heart welling up into his throat and tears in his eyes.

"Is that supposed to be reassuring, 'cause it's not."

The warm night air smelled of burnt rubber as the last inflated tire went flat with a "Pssssh!"

"Come," Jelal said, "we must get moving quickly or they'll find us! I'll go see what supplies I can recover from the truck, you wait here and try to figure out which way is north."

A single 20 mm round can penetrate right through a truck front to back and everything in between but it does a lot more damage than just making a 20 mm hold through things. Almost every thing that gets hit receives enough energy to blow it apart and send thousands of shards spiraling outward in the general direction of the round. A single 20

mm round through a coke truck can rupture 40% of the cans or bottles on the _____ truck and Jelal's truck took 45 rounds. Despite this fact, Jelal did manage to scrounge a badly perforated tarp, some holy bread and several intact tins of imported liquid.

Slowly and with much discomfort, he managed to get Mohammed moving, one step at a time, leaning most of his weight on Jelal's back, They hobbled off into the sand and darkness, where a warm breeze wafted above and the only other sound was the whispering of sand flowing over the dunes.

Peavey, however, wasn't having quite as much luck. He was on an adrenaline high after his recent "target elimination" and was a little over zealous with flicking the safety back on his weapon. The switch, manufactured by Lucas Electrics Ltd of _____shire, was yet another failure in the long line of failures produced by Lucas since th 1800's. You see, Lucas was a family-owned business for longer than is healthy and the several generations of managers did not believe in metallurgy. As such, their electrical components were renown for their unreliability, earning Lucas Lighting Systems the title of "Prince of Darkness." The alternating hot/cold and dry/wet environment in the helicopter had caused th poorly designed switch contacts to corrode. When switching them open, Peavey had inadvertently burned some of the greenish-white "fuzz" to black with the arc coming off the contacts. When he closed the switch again, this black layer acted as a resistor, getting progressively hotter and hotter as current passed through it, oxidizing further. The resulting instrument panel fire tore through the helicopter in record time, helped by Peavey's overzealous use of oxygen to help steady his nerves after the one-sided "fire fight." Taken completely by surprise, and blinded by noxious fumes in the cabin, Peavey was unable to relay his coordinates to base before crashing into the sand dunes some six kilometers North of the truck. He and his copilot Nigel _____ survived the crash, but Nigel was knocked unconscious and both of them had several broken bones, including all four ankles and wrists.

Peavey knew that eventually some one would come for them, but it was going to be several hours before they could get started and it would probably be well into the next day before they were rescued.

All night long, the two specs on the map crept closer and closer together. It was hard work carrying his brother and the supplies he had scavenged. He thought Mohammed would probably not survive, so when they stopped to rest a few hours before sunrise, he suggested they drink the four tins of drink. Mohammed, who was in no shape to argue didn't, and they opened the tins, clinking them together. Neither on could read English, and all they knew was that these tins were very valuable. They simultaneously took big swigs and instantly spit it out nearly vomiting with revulsion from the taste.

"Holy mother of God! What is this crap?" Mohammed asked, staring at the tin of Guinness. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Ugh..." Jelal coughed, "It must be a health drink."

"Of coarse... Drink this and you need not fear death from any other source... 'cause IT will kill you!" he answered back. Eventually they decided that if they were going to

survive they'd have to make as much time as possible in the dark, "cause once the sun came up, they would be "sitting dogs", not having only ducks to analogize.

They dutifully drank two 24 ounce cans each and, never having touched alcohol in their lives, were completely hammered. It took them a full two hours to close the 1300 meters to the helicopter site. Just as the sky was beginning to brighten, Mohammed looked up and saw the smoldering wreckage of the British helicopter.

"Allah is great!" he shouted with joy.

1minutetopic: a complete lack of quality has never inhibited British production
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December 2007, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

A Complete Lack of Quality has Never Inhibited the British From Reproducing

Carmella met Neville in New York while attending a conference on "The Internet, Intellectual Property and Their Implications for World Music". They seemed to have a lot in common. He wrote the music column for the *London Mail* and she wrote for a titchy magazine in Naples. Both enjoyed the new Brazilian music and the fusion sounds coming out of North Africa, so they ditched the last day of conference to go sight seeing together.

When Neville had to return home to England, he invited Carmella to visit on her way back to Italy. "I'll show you around London. We'll have some laughs. Come on, Mella, what do you say?"

She shrugged as she considered him. Neville lacked the passion and style of Italian guys and the Americans' brash openness and sense of humor. But he had a certain goofy charm. And how many times would she have someone to show her around London. "Sure, why not."

She still had to visit some of her father's family on Long Island so they made plans to hook up in a few days. He gave her his cell phone number and said, "Call any time. I'll pick you up."

Her flight arrived at Heathrow in the very small hours of the morning. She called as soon as they touched down. "Nev, cara, you know of a place I can stay. I'm really too tired to go looking for a hostel."

She smiled when he said the words she wanted to hear, "Right'o. My flat mate's off on assignment and won't be back 'till the weekend. I'll be down to pick you up. You can stay with me. It's not much, but no sense in paying for a place when I have room and it's only for a day or two."

"Oh, Neville, that would save my life! If you're sure it won't be too much trouble."

He told her where to wait. She collected her bag and sat in the dingy sheltered area where the taxis waited for fares. Watching a chilly drizzle, she wondered if this was such a good idea. In her jetlagged state, the hot sun of Naples looked very inviting. The desolate gray of early morning always left Carmella with an abandoned feeling. The impersonal, industrial people-shuffling atmosphere of an airport did nothing to improve her sense of oppression. She sat on her bag dreaming of espressi and biscotti. Her stomach went with her vision and tried to digest itself. Pale unhealthy looking people in ugly clothing drifted past in waves. Occasionally a taxi driver, whose English was not as good as hers, wandered over to see if she wanted to be taken some where. When the damp finally made through to her liver, she decided to let the next cabby take her anywhere so long as he promised food and warmth. A dinged Morris Minor, which might have been blue some time in the past and was belching enough exhaust to account for most of the infamous London fog, rattled to a stop in front of her.

It took his calling her name before she recognized Neville waving to her, “Sorry it took me so long. The car doesn’t start well in the rain.” He gave her a sheepish grin. “I can’t stop the motor!” he yelled over the racket. “If I take my foot off the accelerator, I’ll never get it started again. Could you just throw your bags in the back seat?”

Carmella eyed the trembling car, wondering if the fenders would falloff when she tried to open the door. At five in the morning she didn’t think she was in any position to argue with someone who came all the way from ... wherever... to pick her up. Beside she spent close to her last Euro picking up souvenirs for her niece. She smiled and realized that Neville was in the passenger’s seat and he had his hands on the steering wheel. It took her foggy brain far too long to remember that they drive on the other side of the road. While processing the vagaries of British road usage, she tried to open the back door.

“Neville , cara, it seems to be locked,” she ducked down to give him another smile. At the same time he gave the door a whack from inside, sending it crashing into her kneecap and knocking her bag into an oil-slicked puddle.

“Oh gosh! I’m sorry,” he jumped out of the car to see if she had been hurt. The car sputtered, shuttered, gasped, and died.

Neville reached for her bag but dropped it back into the mucky water in his hast to get back into the car in the hopes of speedy resuscitation. Carmella retrieved the dripping bag and, with little thought to the car’s freshly brushed upholstery, shoved it into the back seat. Giving her bruised knee a tentative rub, she hobbled around to climb in beside her would-be rescuer. The back door swung open again. She got out, slammed it, waited a moment then got back in. Neville pumped the gas furiously as the car made what sounded to his passenger to be some very ominous sounds. Nothing happened. The sheepish grin flashed her way again. “It needs a tune up. We’ll have to wait a few minutes before I can give it another try. I think I may have flooded it.”

She spent the next forty-five minutes wondering why she hadn’t just taken one of the many functioning taxis. They stood ready and waiting, stretched out in a never ending line. *By now I would be sound asleep, tucked up in a warm bed with food in my stomach,* she thought with a sigh.

It had to be her fatigued imagination that made it seem that every time a taxi pulled away from the curb with a passenger all comfortably settled in the back seat, the driver gave her a “this could have been you” grin.

She hugged herself in a futile attempt to work some life back into her goose bumpily flesh.

After a lot of coxing, Neville managed to get the car started. Carmella tried to remember he had gotten up at an ungodly hour to pick her up and that she should be grateful but the cold wet air blowing through the open window was beginning to cramp her muscles. “Cara, do you mind if I close the window? I’m a little chilly.”

The sheepish grin reappeared. “Sorry luv, it’s broken. Haven’t been able to close it since last summer. Well be there soon. Like I said, it’s not much but it has lots of character.”

“Character, this is something like charming, no?” she asked.

Neville grunted a sound that could mean "yes," "no" or "don't I wish."

By the time they arrived, Carmella's fingers felt like they would have to be pried open, her neck ached and her shoulders might as well have been riveted to her ears. *Santa Maria, this is where I'm going to die*, she moaned to herself.

Neville climbed out and offered her a hand but she found that she had to use both of hers to pull her legs out from under the dash board. The gray apartment building had seen better days. *Probably in the time of their former king. Well at least it will be warm and surely he must have food.*

Once inside Neville lead her down a damp hall the color of the gum one might find stuck to the under side of tables in very second-rate coffee shops. Her knee throbbed. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw they were heading for an elevator. The sigh froze, fell to the floor and shattered into tiny pieces when he passed it by heading for the stairs.

"Why don't we take the lift?" There was that grin again but the moment it formed it was replaced by a look of horror. "Bugger all! We left your bloody bag in the car!" he dashed past her. She considered sitting on the steps but her slacks were new, she gave it up.

He returned looking decidedly downcast as well as empty handed. "Mella, luv, I hope you didn't have anything of value in your bag." There seemed to be something about his face that couldn't come up with any expression beyond that damned sheepish grin.

A vision of her good cashmere sweater and a pair of really lovely shoes winging away flashed before her mind's eye. And all those gifts! Their Euro value was not great but they were her things, and now some wretched little thug had his grubby hands on them.

"No, don't worry about it. At this point all I want is a place to sleep and something to eat."

"Look, how about I fix you a real English dinner tonight. To make up for loosing your things. I've got to go to work. I'll leave the keys with you. In case you want to do some shopping or something," he reached into his pocket and produced a key ring. Then glanced at his watch. "Ut ho! have to dash. My flat's 6B, just at the top of the stairs. I'll ring you later to see how you're getting on." He planted a wet kiss somewhere in the vicinity of the bridge of her nose and sprinted back down the hall.

"Chow!" she called after him. Standing there, tired, hungry and in pain Carmella thought this might be for the best. One more of those smiles and all her happy-traveler appreciation for his putting her up would come crashing down like that statue of Sodom Hussein. She looked at the stairs, steep and vanishing into shadows. She looked at the tarnished gilded grill work of the lift. Her knee persuaded her: the stairs were out. She pulled open the creaking gate, the little box into which she stepped sloshed as though she had climbed into a row boat. She pulled the gate shut and pressed 6. Nothing happened. Just as Carmella reached to open the gate again, the cage gave a jerk and with much clanking, it began going up at a snail's pace. By the time she passed the second floor she realized why Neville might prefer the stairs. The fourth floor started to slide by when there was a nasty grinding sound from over her head. The cage bounced to a stop with a groan. She pressed 6 again. Nothing happened. She looked for a button that said, "help" or "alarm" or "reset." None of the above was on the menu. No hope for it, she called out, "Hello! Is there any one around? I'm stuck in the elevator?"

The silence that greeted her was not encouraging. "Hello!" she called louder. Nothing. She let out a string of very unhappy-traveler expletives, wishing she had her bag to sit on.

"This is an apartment building. Surely someone will be going to work soon," she said out loud to keep her spirits up. From time to time she heard a door open and close, each time she called out but no one paid any attention. After a long time spent fanaticizing about food and warm beds she had enjoyed, beginning with the one in her parents house when she was a bambina, and various ways to murder Neville, a wizened brown face appeared at the top of the cage. "I am very sorry, Miss, this lift is out of order," it said in a lilting Pakistani accent.

"I noticed that. I am stuck," she said trying to keep her temper.

"You must get out of there, Miss. I don't think that piece of rubbish is very safe."

She ground her teeth. The cage lurched to prove his point.

"I would love to get out. But I can't open the door until I get either up or down. Can you help me?"

"Oh, no, no, no, I can not do such a thing," he wagged his head at her. "For that you need the building maintenance person."

"Well, could you please get him for me?" She didn't want to cry but there is only so much a person can stand. A sniffle leaked out.

"This I also can not for you, Miss. He is in Islamabad selecting a wife for his son."

The absurdity of this quenched her tears. "Well, you have to do something! You can't just leave me here!" Carmella would have liked to stomp her foot but that didn't seem like a good idea. Instead she rattled the cage.

"Oh my goodness, Miss, I would not do such a thing!" he said in alarm just before the cage dropped a floor and half. It bounced wildly as she picked herself off the floor. From above her she distinctly heard him say. "Oh my goodness! You must not..." but the rest of what she must not do was drowned out by a loud long screeching followed by a series of short free falls and abrupt halts which brought her back to where she got on. With trembling legs, she stepped out onto the solid floor.

"Are you all right, Miss? I hope the sodding lift has not broken any of your bones!"

In an unsteady voice she called up to him, "No I'm fine. Thank you." Six floors look more like Everest. Leaning on the hand rail she made her way up to find 6B, waiting for her like heaven awaits the righteous. Once inside she rummaged about in his miniscule kitchen searching in vain for something to eat. A box claiming it contained digestive biscuits offered brownish disks that looked like a cross between dog treats and wafers of compressed saw dust. Some shriveled black sticks of something that seemed to be growing silvery hair and what at one time may have been vegetables were the only items she found in the fridge. *I am too tired to eat any way I will just go take a hot shower and go to bed.*

Once she stripped off her still damp clothing, she realized she had nothing else to put on. “Well I’ll worry about that later. First I need to warm up in the shower.”

She stepped into the tiny metal stall and turned on the water. A stream about what a small dog might produce and about the same temperature fell on her upturned face. Frantically she fiddled with the handles. The stream went from being a trickle to a dribble and back. Only the cold water blasted forth with a bone chilling gush. Sputtering she went back the urinating puppy mode, tried to dry off on a towel that only seemed to move the water around a little. Like a whipped and shivering refugee, she crawled into Neville’s bed. Tired as she was, she could not warm up enough to fall asleep for some time. Sweet oblivion had just began to steal away some of her misery when the phone right beside her ear shrilled. She picked it up more as a conditioned reflex than as a conscious choice to talk to whomever it was. Neville’s cheery voice grated on her last nerve. “How are you getting on?”

“Fine, I’m just fine,” she hissed with sarcasm. Before she could launch into just how un-fine she really was he chimed in with, “Grate! Now listen to what we’re having for dinner. All my favorites! You’re going to love this: bangers and mash, Brussel sprouts, and,” he said with rising enthusiasm, “for dissert, spotted dick! Does that sound English enough for you?”

It took all her mother’s training in polite guest behavior to keep from saying it sounded way too English for her. Instead she contemplated what exactly he meant by spotted dick for dissert. It sounded like both a cheesy come on and a warning that all might not be well with his manly parts. In fact nothing he mentioned sounded even remotely edible, more like a car crash, the inmates of a Belgian kindergarten and an the unfortunate out come of unprotected sex. “Oh my goodness, that does sound exciting.” *Especially the spots.* “But I’m afraid I’m going to have to be gone by the time you get home. My, er, editor wants me to do a feature on...” she scrambled to come up with something. A bug scurried from under the closet door, “some new spy ware that’s coming on the marker next month. Sorry. Where can I leave your keys?”

1minutetopic: a complete lack of quality has never inhibited British production
Contributor: Frances Burke
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A Good Brew

It is like being enveloped in the piney smell of a sunlight glen in a deep, deep forest. Tiny moats of light dance and float lazily: specks of gold in a deep green calm. A soothing breeze murmurs in the trees and birds flutter by as they return to the trees to their cozy nests. Gentle green ferns seem to beckon and the thought of laying in a patch of golden sunlight for a little doze is making my arms feel heavy. I kneel down and sink my hands into the thick carpet of ancient moss and a pleasant musky scent rises. I sink with rapturous luxury and, as I do, I notice a doe grazing very close, ears flicking with delight as if to signal to me that this is definitely the right place. I sink and am grateful for sinking.

"Ah! I see you have found the 'Forest Meditation'. Very popular that one. One of our best sellers."

I blink a couple of times. The doe and moss have apparently melted and now I find myself staring at a large globular flask of green liquid containing sparkling flecks of gold. I unclasp my hands from the belly of the flask like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar and resist the urge to wipe off the nose print I have applied to the otherwise spotless surface.

"I apologize for having kept you waiting, young man. I heard the bell tinkle as you came in but we have a big order to fill at the end of the week and there is so much to do."

"Uh," is all I can croak out as I am still feeling a bit dazed.

The shop keeper is smiling indulgently at me: like he *did* catch me with my hand in the cookie jar and is just about to suggest that he pour some milk to dunk the cookies in. His blue eyes are literally twinkling under his bushy gray eye brows.

"Let's go through to the sitting room," he suggests instead, stepping back and sweeping the air like a maitre'd at a fancy restaurant, "Watch the step."

I automatically look down at the well worn redish carpet and the half step. The whole place looks like someone's grandparent's house – everything slightly mismatched and at odd angles, the floor boards warped from long years of being scrubbed exposed at the side of the carpeted walkway, the fancy ginger-bread-like details on the shelves and the old fashioned flasks themselves. Even the labels have a nostalgic look, "turn of the century" font on hand-painted porcelain. It is only the content of the flasks that betray the yester-year feeling of the place. A wild spectrum of dazzling colors, some glowing or sparkling others turbid and murky in an odd assortment of flasks of all sizes.

I fight the urge to examine each one carefully. I want to read all the labels and pick up the flasks to swirl the contents around to observe the viscosity and density. But I move as bidden past the ample belly of the shop keeper, who pats my shoulder as I pass. I follow the carpet, catching glances to right and left at the mysterious, wonderful flasks all around.

At the back of the oddly shaped room crowded with flask racks is a sofa and table set off from the rest of the store by the large woven carpet that delimits the "sitting room." The furniture seems to be from the same well worn but clean era as the rest of the shops

contents: fancy carved wooden legs and overstuffed upholstery that was once satin red, covered with what looks like cross-stitched doilies.

The jolly older man invites me to sit down and just as I sink into the comfortable sofa, he begins pouring me a cup of tea from a tea service that I am sure was not there a moment ago. The tea is steaming hot and the set is so dainty and rose-bud covered, it looks like a little girl's dream come true.

"Ta," I say as I take the egg shell cup he has offered me. Suddenly, I am desperate for a drop of tea. I sip and it is sublime. There truly is nothing like a good cup of tea.

"So, my friend," chuckles my host, "I hope you've not come for anything in the 'Eat me' or 'Drink me' lines. We are clean out."

I have no idea what he is talking about and stare at him over the brim of my cup, not knowing what to say.

"Sorry, couldn't help a little trade humor," the shop keeper's eyes are smiling and his countenance is flowing with good natured mirth. "What can we do for you today?"

"Well," I say trying to sound business like. But it is difficult to continue, the lure of the flasks is making it hard for me to concentrate. One last wistful glance at the rows of splendid fluids and then I turn my gaze purposefully to the teapot. Concentrating on that teapot helps me collect my thoughts.

"Well," I continue a bit more sure of myself, "I'll come right to the point. I am a bit dissatisfied with one of your products." There. I've said it. The worst is over. I look up at the shop keeper who is looking at me with an expression of confusion. I guess I expected him to react with anger or to disagree with me. His being puzzled only makes me a bit more nervous than I was.

"Dissatisfied? Well, that doesn't sound good. No, it doesn't sound good at all!"

There is an awkward moment as we each wait for the other to speak.

"Could you describe the nature of the problem to me, perhaps I can help you then."

Well, it doesn't look like there is going to be a fight, I decide. But the persistence of the confusion on the old man's face does not bode well for a rapid resolution to the issue.

"I'll start from the beginning, shall I?" he nods and I continue, "Well about three months ago I ordered a potion from your website. 'Cozy Evening', one thirty milliliter flask. The description is what got me: 'like curling up before the hearth with your favorite book on a winter evening'."

"Oh, yes! 'Cozy Evening', that one sells well, it does. Did you have any trouble with the website?" The concerned look is creeping back into his eyes that are attentively following my every breath.

"Oh, not at all! It's a lovely website. Very easy to find what you are looking for and delightful graphics."

"Why, thank you! We have an excellent graphic design department," he beamed.

Fearing that I might get off track, I cast a glance at the flasks. They seem to have dulled disappointingly, so I continue on, "No, I had no trouble with the website. The problem started after I placed the order. Within a day I had three emails: one saying the order had been filled and was being shipped, another that said the item was out of stock and a third said that I had ordered an item with a catalog number that didn't exist. I have been receiving emails of this nature every day since."

"Oh, dear me, that can't be right."

"Well, I did what every normal person does; I tried to call the hotline. I spent over an hour trying all the menu options, using both the push button and voice-activated methods, but never got a technical service personnel or any other human, for that matter."

To my surprise, the shop keeper raises a hand to his mouth and says "Whoops! That shouldn't happen that way!"

"So right away, I wrote an email to support@potions_r_us_ltd.uk.com as well as a letter which I sent by registered post with a polite inquiry as to the status of my order. That was three months ago, and neither have been answered."

The look of concern deepened in the old man's face.

"Well, that would be bad enough, except my bank account was charged for three times the amount of the order on the very day that I placed it. And, although the delivery time was estimated as four to five days, a package didn't arrive until a month later."

"But it did arrive, did it?"

"Well, a package arrived, it did. But it contained the wrong potion. Instead of 'Cozy Evening' I got three flasks of 'Wild, Wet Weekend' along with the special applicator. Now, I don't mind telling you that I am not the kind of person who orders such things as 'Wild, Wet Weekend' and I was a bit offended!"

"As well you should be. As well you should be."

"I sent the package back as described on the back of the invoice, but it came back. As did the additional three packages with identical contents which I also sent back. It's not what I wanted and I didn't feel I had to keep that sort of thing around my house," indignation is growing in me and I take a deep breath. I hate to lose my temper. "Then, finally, there was a period of relative calm when the fifth package arrived. This time, containing a flask labeled 'Cozy Evening'."

"Oh, what a relief!" the shop keeper slumps back into his chair with what looks like obvious relief.

"That's what I thought. Until I tried it. The potion I received appears to be the item named 'Frog Feet'," with this I thrust a printout under his nose and repeat from memory, "'Nasty coworkers got you down? Neighbors being naughty with their trash cans again? Here's a solution to your problem and your irritation as well. Transmutes anyone's feet into slimy, stinky frog's feet within twenty-four hours. The antidote is only available from Potions R Us, so you'll hit them in the pocket book as well! Customers who ordered this also ordered 'Warts 'n All' and 'Hairy Back against the Wall'."

We both involuntarily look in the direction of my oversized and lumpy shoes.

Despite my intentions, I am a bit hot under the collar and am standing before I know it, shaking the wadded paper in the poor old man's face, "I demand a dose of antidote. Right now!"

"Oh, my! Oh, my! This will not do. We can't be turning our customer's feet into frog's, can we. Oh! Oh!" the old man is blustering and clearly upset.

"And I want it free of charge!"

Now he shrinks back as though he fears I might hit him, squeaking "Yes, but of course!" His pathetic state is like a bucket of cold water on me and I sit down abruptly. I did not come here to threaten an old man with physical violence.

As I hit the sofa, the old man is galvanized into action. He starts shouting and grabbing order forms and a clipboard. Six smallish, lithe men show up and as the shop keeper shouts orders at them, their greenish skin color suggests they might be elves. I don't understand a thing that is said, but the little men rush off with lightening speed and the shop keeper turns to me again.

"We'll have you fixed up in a moment, we will. I have just ordered you the antidote to 'Frog Feet' as well as the general antidote to all Potions R Us evil brews. You'll never suffer one of our hexes again, regardless of who poisons you." He seemed to be back into business mode and was talking with confidence. "I'm putting in a double dose of 'Cozy Evening' – your money will be refunded in full. You don't have to pay for any of this – although the package is valued at three hundred times what your original order was. And, as a tiny compensation, we are throwing in a week's supply of 'Forest Meditation' for your troubles. Ah, here it is," he said to an elf that suddenly appeared at his side carrying a flask and a brightly papered box wrapped with ribbons. "There are your replacement potions. And this is the antidote. You can quaff it now, if you like. Unfortunately, it needs twenty four hours to take effect. Can't get around that, no. So I'm sure you would like to get started as soon as possible."

I eye with mild suspicion the dainty flask that he had taken from the elf to offer me. It contains about 50 milliliters of what looks like water. I snatch it from him as he starts to say something and drink. It has no taste or odor that I can detect.

"Twenty four hours, you say?"

"Yes, and you'll be quite back to normal."

There doesn't seem to be much else to do, so I stand again and stick my hand out. "That would be satisfactory. Thank you for your attention to this matter."

The shop keeper begins to babble some more apologies which I can't stand to hear. I am already beginning to feel the sting of shame, although I know perfectly well that I am not the one who should be ashamed. I turn to go, but he calls me back.

"Don't forget your package!" As the shop keeper pushes the package into my hands I begin to feel the first inklings of nausea and abject embarrassment and can't help myself as I clutch the package to my chest and back away mumbling "So sorry to have troubled you!" I mumble shamefacedly.

I literally bolt out of the shop, heedless of the fragile wares I am carrying. After jogging a half a block, my head is beginning to clear. I review what just happened, and now I can find no fault in how I behaved. In fact, I should have been clearer about how unacceptable the whole situation was. But, assessing the current situation, I do feel I was fairly compensated and have to admit the service has been really good (except the hotline, of course).

I notice that my feet are beginning to tingle as they did when I quaffed the first potion, which I find reassuring. All in all, I have to admit, things have turned out just fine.

I have a few minutes before the next train back home, so I decide to stop into a cafe near the train station. Pushing the door open, I am much more careful with my package than I was leaving the last shop, having considered the worth of the contents. A table at the window near the door is free and I set the package gently on the table. I watch the pedestrians outside for a few moments, and feeling a bit neglected by the server, I look up and wave. Oddly, there is no server to be seen behind the long counter and looking around the room, I notice that everyone in the room seems to be staring at me. I have had quite enough discomfort for one day, so I automatically stand and lift the package. A puddle of greenish, steaming liquid has accumulated on the little marble topped table. Fearing the worst, I feel the bottom of the package and find it wet. One of the bottles must have broken. *Bullocks!* Not wishing to give the gawkers in the café anything more to stare at, I quickly make my way to the door. I stop dead in my tracks, as I see a large, ugly, bluish ogre-like creature standing in front of me, mouth wide open in astonishment. Noticing the tusks and dangerous-looking piggy snout, I gulp with fear and realize that my motion is mimicked by the creature. In rapid succession, I realize that he is holding a now sagging package just like mine and that he is wearing my clothing...

Snorting and red eyes glowing, I yowl like *Satin* with his testacies in a vice clamp, rip the door from its hinges and lumber down the street toward Potions R Us.

1minutetopic: a complete lack of quality has never inhibited British production
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: November 2006, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Five More Minutes

"Dude! Change the station!" Hanover yelled over the sound of a circular saw.

"Huh?" called back Ricky as he finished the cut.

"Turn that crap off! How can you stand to listen to this shit?"

"What?" Rick said, pulling out his ear plugs.

Hanover stood up on the rafter extending his arm and hammer into the bright blue sky with the air of a prophet. "It has all become clear to me, now,. You must be forgiven for your innocence."

Ricky looked up at him squinting in disbelief. *What are you on about, now?* he thought.

"Oh, great one," Hanover calls out, head tilted back ceremoniously, "Forgive him for he knows not what he does."

"Dude... What's your problem?"

Hanover was always launching into some pseudophilosophical diatribe which, while it was entertaining, wound up consuming a significant portion of their work day and they had three more units to frame before summer break was over.

Hans, as he was called, looked down. "Irony. That's all I got to say."

Ricky sat back and propped his arm up on the saw. *Yeah... Like that's all he's got to say!* he thought. "Let's have it."

"Irony: it's like the guy with the earplugs chooses the station," he says, pointing at Rick, "That the guy with the not earplugs," he says pointing to his own head with a finger and a hammer, "has to listen to all day, driving him m- m- mad!" he says, shaking his head in a feigned twitch.

"How are you feeling, Hans? Hm? OK? Legs working good? Then how 'bout you get your monkey ass down to the radio and change the station. 'Cause last time I checked, the senate had not ratified the law restricting all radios to just one frequency... and, anyway, what's wrong with this station? I like it."

"Dude! Maraia Carry?" he said grabbing his sweaty, suntanned breasts and swinging them around as best he could.

"So... The bitch got tits? Your mamma don't got tits?"

"My mamma could giver her all..." he begins singing in an off key falsetto, "I'd give my all.. for one more night with you... I'd sell my children... for one more ride on you... I, I, I, I... I" he said, throwing himself back on to two rafters and thrusting his crotch up and down rhythmically, "I need it so bad, from you, and no one else will DO! I'd give five pints of blood just to suck your cum! Oh, do me, do me, ya gotta slap it to me, poke your dick right through me..."

Ricky always enjoyed these little outbursts and was chuckling.

"Dude! I mean, who writes this crap? It is totally pandering to the male ego... least common denominator, no quality, no art. Just mass-marketed ego massaging."

"Yeah... I like it, too." Ricky calls up, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "You could do better?"

"Better? Hell, no! I could do worse?"

"Uh-huh?" Ricky grunted.

"Yeah. I could so write this shit. I mean, it is spilling out of me like an over-saturated sponge in a clenched fist!"

"You go, boy! You get your top-ten song written and I'll get Maria to sing it."

What Hanover did not know was that Maria Carey actually was Ricky's auntie. He was duly impressed when a year and a half later his song "Five more minutes" was a top-ten hit:

I'd give it all to you, to you, only to you
I'd sell my children into slavery for five more minutes with you
I know you lie and cheat and dump me in the street
I just need it, I need your sex and only you will do
I'd sell my soul to Satan for five more minutes with you
Just touch me once more and let me die happy
That I got to feel your love

1minutetopic:	five more minutes
Contributor:	Horizon Gitano
Completed:	November 2006, Nibong Tebal
Last revised:	9 July 2013

Five More Minutes

Bridget Casey tugged on her brother's arm. "Will'ya come on now, Kevin. I can't be late. I'm only getting to go because Jemima broke the rose bowl." She gathered the serviceable brown skirt, the best one she owned, in one hand to keep it out of the mud as he helped her into the carriage. "It's so exciting. If I do good, it'll not only be higher waged but I be improving me station in life. Hurry up! If I'm one tick late Missus Barstow will be ever so vexed with me. She'll box my ears proper, she will."

"Give over, Bride, we have plenty of time. Do you no' want to have a look about, lass? No telling when you'll be back. Do you no' want to stop and say good by to Martin again?"

The thought of Martin squeezed Bridget's heart. He said he'd wait for her but young men were not good at waiting, she knew that. What a terrible choice she had. Lady Blankenship was giving her the chance of a life time. She simply could not pass it up. Even Martin had seen that. Sweet, dear Martin, with his sea green eyes and the black hair of a pirate. She loved him truly, she did, but this -- this would be her one opportunity to get ahead.

"No," she sighed. "'Tis hard enough as it is."

The understandable buzz of fear, uncertainty and the early morning chill had the girl pulling her shawl tight around her shoulders. Thank God, the day looked like it would be a fine one for early April. Pear blossoms were dusting the lane in front of her parent's cottage with a warm false snow, while sparrows twittered brightly among its ancient branches. If it had been dreary she didn't think her flagging spirits would manage. Her brother tucked the small bag that held her things under the bench and clucked to the horse. He stole a sidewise glance at her. *Just sixteen and no bigger than a whippet. And here she is setting off on an adventure I would give my eye teeth for. Ah, life is not at all fair*, he thought. "Are you no' afraid, Bridie? We've known many who've gone, but not one who's ever come back. Some write home, a few even send money but naught I know have ever come back."

"Well this is different, isn't it now, Kevin. I know I'll be back. Have no fear of that and I'll have a good position for meself." She looked down at her tightly clasped hands and bit her lip. "But yes, I am afraid. Well, not afraid exactly, I know I'll be safe and all, but it is so awfully far away, isn't it?"

They got as far as the crossroad when Bridget adjusted her skirt to make a more comfortable seat on the hard wooden bench. Her foot nudged her valise, and she bent down to push it further back out of the way. "Holy Mother, Kevin, sure and didn't you forget my good bonnet," she turned to give him an angry glare. "It was in the blue box. I left it right next to my bag."

Kevin rained in the horse. "It's still early. We can go back and fetch it if it means that much to you."

A fat tear slid down her cheek. She knew the tear sprang more from nerves than leaving her beautiful new hat behind but she sniffed. It cost her dearly and such a pretty thing, the straw hat had a pink ribbon and lovely little flowers that looked like violets. She knew it set off her blue eyes. "No, it's all right. Have ma keep it 'til I come home again."

"Bride, we have lots of time. A lass can't be gallivanting about with out a pretty bonnet." He turned the buggy and, over her half-hearted protest, drove back to retrieve the hat box.

Missus Casey stood in gate with the box in hand, "I prayed you'd no' get too far a'fore you saw you'd left it." She handed up the box, wiped fresh tears from her plump cheeks and waved her only daughter away. It grieved her heart to have Bridget going so far, to the other side of the world where there would be no family to look after her. It did no good to remember how many young people had to leave Ireland to make their way in life. Hadn't she and Peter had to leave Kearny so they could put bread on the table? Life in England may not be what it was at home, but they ate better. The woman mopped her face with her apron and sighed the words of an ancient Irish prayer ending with, "May the road rise up to meet your feet, and may God hold you in the palm of his hand."

The bright morning sun had climbed enough to warm the air by the time they encountered the traffic making its way into Southampton. Kevin gave the rains a little flick to urge the horse to a faster trot. There seemed more drays and hand carts jostling along the rutted road than usual even a few motor cars. With his sister prattling on about her new position in Lady Blankenship household, the elegance, the glitter, the lavish entertaining of the establishment she took no notice of the traffic around her.

The nearer they got to the harbor the heavier the congestion became until the heavily loaded wagons and carts began to crowd together. The lorries and motorcars frightened the horses. The shouting and clatter rose to a steady roar. The dust and crush spooked Kevin's poor old country horse, making the normally docile creature hard to handle. It did not help Kevin's peace of mind much either. He had the directions to the dockside but had no personal experience with this part of Southampton. When a dray groaning under load of hogsheads refused to make way so he could turn into the street he wanted, Kevin cursed then turned to see if his sister had heard. She sat frozen in fright at so much commotion. He thought he could just turn at the next road and work his way back, But that road wandered in the wrong direction leading them further and further from the water front.

Sweating and frustrated Kevin finally managed to circle back to where he felt sure they should be.

By now, Bridget held the edge of her shawl to her face against the foul stench of garbage, dung, fumes from the motor traffic and an indefinable rancidness. The hot sun hung high in the cloudless sky. Bridget's free hand clasped the edge of the bench so tightly it hurt. She kept looking for reassurance from her brother. This is taking much longer than he reckoned it would. She knew it and her anxiety only fueled her brother's.

"Can you no' go any faster? Kevin, I have to be there to meet her ladyship before boarding. If I'm late Misses Barstow will be that furious, she will."

"We've still time. I tell you true though lass. If I'd'a known it would be this bad, I would've put in a cab once we got into the city. We can't be too far now."

They had gained the main road again and up ahead Kevin could see the bright wink of sun on water. He breathed a sigh of relief just as a hand cart pushed by a burley man dodged to miss a truck hooked wheels with his buggy. Midst much cursing and yelling the two men glared at each other. Kevin tried to get the horse to hold still while the man tugged at his cart. He finally handed the reins to his sister so he could get down to help disentangle the dilapidated cart loaded with cabbages. Once the pressure on the wheel let up the horse sensed it and pulled forward. Bridget had some experience with horses but not under such conditions. She yanked back too hard causing the already fretful horse to rear, backing the buggy into cart, wedging the wheels even tighter.

"Kevin, help, I can't hold him!" she cried. Her brother sprang up to the seat snatched the reins and managed to hold the horse.

The loud blast of a ship's horn drowned out even the clamor of the congested road for a minute. "Bridie!" he shouted when she could hear him again, but what he said next was lost in another loud blast. Finally he yelled, "Get down and run lass. The dock has to just up ahead. Run down the road as best you can."

The already frightened girl looked at her crush of wagons and rough men choking the way. She looked to her brother one last time before climbing down and pushing her way through the crowd. Rude men called vulgar suggestions at her as she tried to run in her good slippers. She skidded on fresh horse manure and went down hard on the packed earth. Someone helped her up but she shrugged off his attempt to brush the clinging muck.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph I'm going to miss the boat!" her brain screamed as she shoved blindly past more hand carts.

She had gained the pier frantically looking about for someone who could tell her which of the enormous boats was the one she wanted. A dignified man in an official white suit appeared in a throng up ahead. She dashed to him, panting and wiping more dust onto

her face than removing tears. "Can you help me, sir, please! She jammed a scrap of paper with her directions at him. He scanned it then took in her disheveled hair and the stained and rumpled dress. Checked the paper again then for the first noticed her youth and fresh from the country look of her.

"I'm sorry miss," he said kindly. "You just missed her. Your ship sailed five minutes ago."

Bridget could just see the *Titanic* steaming out of Southampton harbor. She thought her heart would break. She had missed the chance of a life time by five minutes.

1minutetopic: five more minutes
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: January 2007, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Dedicated to His Art

Weng was trembling seriously – his whole body was shaking and he was sure that if he tried to stand, he would fall over immediately.

He was having a shitty day.

His "creditors" had just paid a visit to his dressing room and threatened him with several detailed descriptions of physical suffering, most of which sounded worse than death. And he had no doubt that the belligerent, pock-marked, potato heads were capable of carrying out each threat with flair on his person.

He rested his elbows on the makeup table and put his head in his palms. What was he going to do? Mr. Ooi had just last week informed the staff that if they couldn't double the revenue, he was going to have to close the theater. Weng did not know how he was going to pay his debts even if he kept working at the Jubilant Dragon Theater. If he lost his job, he would not have the slimmest chance of making the payments – and everyone would know.

This was the steadiest job he had ever had. Before he moved to Kuala Lumpur and started working at the Jubilant Dragon, he scraped by playing in skuzzy dives here and there. But, other than Hungry Ghost month, the work was irregular at best. He couldn't work one month a year and cover his expenses. His costume alone cost three times more than he had ever earned in a single month. And, besides, Hungry Ghost was six months away and he had to have the money in two weeks.

And what about Fatima? His tortured mind went into spasm at the thought. She had often hinted that she wanted to return to her village. But he was against the idea as he would never find work there. They could run away together... But Weng knew that Cheng's thugs would know where to look for him.

He sank further into despair as he recalled the conversation with Fatima earlier in the day. With tears in her eyes, she had told him she is pregnant and he had flown into a rage. He accused her of sleeping with other men and denied that it could be his. After screaming like a maniac for half an hour, he went to the door, took one look at her cowering on her bed, said he wished she had never been born and walked out. He didn't even bother to slam the door behind him.

He loved Fatima and he was now regretting how he had behaved. It was just the stress. He couldn't take care of himself, much less a baby. Although it was hard for him to admit it to himself, he wanted to marry her. She was such a sweet girl and the kind of woman any man would want as a wife. He was sure that her family would accept the marriage, as they had visited her village several times and, once everyone got over walking on egg shells around him, they seemed to like him. He wondered what his parents would think of such a match – a Chinese boy and a Malay girl. The parents of his friends were dead set against interracial marriages. But, as Weng's parents were long dead, they had no say in the matter and he was free to marry whomever he wished.

That is, if she would still have him after the way he behaved. And assuming he survived the next two weeks.

He was still trembling and tried to calm down. He took a deep breath and asked himself: What would Elvis do?

Elvis would never have acted the way he had to Fatima. Not in a million years. Elvis was a gentleman. And he doubted that Elvis would have gotten himself into debt with gangsters either. He just couldn't imagine that Elvis could have gotten himself into this situation, so it was impossible to imagine what he would do to get out. Rather than calm him, the question just made him more miserable.

Weng's heart nearly exploded as a knock sounded on the door. It took a second for him to register the fading voice of the stage hand saying "Five minutes" as it receded down the narrow corridor.

He had five minutes to get ready for the stage. The wig was out of the question, so he started coming gel into his hair. His hands were shaking so badly that he was going to have to forego eyeliner, too. What would his audience think of him tonight? He doubted they would be entertained by his current state. Nor would poor old Ooi.

Well, he wasn't dead yet, and he had no intention of letting his fans down. He did what he could with his face and stood up. His knees were still wobbly, but they held him. He put on his satin shirt, smoothing the lapels in place, and then the gold lamee jacket. Instantly, he felt it working his magic. He straightened and looked into the cheap, bulb-rimmed mirror. Looking back was a confident young man, bursting with talent.

He thought, as he always did at this moment, how he would prefer to do the early Elvis, back when his music was allowed to be honest. But the crowds wanted gold lamee, so they got gold lamee. Secretly, Weng believed that it was his dedication to his fans that led Elvis to the glitz of his late period. And if gold lamee was good enough for Elvis's fans, it was good enough for Weng. He had no intention of letting Elvis or his fans down by letting his shitty day get in the way of the performance.

He squared his shoulders, swiveled his hips and shot his finger gun at the mirror. Giving a rakish grin and a wink, he swaggered to the door and beyond to the crowd that was awaiting him.

1minutetopic: five more minutes
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: November 2006, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

The Player

I guess you could say I take great pride in my work. What really differentiates me from others is my unusual motivation, I don't need to be rich or famous... I just like to get my way, even if it technically means I am interfering in other people's lives. I'm really quite selfless and I do try to balance out the good and the bad... like for every time I pull off something... evil, shall we say? I try to make sure I also do something benevolent.

Perhaps an example would serve best to illustrate my point. Back in high school my big sister Ellena was on the cross-country team and skinny as a rail 'cause she was training all the time. One Sunday after a big meet, we all went out for a posh all-you-can-eat brunch buffet at a fancy hotel to celebrate her taking first place, and, of really, she loaded up. I couldn't help but mention to the servers attending the line that it really was a shame.

"What's a shame?"

"Well.. all that great food" I mentioned pointing to her loaded plate as she walked over to the table. "Going to waste." They followed her but not me. "Oh, I mean, she's bulimic, so she's just gonna barf it all up in a few minutes anyway."

The glee with which she ate was only eclipsed by the dismay with which the servers watched her devour the food and go back for more. The best part was when one of the servers caught her as we were leaving. With heavy eyes, she patted Ellena sympathetically on the arm and said, "You really are a beautiful young woman... You should really take care of yourself."

Ellena was a bit confused then slowly turned her eyes to me. I just shrugged and said, "The bathroom's over there."

To make up for that one, I got my buddy Guiermo elected student body president. He, of course, had never know he wanted to be student body president 'till it was handed to him. He was a shy artistic type musician with long "Kenny G" hair and had nothing to do with politics.

It was easy enough to convince him to shave off all his hair.. Images of Spike Lee with clean-shaved noggin, thoughtful goatee and glasses featured large in the effort. It goes without saying, he never would attend the political rally where I explained, quite unbeknownst to him, that he had bone marrow cancer and was undergoing horribly painful chemotherapy.

"Don't ever let this pass your lips, but basically his one goal in life would be to serve you all as long as he can in the student body..." I said with a tear in my eye. "I mean, he probably won't make it to the end of the year anyway, so what the heck."

Not only did that steer him to a life of political activism, but it also gave an entire student body hope that with humility, determination and plenty of vitamin C even cancer can be overcome.

In fact, one of my personal favorites was the indirect result of coincidence. It just so happened that two days after totally wiping out on my bike, I had some wicked bruises on

my face. I was with my favorite uncle Benny at a liquor store getting a bunch of beer for a barbecue. I must have been about twelve years old and when I found myself inside the store I just stopped by the counter, and sunk my head while Benny went back to load up. The big guy behind the counter looked like a bouncer and gave me a "What's wrong?" look.

"Aw... my stepdad's really an OK guy, I guess..." I said in a hushed tone, quickly glimpsing back towards Benny's direction. "I just wish he didn't drink so much..." the bouncer's face seemed to soften. "I mean... I suppose I deserve it sometimes, but I just can't take it when he beats the crap outta my mom..." Now his face seemed to harden.

Benny came back saying "Hey, don't you want to give me a hand with this?" I jumped and stuttered "Uh..huh.. yes, sir." He looked quizzically at me. "Grab another twelve of Coronas" I shot off to get them.

The bouncer leaned forwards to "have a word" with Benny just as I turned and silently signed "Shhh... or I'm dead." With a finger to my lips and then to my neck. Back at the counter the bouncer looked like he wanted to kill Benny, who grabbed me around the neck with his arm like he always does.

"Hey, pal... you really think you need all this, do ya?" he asked Benny.

"Hope it'll be enough! We're gonna have a little party, ain't that right, boy." He shook me playfully.

"Yes, sir... I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun for us all," I squeezed out through squinted eyes. I was starting to fear for Benny's life. The bouncer looked at my pitiful face and glared at Benny. As he paid he started to feel something was up.

"What?" he finally asked the bouncer.

"You..." he held out a tattooed muscle-bound arm. Glancing at me as I looked down at my feet, he could only say, "You get some help!"

"I'll help you." I whispered as I grabbed one of the bags from a bewildered Benny and pushed him out the door before he got beat up. The bouncer stood in the doorway, staring at us and slowly bouncing a baseball bat in his hands as we drove off.

"Woah... That guy was creepy," Benny said glancing one last time in the rear view mirror.

"The world is full of sick people, my friend. Maybe you better not go back there..." I said punching him in the arm. "I think you remind him too much of his former cell mate."

I figured I really had to make amends by spreading a little good will. Fortunately I had just discovered that one of the neighbors was Jewish. I casually mentioned that I had a Jewish friend, Jamie, who's parents had recently been killed by rocket fire during a brief stint on a kibbutz in Israel. Of course, Jamie didn't know a thing about this, I just let him know that the Cohens were very kind, decent Jews and wanted to invite us over for a special celebration called "Passover." I also mentioned that it was offensive to refuse and to ask questions about religious stuff.

I had explained to the Cohens that Jamie was so traumatized by the event that he pretended that his parents were still alive, the poor boy. Mrs. Cohen really out did herself to try to feed Jamie well. She watched every spoonful he ate like a hawk. Conversation was a little strained at first so I had to fill the gap with leading questions.

"Isn't this good?" I'd ask. Jamie obliged with "I haven't eaten this good in a long time!" Mrs. Cohen smiled such a bitter sweet smile. "Well, you can come back any time you want!" she invited.

"Oh yes, ma'am. I will... I'll just have to ask my mom if it's OK..." with that Mrs. Cohen's eyes began to tear up.

"Im' sure it'll be OK..." I added. "How 'bout we come over next Saturday?"

"Oh, yes, please do," she implored.

Though it was not customary, they gave Jamie some very nice presents including a knit vest I think Mrs. Cohen made herself. When it was time to go, my folks came by for us.

"We hope you got enough to eat." Mr. Cohen said stuffing bags of leftovers and other food in Jamie's already full arms.

"Oh, yes! Thank you very much. I can't wait to tell my parents about it all."

Jamie couldn't understand why Mrs. Cohen was so affectionate, hugging him tightly for so long. I do, however, strongly suspect it had a lot to do with his eventual conversion to Judaism.

"Yep, Rabbi Jamie," they'll say some day, "One of the best damn Jews around."

And me? Well... I may not be the king, but it's still pretty good to know I got him enthroned.

1minutetopic: the gamer
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December 2006, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

The Gamer

Officer Blackstone guided the two handcuffed men into the booking cubical. He gave an all but imperceptible nod to the three other officers lurking just behind the slightly ajar door of Talbot's office. *This is going to be so good. I'll be drinking on it for months*, he thought as he marched his collars up to Sergeant O'Boyle's desk.

The gruff booking officer barely looked up from the questionable magazine he had stashed discretely under a pile of real work. "Yeah, Blackstone, what y'got for me tonight, a couple a drunk and disorderlys?"

"Disorderly yeah. Drunk no." he said with a grin in his voice.

The hint of something a little "off" in the arresting officer's voice got the crusty older man's attention. He finally cast a glance at the collars.

Before him stood two well dressed, geeky-looking young men, late twenties to early thirties. One was what political correctness dictated he categorized as Asian American. *Chinese probably, but who the hell knows*, O'Boyle thought with a grunt. The other a clean-cut all American boy type. Both were sporting an impressive assortment of bruises and scrapes.

The oriental guy fairly vibrated with indignation. He thrust his chin out as he tried for what passed as aggression in one who clearly didn't know diddaly about such things.

"Officer I demand to see someone in charge. This scoundrel has robbed me! He should be in hand cuffs not me. He is the criminal! I want my sword back!"

Scoundrel! Who uses words like scoundrel these days? The booking sergeant wondered with amusement. Until his sluggish brain latched on another word of even more interest.

"Sword, what sword would that be?" O'Boyle asked Blackstone, "You got the sword in question?"

"No sir, I do not." *There it is again that damned annoying hint of a laugh. These rookies really tick me off.* The booking sergeant grunted again.

"Okay let's start at the beginning. What's your name," he asked the indignant guy.

"My name is Cha Liang-Cheng. I live at 7763 Willamette Street and am employed by Bartlet Financial. I am a respectable citizen and I have been robbed of a very valuable sword by this..."

"Hold up, hold up, Mister Cheng. Let me get this down."

"Cha," the young man said with evident annoyance that "these people" never seemed to be able to get the placement of Chinese names right.

"Yeah, right, Mister Cha. Please just answer the questions and this will go much faster." The booking officer scrawled the information on his form. He looked up to see the clean-cut guy looking totally bored.

Mister Cha had the look of a man who doesn't see much sunlight. His hair looked like he cut it himself, without the use of a mirror, and the suit he wore wouldn't fit him even if he

gained thirty pounds. The unibrow didn't help much either. But his air of righteous indignation came through loud and strong. Besides, the blond guy looked like a smart ass, and O'Boyle really did not like smart asses. Young rookies were smart asses. As a matter of fact, he was beginning to think that smart asses seemed to be multiplying exponentially with every year of the twenty he needed for retirement that he put in on the force.

He asked the smart ass, "You take his sword?"

"No, he gave it to me." The whiny implication of "what do you think attitude" in his voice confirmed the booking officer's original suspicion, *damn smart ass*.

"Okay, what's your name?"

"Mark Whitehouse."

"Address."

"Lindmore Apartments, Apartment 1C, 1620 Park Street." Whitehouse delivered his information in an annoying sing song that screamed "let's get this over with. I have more important things to do."

"Where do you work?"

Now the snotty grin fairly dripped from his face. "I am a self employed broker."

If there was one thing the old cop didn't like more than rookies it was real estate guys.

"Dealer in stolen good! He is a thief!" the skinny man sputtered.

"You give him the sword?" O'Boyle asked.

"Yes, but only for one night. He said he'd give me fifty dollars if he could use it for one night so he could kill Karchung-durg and take his Wand of the Serpent Seal."

O'Boyle stopped writing and sat up straight for the first time. "Kill who?"

"Karchung-durg, the war chief of the Tunacj..." Cha wanted to charge on but the booking officer pushed a button in a panel next to the drawer where he kept his stash of questionable magazines and yelled for someone to get Captain Larkin, "We got a potential gang incident on our hands here!" The booking sergeant mopped his sweating brow. Saliva dampened the corners of his lips. "Chripes! A gang turf battle right here in Mason City. This is big. This thing is real big," he muttered to himself.

Whitehouse snickered but didn't say anything.

The sergeant gave the oriental man a hard-eyed stare. "Who's this, Cachung drug guy?"

"Karchung-durg," Cha corrected with a sheepish duck of his head, "But he's not important I just want The Virtuous Slayer back."

"Killing this guy isn't important!" Never in his entire thirty plus years as a cop had O'Boyle ever heard anyone speak so lightly of murder -- much less in a police station and to a cop.

"The Virtuous Slayer is a virtual weapon," Whitehouse sneered.

"Yes, and it is mine. I paid three hundred dollars for it on E-bay," Cha said in desperation, not liking the direction this discussion seemed to be heading in.

"What do you mean a virtual weapon?" The sergeant's face had become flushed. He felt he was missing something important and he didn't like that. And only the oriental guy seemed to be taking any of this seriously -- and he didn't care about the murder, but only getting his weapon back!

"He means it isn't real," The Broker smirked. "Its part of a game, the kind you play on a computer. There is no real sword. Can I go now?"

"You mean to tell me you guys got into a fight -- a real fist fight -- over a toy, a pretend toy."

"It is not a toy! It is a virtual weapon. I rented it to him for fifty dollars and he will not give it back. That's stealing. He is going to sell it on E-bay for twice what I paid for it. I want The Virtuous Slayer returned to me."

A slight tic pulled at O'Boyle's left eye. He rubbed it with a meaty hand. "How can you sell something that isn't real or rent it for that matter?" His collar seemed to be too tight. He could feel a tightening at the back of his neck a sure sign a tension headache was on its way.

Mr. Cha took a beep breath. "A virtual weapon is a real, tradable commodity. That is what this thief deals in, virtual goods. On E-bay you can buy virtual property -- whatever you need for your game: weapons, castles potions -- what ever. Some are very valuable, cost hundreds, even thousands of dollars."

O'Boyle ran his finger under his color and gulped a few times, and looked at Blackstone. "Are these people are totally nuts or what?"

"I am not nuts," Cha puffed himself up to his full five foot eight inches. "I pay taxes. I have been robbed and I want him to return my property."

The sound of muffled laughter could be heard coming form Talbot's office.

If he didn't do something soon, Blackstone feared the cantankerous old sergeant might have a stroke. He eased over to the booking sergeant's side. "You want me to get my kid down here? He's a gamer, plays this one all the time. Its called Galaxy Pirates. He'll know how to get the sword back to Mister Cha."

"Chripes, first its white collar crime. That I could understand. Then its identity theft: that's a little fuzzy. Now its virtual property, pretend crap that's being ripped off and I have to get a damned fifteen year old to come here to sort it out. I am too old for crap like this.

O'Boyle wondered if it was too late to take his brother-in-law up on his offer to go into partnership in a bar, a nice quiet neighborhood pub.

He caught a glimpse of heads ducking back into Talbot's office and Blackstone's broad grin. Maybe they could refuse to serve smart asses.

Gamers, chripes, what would it be next!

1minutetopic: the gamer
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: January 2007, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Slicing up the Balkans

What if he sliced up the Balkans in the traditional manner? Would it have the same devastating effects on stability?

Todd was disturbed from his ruminations by a polite knock on the door.

What could it be this time? he wondered. He didn't like to be interrupted when he was working.

"Come," he said in a voice that he hoped would be appropriately discouraging.

The door opened a crack and the big-haired head of Cynthia appeared.

"Hi, Todd," she said sweetly. "Bruce and I are going on a picnic. Would you like to come with us."

Todd wasn't fooled. He knew that Cynthia turned into Dragon Lady when she was pissed off or on her period. She might be all sweet and sexy now, but that state could not last for long.

"I'm working," he added as an after thought, "No thanks." With purpose, he turned back to his paper strewn floor.

"What are you working on?" she asked, pushing the door a bit wider and taking a step forward. "Bell stuff??"

Todd sincerely hoped that he could stop this intrusion before it shredded his concentration.

"No. You know I don't bring home work."

Todd worked at Taco Bell as an assistant manager. He found it a bit ridiculous that anyone could imagine that his work was anything he could take home. His work was so meaningless that he could hardly even think about it when he was at work.

Now she had her two feet officially in his room and was leaning her back against the doorjamb with her hands behind her hips.

"Then what?"

She tipped her head slightly and the motion caused the opposite hip to stick out. Todd imagined that she thought this was an alluring pose. This "come on" sort of behavior had started several weeks ago and he had been steadfastly ignoring it. He had no chance to do anything else. Cynthia's boyfriend lived in the same house. The three of them, along with a mousy mathematics student that never came out of her room except to go to class and get food and water for her pet rat, had rented this house together. They were stuck in a year lease and no one had the money to get out on their own, so they had to put up with each other.

Well, actually Cynthia's dad had the money to put her in a penthouse, but she pretended the money from school came from her "job" as a gopher at some engineering firm.

And anyway, Dragon Lady was not his type.

"Then what?" she repeated.

"What what?"

"If it is not work work, then what kind of work is it?"

"Oh. Well, its rather complicated. You wouldn't understand."

"Look, I am studying engineering, I think I can understand what you do."

"OK..." it didn't seem he had an option about wasting his time on this stupid conversation. "I am playing a game of Risk, applying the principles of *The Art of War* to see how things look at the end of the second World War."

"You are playing Risk?"

"My, but that was clever of you."

"All by yourself?"

He wanted to ask if she saw anyone else in the room, but decided that additional sarcasm would only prolong the agony. Besides, he had already told Cynthia about the games he played on the Internet, so theoretically, he could be playing with someone who was not present in the room.

"Yes."

"But Risk is a multiplayer game..."

"Yes, well, I am playing all sides."

"How many sides are you?"

"All six"

This seemed to shut her up which was good. But she was staring at him like a second head was growing out of his chest, which was definitely a bad sign. He let the silence drag on, hoping it would precipitate her departure. She was looking at the various game boards and strategy sheets spread out on his carpet.

"Oh, Todd," she said plaintively. "You are playing with yourself?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but refrained.

"Don't you ever... Wouldn't you rather go to the park with us? It is such a nice day, and it would be so much better than hanging around your dark room all day..."

"No, thanks. I prefer it this way."

To his alarm, she pushed off of the doorjamb and seemed to launch herself at him. Within a second, she was sitting next too him on the floor with an pitying look in her eye and for all that gave the impression that she was going to caress him and say "oh poor baby" or some other such garbage.

"Look, Todd, other than working at Taco Bell and going to class, when do you ever interact with other people? I mean face to face?" This last bit was obviously meant to cut out interactions via the Internet.

Todd didn't feel he should have to be subjected to this by some girl from whom he was not getting sex. He was struggling to find an appropriate way to word this when she continued.

"Look, you play games by mail. You play games on the Internet. You play games on your computer and GameBoy. And now you are playing games against yourself. You never go out, you never get any exercise and you don't have any friends except us. Don't you think that some interaction with real, physically present humans might be a good change?"

He had to lean back to avoid her hair or parts of her body brushing against him. Every response he could think of was too rude to ensure his position as fourth roommate would continue into the future.

Just as he was about to start barking at her, Bruce's voice could be heard from the bottom of the stairs, singing "Cynthia, Todd! The day is lovely! It's calling us to play! Let's go!"

"Your boyfriend's calling, you'd better go."

"Is that what this is all about?" she whispered conspiratorially.

Again, Todd had no idea what she could possibly mean by this and said, "Come on up Bruce. Cynthia is trying to convince me to go with you and, as I have no intention of joining you two lovebirds, it might take a long time."

Cynthia had an anguished look on her face, as though she felt betrayed, before she stood up and went to join Bruce at the top of the stairs. She made a point of kissing him right at the open door so Todd had to witness it.

Bruce appeased and cajoled her, bouncing like the puppy he was, until they descended and left Todd in peace.

Finally. What is up with that psycho bitch? he wondered. He was absolutely certain that she wanted his body. And he might do her once or twice, just because she had nice tits. A mercey fuck since he was sure Bruce was lame duck with a tiny weenie. But what made her think he would sleep with her when she and her boyfriend lived in the same house? That was just plain messy.

Psycho.

As he heard the car start up, he returned to his game.

Slice up the Balkans? Or, just for a bit of fun, what if we unify a superpower Middle East? Hmm? That might be fun...

1minutetopic: the gamer
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: November 2006, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

Man in Waiting

Some guys have all the luck.

But was it really luck? he thought as he stood outside the closed door. Jeff wasn't home. Kyle's tentative knocks had echoed lamely through the front entry way.

Maybe Jeff's out back, he thought and knocked a little harder. He'd knock and wait listening for the anticipated foot steps. Then he'd knock again a little harder. This whole process had already taken eleven minutes and he was almost up to a relatively manly knock, though far short of actually calling out for Jeff.

Bang, bang, bang.

He hit the heavy wooden door, scuffing his knuckles.

This is ridiculous... I know he's not here... he thought regarding his knuckles with a frown. *He better not be here! That bastard.*

Kyle had arrived, as usual fifteen minutes before they were supposed to be taking off for the evening. Jeff was always going out and enjoying himself. He was fun and spontaneous and Kyle wanted to be more like him. He had planned to be spontaneous this evening. They were going to drop by Angelica's place and pressure her into going out with them. Kyle even decided to dance to prove to her that he was worthy of her affections. She was perfect: exotic, petite, brown skin, big dark eyes and long, straight black hair – a complete contrast (or counterbalance, as he preferred to think) to his white-bread, white-ass curly dirt-blond hair and much to his eternal chagrin, freckles. He loved that she was from Mexico and spoke English with an accent. Jeff called her "Angie" which annoyed him no end. It belittled her heritage in his eyes. An-hel-i-ka it was supposed to be.

Thinking of this depressed him further. He checked his watch.

9:35... Jeff said we'd be leaving at 9:30... That bastard! He's always doing this.

Kyle sat down on the step in resignation.

Maybe he's just late getting back from playing racquet ball... Maybe he took off already and is right now outside my place waiting for me? Ironic.

He looked back over his shoulder at the foreboding door as though it would suddenly burst open like the buttons on Angelica's blouse he had so long dreamed about.

No way in hell he's waiting out side my door... He'd never do that. Why am I always waiting on him and not the other way around! It's not fair.

Of course he knew it was because Jeff had a life and he himself was just a cling-on wanna be, but he'd never admit it.

Damn him! I'll show him! I'll go over to Angelica's place by myself. I'll tell her she's going out with me and that were going dancing and that's just how it is!

With righteous indignation, he rose and banged on the door one last time, finally hard enough to actually be heard.

"Damn you, Jeff, you bloodsucking bastard," he yelled. Turing to leave he caught the disapproving eye of Jeff's Chinese "Auntie" from next door. "Shit," he said under his breath marching off to his car. His hands were actually shaking and he began to sweat as he drove.

How could he do this to me... He knows how I feel about her. He probably just forgot or is off chasing after some latest thing that has caught his fancy... That's where I've got him beat, though... It's my singled-minded consistency that'll prevail in the end.

He unbuttoned the top button on his shirt and rolled up his cuffs half way to look more manly as he pulled into Angelica's parking lot.

Oh, good! Her car is there, he thought as he pulled in right next to Jeff's car.

1minutetopic: the price of patience
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: Januar 2007, Nibong Tebal
Last revised: 9 July 2013

The Price for Impatience

Orpheus called his class of disciples that day in the forest for an unusual morning lesson. The sun was just beginning to warm up the shiny waters of the Aegean Sea that surrounded the island of Samothrace. The soft fragrance of cypress and almond trees permeated the air around the temple of Dionysus. Nothing could be heard but the gurgling sound of the brooks that flowed down the sides of Saos Mountain, forming little waterfalls and pools of crystal water in their path and the occasional singing of a nightingale at a distance.

This was indeed the sacred forest of the Great Gods. It was the birthplace of the Samothracian mysteries. Each year, initiates from various parts of the Mediterranean, particularly from the regions of Thrace, Asia Minor, Macedonia and other Greek States would gather here to celebrate the Great Gods and take part in the initiation of the Cabeirian mysteries. Especially this year, people gathered from all places to hear words of wisdom from the great Mystic, Orpheus. His reputation as the son of Apollo preceded him to the whole civilized world. Many talked of the miracles he had performed, of the music of his Lyre that enchanted even the wildest of beasts and of the wisdom of his words that paved the road of virtue and righteousness, almost two thousand years before the coming of Christ. If India and the East had Rama, Greece and the West had Orpheus.

His tall figure appeared behind the trees as he approached the group of initiates that had come to learn from his wisdom. He was dressed in a white tunic, symbol of purity and truth. His golden belt around the waist indicated the highest rank of the Mystics. Orpheus moved into the opening amidst an olive grove, in which a sanctuary was built with a twelve-columned dome at the center and a small theater on the side. Four furnaces at the corners of the sanctuary and one at the center of the dome were burning frankincense, which purified the air and invited invisible spirits to partake to the rituals.

“Today, my brethren, I will talk to you about a very precious talent that you should cultivate all your life”, said Orpheus to the crowd of people that had now formed a circle around him.

“This talent is called patience”, he continued in a soft voice.

He removed the veil that covered his head. His blond hair fell in curls and caressed his shoulders. His gentle green eyes radiated compassion and wisdom. Many of the mystics that were seeing this man for the first time remarked at the young of his age. They expected to see a much older man. Diotima, the high priestess of the temple of Dionysus and Pythia of the sanctuary – the only female allowed to enter the closed circle of initiates – also wondered how such wisdom accompanied this youth. But again, he was the son of Apollo.

“Patience, my friends, requires psychic strength. Who can tell me what psychic strength means?” asked Orpheus the group of disciples.

“Our Master,” said Diotima, “psychic strength is the endurance of the psyche – the soul – to the pressure of the spirit”.

Diotima was the highest priestess of the ancient world before the coming of Theokleia, the great Pythia of Delphi centuries later. She had entered the temple of Dionysus at the island of Samothrace when she was six years old and she was initiated in the Cabeirian mysteries and in the ancient mysteries of Apollo and Dionysus, from which the Eleusinian mysteries were born. The priests of Dionysus in Samothrace had recognized immediately her spiritual charismas, the purity of her soul and her exceptional ability to communicate with the invisible spirits under hypnosis. Very soon she became the high priestess in their temple and acquired wisdom that was envied by the elite of the mystics.

Orpheus took Diotima personally under his supervision and initiated her into the highest of mysteries. He looked at her as the sun illuminated her white-purple garment with the golden necklace around her neck and the golden hairpin decorating her beautiful black hair. A mystic like Orpheus could easily discern the colors of the aura around her head that signified her psychic level of evolution.

“Very good, Diotima” remarked the Master with a smile that indicated his appreciation for the progress of his pupils. “And what is the difference between the soul and the spirit if one were to ask you?”

“The soul, Master, is the motive power of the entity, it is a ray of the Divine and as such, it cannot be analyzed. The spirit is the helm of the entity, its nature is material, yet very subtle and invisible, and it has the free will to choose between Good and Evil.”

“Excellent!” said Orpheus. “I am really happy for your progress. I am sure that, when this cycle of initiation closes and I have to leave, you will become the mystics who will transplant the light of virtue and righteousness to your fellow-men.

Before I go, however, there are still a few things that you need to learn. But you must learn everything slowly and with patience. The world was not created overnight. It took millions and millions of years. The fruits in the trees do not ripen in one day. They need months to transform the energy of the sun and the essences of the earth to their flesh and juice which we can enjoy.

The same holds true for all of us. We need to have patience when we learn and when we evolve. A moment of impatience can destroy everything that we have strived for all our life. Learn the meaning of time and teach your soul to control the spirit when the latter wants to rush in hasty actions.

Be patient with other people, be patient with yourselves, be patient with your progress.”

“But Master,” interrupted Diotima in a hesitant tone, “what happens in the case where we don’t have time and we need to reach a certain level? We all know, for example, that you will not be here with us for much longer. And yet, some things we still have not learned and some skills we still have not mastered. Some of us, for example, still cannot exit their body voluntarily and do astral travel. What happens in these cases when we need to speed up things?”

Everybody was listening to Diotima carefully and then turned their attention to the Master. The question was pertinent to all and they awaited – “impatiently” it seemed – for an answer.

Orpheus smiled. He paused for a few seconds and looked at each one of them individually in the eyes. He then spoke in a soft voice.

“I will tell you a real story”, he said. “It is a story about impatience. It is the price you pay for being impatient. It happened to me not too long ago. Some of you have probably heard that I was in love with a woman named Eurydice. So strong was our love that we could not imagine living apart from each other. You can imagine how devastated I was when I lost my Eurydice to a terrible accident. Day and night I prayed and begged the gods to bring her back. All was in vain, I could not change the decision of fate and I could not change the Divine Laws. A mystic like me should know better.

Finally, after, months of mourning the loss of my sister-soul, the gods felt sorry for me. Hermes, the messenger of gods appeared in my dream and told me that I could meet with my Eurydice. She awaited me in the underworld.”

“Hades!” exclaimed Diotima. “Master, we have heard the story about you going down to Hades to meet with Eurydice! Some consider it a myth. So, it is true...”

“Yes, Diotima, it is true. But it is also symbolic. You see, the trip to Hades was nothing else but a spiritual communication with the spirits of the dead. Only to you, my friends, I can say this because of your metaphysical knowledge. To the rest of the world let it remain simply a myth.

So, in the presence of some friends, I gathered all my spiritual powers and came into contact with the spirit of Eurydice. I actually manifested her phantom and part of the environment from the astral plane where she resided. You can imagine the amazement of my friends when Eurydice slowly materialized in front of their eyes! They were convinced that I had supernatural powers.

Alas, the phantom of Eurydice did not last long. This was because I was impatient and I did not follow Hermes’ advice to not look at the phantom until it had completely materialized. You cannot go against the natural laws, you know and in my case, I ignored the natural laws completely. I will tell you the mythical part of what had happened. According to the people present, I had descended to Hades through a dark worm-hole. I met with Eurydice but I was not supposed to look at her directly. I only heard her voice. Hermes asked me to hold Eurydice’s hand and guide her to Earth but never speak to her or look at her until we reached the open air.”

The curiosity on the faces of his disciples was growing stronger. Orpheus paused for a second, raised his head and gave a solemn look to an eagle that was flying over their heads. Nobody spoke a word, so he continued.

“My excitement to hold Eurydice’s hand once more was so intense that I was trying hard to follow Hermes’ directions. Eurydice was begging me the whole time to look at her and speak to her. She did not know what was happening. She was in a state of confusion and she thought I did not love her any more. As we were approaching the end of our ascending path, I could not restrain myself anymore. The pleadings and cries of my beloved soul-mate were too much for me to handle and in a moment of weakness, I turned around and looked at her face. It was the last glimpse of my love. What I remember after that was total darkness. The vision of Eurydice was gone for ever.

I knew then that I was not going to see Eurydice again in this world. I had to wait until I passed over to the other side. My life has been since then a life of endurance and patience. I had learned the price of impatience the hard way. What I could have had in a few minutes was lost for a lifetime.

I, therefore, implore you as my disciples and as my brother-souls: Never, ever be impatient for whatever reason. Have your soul alert all the time to check you on that, or you will suffer the consequences of your hasty actions.”

With this last sentence, Orpheus waved the initiates to kneel and pray around the altar. Silence fell for a few minutes while each mystic was contemplating the words of the great Master.

Links:

<http://www.loggia.com/myth/eurydice.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabeiri>

<http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21119a/e211sa03.html>

1minutetopic: the price of patience
Contributor: Ioannis Kontodinas
Completed: November 2006, Athens
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The Price of Impatience

Larry Scalari looked at the neat booklet in his hands and swore -- not very imaginatively but with great feeling. Wondering for the millionth time why he couldn't have a normal family. One in which Grandmother just sent checks for birthdays and father's weren't devious bastards full of trick questions.

"Who the hell is Epictetus, for Christ's sake, and why should I care what he thinks!" he gnashed his teeth as he reread his grandmother's birthday card.

Laurence Dear,

I have given some thought to the problem of your car insurance and believe I have hit on a beneficial and creative way around your financial short fall. This might also prevent such difficulties from arising in the future. Included you will find an abbreviated version of *The Enchiridion* and *The Discourses of Epictetus*. I found the exercise of encapsulating his exceedingly apropos philosophy quite delightful. I hope you will find them equally enjoyable. Here is my proposition. If you read this carefully and write me a one page synopsis I will send you a check to cover the next six months of your car insurance.

Your loving grandmother,

Claudia Scalari

The old duck sure has a warped idea of a good time, he thought. *Guess it comes from all that time she spent in a convent school on some god forsaken mountain top in Italy*. His father had told him, threatened him actually, with such boarding schools. Grandma's education had been the last gasp of classical education. Long after such ideas had gone the way of the dinosaur.

"All that 'carpet dime', and crap like learning history so it wouldn't repeat itself, it must have rotted her brain. Who in their right mind would think the Vietnamese would actually bomb Pearl Harbor again?" he muttered as he slipped in another CD. "The damn thing must be fifty pages long. Who's got time for shit like this?"

Trashing the card, he rifled through the pages. A ray of hope sparked in his mind.

"Thank you, Jesus!" The old girl thoughtfully put in chapter headings. "I can't believe it, how dumb. All I have to do is skim a few lines under each heading and I'll have it wrapped up in time to hit the mall and hook up with Ashley when she gets off work."

Larry slouched at his desk and began to type away on his computer, muttering, *This is good: just the headings will take almost half a page*. A few minutes later he had typed in. "Reflect on the beginning of your enterprises and then consider what their logical outcomes will be. If you think before you act, looking with care at the total picture, you will not act on impulse."

He stopped and read that again thinking of the sneaky way his father duped him. "Larry, I have a proposition for you. I will either pay for your car or your insurance. The car is a reworked VW bug in good condition. It costs three grand." Larry didn't hesitate even long enough to hear his father out. Three grand would eat up every penny he made at his summer job at the recycling company. "Okay, no sweat. I'll pick up the insurance."

He was still congratulating himself two days later when the bill arrived. "Holy shit, this can't be right! I could buy a car like that piece of carp every year for the rest of my life for what this is going to cost me."

"Humph, there might be something to the old Emphisus geezer," he glanced at the time in the bottom of the screen. "Crap, I better wrap this up. That way I'll have time to grab a Big Mac first." He figured he had already plowed his way through about a half of it. That should hold the old girl and besides the page was almost full. He hit print addressed an envelope and figured he had the insurance money in the bag.

Three days later the letter arrived and not a minute too soon. If he hustled to the bank, he could send off the check before they canceled his policy. Larry tore at the envelope and a small note card flew out. He fished around in the envelope and came up empty. "Maybe tucked into the note card." he prayed.

Laurence Dear,

I did say to read the material I sent you carefully, did I not? Please reread the last line on the second to last page.

As always our loving grandmother,

Claudia Scalari

"Read the second to last page? Do I even have the damn thing?" He stomped up to his room and dug the booklet out of his overflowing trash can, turned it over and scanned the bottom line. "Congratulations for getting this far, Dear Boy! You can forget the synopsis. Just tell me that you enjoyed my little joke. C.S.

"Shit! It must be genetic, this devious, twisted desire to wreck my life."

1minutetopic: the price of patience
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: January 2007, Colorado Springs
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The Price for Patience

Juana had a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to finish it in.

Her boss was a reasonable person and allowed her to work from home for up to two days a week. They both realized how much more productive she was when she worked at home, this privilege was well guarded against disparaging comments from suspicious coworkers by them both.

Without the phone ringing or having to filter through the hundreds of work-related emails and interruptions she got every day, she could concentrate better – and concentration is what she needed today. Her firm had a presentation for a proposed high-rise at the end of the week and she was responsible for drafting all the architectural drawings – everything from the weight bearing structures to the interior design. This was going to be a tricky job as one of the board member to which she had to present actually understood something about architecture so she couldn't rely on just flattery. It pained her to think how often flattery was sufficient. Most of the people who made decisions for big sites like this didn't know beans about architecture and were grateful to have some underling like her congratulate them on their good taste and sound decisions.

She was happy to have a real challenge and had been working steadily for hours when she heard a whirring sound and something clattering on her balcony which disrupted her train of thought. She stood up from her drafting board and stretched her back. Fog was pouring over the foothills, giving the deep blue of the distant ridge a fluffy white cap. She enjoyed the view. She enjoyed looking out her special corner window at the view. And she enjoyed being at home rather than in her stuffy office.

Just as she was considering making herself a coffee to get through the rest of the afternoon she heard a gentle tapping noise from the balcony door. She went to investigate. A neighbor's cat had found a way to get onto her balcony and terrorize the birds who came for the birdseed Juana put in the feeder and she was eager to find out how the tom managed it in order to prevent access. There was no sign of the cat. Instead she saw a large brown beetle tapping on the window with its front feet which were waving about. Satisfied the cat had not found its way to her balcony again, she was just about to go down to the kitchen, when she saw a large, silvery, disk-shaped object on the balcony table. Looking at it directly, she noticed that coming out of it was a stream of beetles identical to the one at her door. How strange, she thought, to see such large insects so late in the autumn.

Just then, she heard what sounded like a tiny throat being cleared. Several beetles had assembled on the table under the open window and, oddly were standing erect. Most of them were carrying sticks that were slightly taller than the bearers.

The biggest beetle stepped forward and cleared his throat again. "Excuse me, but could you like, take me, us, to your leader?" And as an afterthought added, "We come in peace."

Juana could not believe her eyes and ears. The beetles were still streaming through the window and assembling in an orderly formation at the edge of the table closest to her.

They were all looking up at her expectantly. She crossed her arms, which set the beetles to whispering among themselves.

After a moment's consultation, the biggest beetle said "*Nous porter à votre chef?*"

The situation was too absurd to even think about, so Juana found herself asking automatically, "Why do you want to see my leader?"

"Oh, yeah, we are here to take over your planet and it would be most efficient to organize things through the leader."

"You? You little beetles are going to take over my planet?" Juana asked incredulously.

"Look, we are not beetles, OK?" said the big beetle indignantly. "Alright, we look like the insects you call beetles that live here. But we are from, like, a totally different planet. OK? So, we can't be beetles. You see?"

"I don't care if you are beetles or not. What I am concerned about is how you little beetle-like things are going to take over my planet.

"Oh, gosh. Yeah. I forgot to explain. We have weapons of mass destruction." With this, the beetles began waving their little sticks around. As they did so, they emitted a whishing sound similar to a broom sweeping a sidewalk.

"So, how can you come in peace if you plan to take over the world?"

This caused the beetles to begin whispering again. During their distraction, Juana noticed the big gray tom noiselessly light on the balcony table. He was unconcernedly sniffing the beetle's space ship. Juanita figured that he had somehow come out of the tree branches that hung over the balcony. Clever cat: climbs the tree and drops down as easy as you please right next to the feeder.

"Uh, excuse me?" the big beetle was trying to get her attention. "Well, we mean to take over the planet peacefully. We brought our weapons of mass destruction just as, like, a precaution, you know. If we could just speak with your leader, we could get this all worked out very peaceably."

"Prove it," said Juana defiantly.

"Uh, prove what?" This had the beetles looking at each other in confusion.

"Prove that you have weapons capable of mass destruction. Destroy something." This visibly agitated the beetles. "Like, for example, destroy this lamp." She instantly regretted choosing the lamp because, although it was ugly, she thought it unwise to offer an electrical device up for destruction. Just in case, she added, "Or this chair. I never use it anyway."

"Aw, now! We can't do that, eh. These are really very dangerous weapons and if we get started, we can really do a lot of damage. It's just better if you take us to your leader and let us discuss it at that level."

"Now, how do you expect me to be convinced without any demonstration? We humans are logical creatures."

This set the beetles twittering again. Juana looked out at the cat who had lost interest in sniffing the ship and was now on the window sill sniffing the place where the beetles had entered.

"Well. OK. We are not so big on logic. But let's try this. Say for argument, we have weapons of mass destruction. Then the best thing you could do is take us to your leader since, anyway, we come in peace and are reluctant to destroy the planet we want for our own use."

The other beetles were nodding with approval at this argument. The motion attracted the attention of the tom, who silently glided to the table behind the assembly.

"OK? And then, like, the other argument is, like... What was it again?"

Another beetle stepped forward hesitantly and bowed, saying "Like, it totally doesn't matter if you take us to your leader if we don't have any weapons."

The beetles were nodding vigorously again. The cat found it amusing to bat at one of the larger ones in the back.

"Yeah, thanks Dude. I mean General Tzzizzi. Yeah, that was it. So, how can it be a problem to take us to your leader even if we are harmless, which, I assure you, we aren't." To underscore the last statement, the big beetle started waving its stick, making the sweeping noise, and the other beetles followed suit.

This greatly interested the cat, who had knocked one of the beetles on its back. It was making a sort of clicking noise and waving its arms. A few of the assembled beetles looked back at the disturbance the cat was creating, but soon turned back to Juana again. No one moved to help the downed beetle and the cat, being a rather virulent example of his species, bit the beetle's head off. The clicking discontinued.

"Weeel," Juana was stalling for time, "what if I don't want to take you to my leader? What if taking you to my leader is a big pain in the butt and I need some evidence to make the move?"

"Oh, boy! Is that true?" the beetles were whispering again, causing the cat to swat another on its back. "Well, like, how big of a pain would it be?"

"Trust me, it would be a big pain in the ass!"

"Well, like how? Describe it for us."

"First, we would have to decide who is the appropriate leader. I am NOT going to just march into Mr. Schwarzenegger's office." Juana launched into a long monologue describing the chain of command, the various security checks and pointed questions about her sanity she would encounter if she tried such a thing. Meanwhile, the big tom had time to work his way through the assembly, swatting and biting heads off.

When there were just three beetles left, one dropped its stick as the cat was knocking it over in such a way that the stick emitted a tiny pinpoint of light. Juan was impressed to see that her sofa and coffee table had vaporized, but the remaining beetles were too busy arguing with her to notice. Just to be sure they didn't get distracted, Juan interjected, "Well, if you think I am going to let some bugs take over my planet..."

This kept the beetles arguing until the very last one had its head bitten off.

Juana walked over to the table and began petting the cat.

"Good job, kitty! You saved the world. Would you like some nice milk as your reward?"

The cat mewed his assent and followed her into the kitchen. As he drank lavishly from the bowl of milk, Juana swept the decapitated bugs into a garbage bag which she deposited in the communal garbage can. Before returning to finish her work she wrote a note to herself: " Weekend: sofa shopping."

1minutetopic: the price of patience
Contributor: Shannon Frances
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chapter 2 stories

Living in the Middle East, chapter 2

I woke up in a hospital room in Amman, Jordan. My whole body was in pain. I could not move my limbs, I felt paralyzed. I closed my eyes again as a horrible headache throbbed my head. I passed out

I woke up again with a dazzling light filling my room. I covered my eyes as the light was blinding and I tried to discern the figure of a man sitting across from me. Gradually the light faded away and I saw an old man dressed in white, staring at me and smiling.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“My name is Faruh, you are in a hospital. You had a terrible accident at the construction site where you were working. You fell off a scaffold and you broke a couple of bones. Your spine was hurt, you won’t be able to move for a while but you will make it, don’t worry!”

The old man went on, describing my condition in medical terms.

“How ... how did I fall?” I interrupted him.

“Well, according to your colleagues, you climbed up a scaffold in an absent-minded state. People were calling at you but you wouldn’t listen. You were acting pretty weird, they said. You were calling a woman’s name ... Myriam...”

“Myriam!” I cried out. It all came back to me in a flash. I was talking to Steve for one minute and the next thing I know I was running up the stairs to get my stuff and go to Myriam’s house. I was going to talk to her parents. In my state of frenzy, I took the wrong turn off the stairs and up into a scaffold. My frustration must have blinded me as I run along the scaffold and fell into the vacuum. I did not hear my colleagues shouting at me to move back. Next thing I remember is waking up in my hospital room in severe pain.

“Doctor Faruh,” I called, summoning all the strength I had and trying to slide up my pillow and raise my head. However, doctor Faruh was nowhere to be seen. He disappeared just as suddenly as he had appeared. Pain overwhelmed me and I had to lie back down. “Strange!” I thought to myself, closing my eyes and falling asleep again.

The next morning I woke up with a huge appetite. It seemed to me that I had not eaten for ages. I was glad to see a nurse entering the room with a big tray. “That’s probably my breakfast”, I thought. There was bread, some dried fruits and nuts on the tray. There was also a cup of freshly-brewed coffee, the aroma of which entered through my nostrils and into my head, stimulating all the nerve cells of my body.

“So, you finally woke up!” said the nurse smiling. “You must be starving.”

“Well, I also woke up last night, actually” I said to her, examining her face. “But I was too tired and I fell right asleep. Oh, and I briefly talked to Dr. Faruh, he informed me about my condition.”

“Who? Dr. Faruh? There is no Dr. Faruh here ... and, as far as I know, nobody visited your room last night... that was probably a dream you had.”

"No, no, I am quite sure this was not a dream. An old man introduced himself as Faruh and he told me that my pelvic bone was broken on the left side, that my third and fourth thoracic bones were fractured and that I had suffered minor injuries in my spine but that I would be able to walk soon..."

The nurse's face took a serious expression now. "How ... how do you know this? This is exactly the doctor's diagnosis and I am holding your report card with me. Apart from the doctor and me, nobody else knows about this diagnosis..... what is the name of that doctor, you say?"

"Faruh", I replied.

"Can you describe him?"

"OK, he was tall, thin, with a long, white beard. He was dressed in a white tunic, which I thought was a doctor's uniform."

"I have to talk to Dr. Mahred about this," said the nurse, "I will be back in a minute. In the meantime, please eat this, you need to get stronger. And, by the way, you have a visitor."

"A visitor?"

"Yes, a woman. Her name is Myriam, I think. I will ask her to come in after you finish your breakfast."

My heart was pounding like crazy! Could it be true? Myriam here? How did she find out about my accident? I finished my breakfast in a split of a second and rang the bell for the assistant nurse to come in.

"Please, let my visitor come in," I said. "I finished my breakfast. I will keep the coffee. Thank you!"

"It will be a second, sir" said the assistant nurse, gathering my empty tray.

A second seemed like a life-time. What would I say to Myriam? What would she say to me? The fact that she came to me proved that she had feelings for me! I didn't know how to react to her visit.

The door opened and Myriam showed up. She was more beautiful than ever. She was wearing a fine-woven dress and a purple veil over her head. She looked like a princess out of a middle-eastern fairy tale.

"Hi", she said shyly with her sweet voice.

"Myriam!" I said. "What a surprise! Wow, you look great! You are the last person I expected to see here!"

"Sssh, don't get too excited, the doctor said that your organism is still very weak and that you need a lot of rest."

"The truth is, I've been better..." I said with a smile. "I am in great pain but a doctor told me that I will be fine soon".

"Yes, well... I was talking to the head nurse about this. She told me that you might be having hallucinations. They want to do a CAT scan on, see if your brain has been damaged."

“What did they tell you? Never mind, I have no brain damage! I saw someone last night, that’s for sure. I talked to him; I am not making that up! They can say whatever they want, I will be out of here soon... Anyway, that doesn’t matter, tell me about you, how did you find out I was here?”

“Well, you know, with all that happened between us the last couple of days, I was detained at home. My father was furious with all the rumors. I was not allowed to go anywhere for two days.”

“Myriam,” I interrupted her. “I was going to come to your house and talk to your father. I’ll do this, I mean it! I really want to be with you, he should understand! I mean, I really care for you!”

“I know, I know. I care for you too! Just wait a couple of days until he calms down. He is a very irritable person but he is also a very sweet person, if you get to know him well.

Anyway, I was saying, I was grounded at home for two days. Yesterday, as we were having dinner, a stranger knocked at our door and asked to talk to my father. From the expression on father’s face, I realized that something serious was going on. As the stranger left, my father came and talked to me.

‘You have to go to the hospital tomorrow’, he said. ‘A person who is very close to you had a serious accident’. After saying this, my father locked himself into his room and I have not seen him since.

I knew immediately that something bad had happened to you and I was freaking out. I also knew that my father knew. I could not explain it. His behavior was weird, why did he order me to go and see you at the hospital? What was going on? I called your office immediately and they told me about your accident. I nearly collapsed. The thought of losing you was driving me insane. I did not sleep at night. A million thoughts were torturing my mind.”

“Myriam, this is indeed odd. That stranger was probably a colleague of mine but only Steve knew about you, who else could have informed you about my situation? What did this guy look like?”

“Well, it was hard to discern in the dim light but I can tell you that he was an old man, tall, thin, with a long beard...”

“A long, white beard and dressed in a white tunic?!” I snapped in amazement.

“Well, as a matter of fact.... yes. How....”

“Did he say what his name was?”

“I did not ask my father about this, no. But....what is going on?”

“The stranger you saw last night, Myriam, talking to your father, is the same old man I saw yesterday in my room! He told me about my condition, I thought he was a doctor.”

“Well, I can tell you for sure that he is not a doctor and definitely not a colleague of yours.”

“How can you be so sure? You said you did not know him”, I asked her with curiosity.

“Because of the white tunic he was wearing. This tunic is a religious uniform, so to speak. It is used by the Essenes.”

“The Essenes? I thought this people disappeared long time ago.”

“They mysteriously disappeared, this is true. But they exist, they are a secret Christian sect, very few people know about them and they are sworn silence. I know about them because my grand-father was one of them!”

“I thought you people are Muslim.”

“My father married a Muslim woman and changed his religion. He was Christian! This is why he obeyed the order of that Essene old man. Despite his disapproval of you, he had to obey the monk’s order and he told me to go see you!”

“Myriam, this is incredible! Do you know what you are saying to me?”

My mind was spinning like crazy. Suddenly, I had found an unexpected ally, Myriam's father. Whatever his hesitation was in keeping me away from Myriam, I was determined to find out. Moreover, I was determined to find out who that old monk was, who had changed the path of our lives forever and, in addition, how could he have known the details of my condition?

1minutetopic: chapter 2
Contributor: Ioannis Kontodinas
Completed: October 2007, Athens
Last revised: 22 October 2007

Twisted Fate

Nikos sat in the Bahnhof Strasa Café drinking coffee and pondering, not for the first time, the unfairness of fate. Myriam's parents had managed to have him transferred out of Jordan. All very tactfully done of course. He was no threat or a dangerous person, they explained to the powers that controlled his job prospects, just that their daughter found him a bit too interesting. That had been over a year ago and he and the delectable Myriam had been in almost daily email correspondence ever since. He pined for her out of all proportion to the few sweet encounters they had managed before he was sent to Germany.

Almost before his departing flight had left the runway, her father started pressuring her to accept one of the many offers he had for her hand. Fortunately her father had given her the right to refuse any one she did not want to spend the rest of her life with and since she only wanted Nikos the list of rejects was beginning to grow disturbingly long. He had wracked his brain for a way they could be together but short of kidnapping nothing presented itself and so even that started looking good to him.

"Move over. Kim'll be here soon," said Samie, as he dropped into the chair next to Nikos. "How goes that report on the bridge project you any closer to cracking the bank erosion problem?"

Nikos groaned. "You people! Are making me crazy!"

"Us people? Who would that be, Palestinians, Yanks, project managers?"

"Yes to all three. Palestinians are just the same as Jordanians, pigheaded, you will pardon the expression, people who cling to the outmoded practice choosing their daughter's husbands. Yanks who make want to take over the world. And project engineers who want everything done yesterday."

Samie slapped Nikos on the back. "You my friend are moping again."

"I got another e from Myriam after lunch," Nikos said. "Her father had given her a deadline. Once her classes are over she has to pick a winner from the bachelor brigade."

"Oh! Nik, how awful," Kim said leaning over to give Samie a quick kiss on the cheek. "But you can't blame it all on the middle east mentality. My father would come unglued if he thought I wanted to marry an Arab. And Samie's Parents believe I'm a nice Lebanese girl. What a mess."

"He told me all about that," Nikos laughed. "How you met him in a book store when you were doing your experiment with what it would be like to live in an Arab country and asked him to recommend background material."

Kim tossed her blond hair and laughed. "I had to pick the only Yank Arab in town to help me, and see where that landed me." She smiled into Samie's dark eyes. How she loved those bottomless pools of midnight.

Reaching over to squeeze her hand, Samie sighed. "Too bad we can't just switch ourselves around. Myriam's parents would love me. And Kim's father, while he might not like the idea of a Greek son-in-law, would be happy to have an engineer in the family."

Kim's mouth dropped open as she stared at her sweetheart. Nikos could almost see the sparks going off in her head.

"What?" Samie asked feeling that he had just missed something important.

She reached over and threw her arms around Samie's neck and gave him a loud smacking kiss. "Darling, you are brilliant!"

Samie liked Kim's spontaneous displays of affection though they never ceased to embarrass him. They tended to cloud his mental functioning. "What?" he asked again.

Kim narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice as she leaned closer to her friends.

"How about Samie marrying your Myriam. And You marry me?" she whispered.

They stared at her for a long moment before Kikos said, "I am flattered by your proposal, Kim but . . ."

She laughed at their bewildered expressions. "No, no silly! You e Myriam tonight that Samier is coming to propose to your father. He is a catch you know, being young and handsome and an engineer and with family in the US. Of course she will have to come live with here in Germany. Samie takes all sorts of photos to the family and wedding to send to his family in Dearborn. Shazam! Two happy families. Nikos and I do the same and my parents are a bit teary-eyed that I'll be living here for the foreseeable future. But at least the money drain for my endless education will have stopped and they can move on to annoying my sister Barb. Shazam! Another happy family."

"Once Myriam is all safely in Germany, its divorces all around, and we untwist the rotten fate we seem to be saddled with. A few pieces of legal paper, And still more Shazam! We are free to marry as we please!"

"It will never work!" Sami said. "Her parents will call wanting to know if she is all right. My parents will call wanting to know if she is pregnant yet. They will find out."

Nikos had a far away look in his eyes. "It might work." he said softly. "Samier'd apartment is right next to mine. He could knock on the wall or something if they call I could do the same. Or better yet we could get a cell phone and share it around. Myriam has it one week. Sami the next, that way when ever they called they would get the right spouse. We could send pictures of us back. home to them. Sure they might find out eventually but what can they do then."

He could see the mental images he had been living with, of being caught abducting the daughter of a wealthy and influential Jordanian family resulting in his spend the rest of his life in prison. He suspected, it would most likely be a very short life.

Samie shook his head "You two are out of your minds. I don't want to lie to my parentsKim slipped her arm around Samie waist and kissed his neck just below his jaw. She winked at Nikos. "Lets go back to our place and think about this, shall we?" she breathed into her lover's ear. His mind fogged again. "Um, sure, I think that's a great idea."

1minutetopic: chapter 2
Contributor: Frances Burke

Completed: February 2007, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 22 October 2007

Parallel lives

Although the day was beautiful and a spicy breeze was blowing off of the ocean over the white cliffs, Costas was lost in thought and barely registered the sun and surf. . He had come back to Greece on his home leave from Jordan, hoping that being in the bosom of his family would take his mind of Myriam. But it seemed that everything -- the distance from her, the familiarity of his home town, the constant ruckus of seven people living in one house can make – everything made him think of her. He wished he could share this beautiful day with her and show her his favorite lagoon. He thought of her when he saw flowers in a window sill and lace on a table. When he ate, he thought about how he would love introducing her to Greek food. When he looked at the sea, he thought about her beauty. Even when his grandmother said something rude and off color, he thought, *she would like Myriam so much.*

He was what his American friend Steve might, in a generous mood, call "love sick". Back in Jordan, he had become so enamored with Myriam that it had started to affect his work. And the kind of work he did could cost him an arm or a leg if his concentration wandered.

He had spend the last few months plotting and scheming how he could get as much time with her as possible. He had even come into work late a couple of times because he had been hanging out at the market hoping to catch her during her morning shopping. As it had become harder and harder to meet with her, he became more dedicated to making it happen.

All the time, he had been sure it was her family that was interfering with the possibility for them to be together. To his dismay, she had asked him to stop perusing her the last time they met. He replied that he thought it would be a good idea if he met her family – her father in particular – so they could see that his intentions were honest. She had surprised him by saying that they knew his intentions were honest: she knew that he would someday ask to marry her. She had whispered this admission, with eyes down cast so that he could not see the expression on her beautiful face. He asked if it was because he was not Muslim. Eyes still averted, she silently nodded. He started to argue again that if he could just meet her father, he would see that, although he was not Muslim, he was a good person and her father would come to accept the fact.

"I can not marry a man who is not Muslim" she replied.

"But, if your father loves you, surely he would want you to marry someone who would love you and take care of you regardless..."

Before he could continue, she had looked up at him with sad and intense eyes.

"You don't understand. This is not the decision of my father. It is my decision. I will not marry outside of Islam."

Costas was stunned. It had never occurred to him that it was her decision to avoid him – he had always assumed that her father was controlling her behavior and movements in the city. That it was her father who had declared that she would not marry a foreigner and an infidel.

He was still speechless as she stood to go, eyes again downcast. It was as if all that he cared about was leaving the room with her. Not knowing what else to do, he had asked, "What if I convert?"

She paused before turning back towards him only so much that he could just discern her profile.

"We can talk again... but only after you convert."

With that, she had walked out of his life.

He had come back to try to quiet his mind enough to think about the future. His family was not particularly religious – for him, religion was more or less a reason for family celebrations. Baptisms, weddings, Easter: basically an excuse to eat a lot and play with his cousins and, more recently, his nephews and nieces.

Costas considered himself a spiritual person, and he believed in God. But after reading the few things he could find printed in English about Islam, he wasn't sure he could change what he believed. A lot of what he had learned seemed practical and good guidance. But he had difficulty with enough of it that he had trouble imagining that he could convert.

After this realization, he became angry that something as arbitrary as religion could come between him and Myriam. He wanted to believe that her family was behind it. And he wanted to believe that he could talk her into giving him a chance.

But that all seemed to be a broken dream now, as he paused on the shore-side path to his lagoon to look out at the ocean. The depths of the blue on blue of the sky and sea only intensified his sorrow and confusion. He had come here seeking clarity, but only found the clarity caused him more pain.

"There's a lovely little lagoon right down there."

Costas nearly jumped he was so startled to hear a voice so near. A man was sitting, half obscured by the bushes but very near the path, and pointing down the path.

"Oh! Sorry! I didn't mean to startle you so. Maybe you should sit down; you look like you've seen a ghost!"

As the man stood up with the clear intention of steadying Costas, he noticed that the man was completely naked. Instinctively, Costas moved back from the man as he tried to grab his arm, causing him to really lose his footing so that, as the man pulled his arm, Costas slipped to land on one knee, dragging the man along with him so that he fell forward and landed on Costas's side.

After a barely noticeable hesitation, the man leapt up, stepped back, stuck his hand out and said, "Hi, I'm Marty!"

As, Costas stood up and dusted himself off, he looked past the man. The enormous, bright towel was flanked with all the implements of tourism: sunglasses, assorted tubes of sun screen, bottles of beverages, reading material and unused swimming trunks. The

man had been sunning himself and Costas had to wonder why tourists had to come here, to his favorite lagoon, to get skin cancer.

The extensive dusting had not discouraged Marty from trying to shake hands with him, so Costas dusted his hand and shook thinking, *this guy must be an American*.

"It is so nice to meet you!" Marty launched into a vigorous monologue, "Would you like to sit down for a moment you really do look quite shaken. I have some nice restorative ouzo if you would like..." Marty chattered away as he led Costas to his giant towel.

Costas sat on the edge of the towel as Marty continued to talk away, donning a pair of swimming trunks and organizing a tiny tray with two glasses and a bottle of ouzo.

Since Costas had nothing better to do than feel sorry for himself all day, he decided that it was in keeping with his mood to drink half a bottle of ouzo with a friendly stranger. So, he sat and listened attentively to Marty talk and talk and talk.

By the third round, Costas had learned that Marty was living in Syria and was in Greece to consider turning down a great job in Thailand to stay in Aleppo to be with his new lover, Ma'med, with whom he was deeply in love. But the boy had left him when he realized that his Muslim family would never accept their relationship.

After the fifth round, Costas was stunned by the parallels in their lives and realizing that, although this man gay (*Boy, that guy is a big sister*), his pain was real and not dissimilar to what he himself was experiencing. His tongue loosed by the alcohol, he told the story of Myriam to Marty, who was very sympathetic. It was actually a relief – Costas had not spoken of the affair with his family or his friends at the construction site where he worked in Jordan (although his friend Steve clearly knew what was going on, as he helped as a go between).

When he finished, there was an awkward moment when they both feared they might start weeping unmanly tears induced by the ouzo.

"Hey. I know something that will cheer you up," said Marty perking up. "I know a man who has a goat that shits gold nuggets."

Costas stared in disbelief.

"No, really! I didn't believe either my tour guide when he told me about it, until I saw it with my own eyes. Now, maybe the guy had shoved those nuggets up the goat's butt a few minutes before I got there, but the beast was definitely defecating shiny golden pellets within minutes of my arrival."

"Now," said Costas trying to switch gears for this new topic of conversation, "did the guy ask you for any money? The guy with the sheep."

"Yes. He said we had to pay five Euros to watch his goat take a dump. Which I thought was a bit steep, even if it was gold. Watching an animal defecate is not something you normally would pay any money to see at all, is it? Lots of people might pay to NOT see it, actually."

Before Marty could continue, Costas said, "Well, if his sheep is shitting gold, why does he need your money?"

"Ah, he had a good answer for that one. He said that he was afraid that if he brought in the gold nuggets to change them for cash, the authorities would think he was a drug dealer and put him in prison. Or take the goat away. So he has to charge tourists five bucks a pop until he has enough money to smuggle the golden goat turds out of the country."

"And into a country that would not be suspicious that he was a drug dealer but be happy to receive an honest, hard working man with a sheep that shit gold?"

"That's the story. Anyway, it doesn't matter. What does matter, is that it cheered me up to see that barnyard animal pooping out a value greater than my current portfolio. What'a ya say? Shall we go watch the goat poop?"

After Costas simultaneously determined that the gold-shitting goat was within walking distance and that the bottle of ouzo was empty, he let himself be talked into it. After scooping up Marty's stuff into an oversized beach basket, they wobbled back up the path to find the goat who shits gold.

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Contributor: Shannon Frances
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Chance meeting

Kyle looked down at the ant-like cars creeping along beneath his dangling feet. Considering that this was the last decision he would ever have to make, he didn't feel he had to rush it and was enjoying a nice, temperate breeze coming off of the side of the skyscraper.

He pulled out a new pack of cigarettes that he had bought especially for this evening. Although he had quit two years ago with an enormous struggle, he didn't see any point to fearing cancer now. Trying to be conscious of every nuance and sensation, he removed the shrink-wrap, opened the box, tore out the foil and drew out one slender cigarette.

Savoring the aroma, he sniffed the cigarette and drew it under his nose like they do in movies. He had dug out his favorite Zippo, a gift from a friend returning to Japan after his studies were over. There was a moment's panic when he fumbled and thought he might drop the lighter, jerking dangerously in an attempt to prevent it from falling down the 54 stories below.

Taking a moment to calm his thoughts, he considered that it would be no big deal if he lost the lighter now – it would soon have no meaning for him. But he hated the idea of having to go back into the hotel to get another lighter. That would be just the sort of loser move he was always making.

But, fortunately, this one time, he had caught it. And, without further ado, he light up, taking a deep breath and then immediately coughing a lung out. He was surprised at how nasty and irritating the smoke was – after he had been looking forward for days to his last cigarette.

Determined to stick with his plan, he continued to smoke. At first he smoked as quickly as possible to make it go fast. But that made him feel nauseous, so he slowed down. As he watched the glowing end slowly burn away, he became thoughtful. He was more certain than ever that this was the right thing to do. For a while after his decision, he had felt mildly euphoric, but now he was overcome by a bittersweet sense of loss...

"Is he here?"

Kyle's thoughts were shredded by a shrill voice very close and extremely loud coming from immediately behind him.

"Is he here yet?!?"

He turned to see an older woman crash into the wall just a few inches from where he was sitting. She had been running and the momentum caused her head to jut out over the ledge. With her hands on the top of the ledge, her head hung over, dangling in a way that made the orange curls of her hair float in the updraft. After a moment, Kyle heard her take a sharp breath before she squealed.

"Jesus H. Christ! That's a long way down!"

Pushing herself off of the wall, she straightened up and began pushing her curls back into some elaborate hairdo that consisted of a sweat band riding high on her head and several different kinds of hair clips placed here and there.

Kyle watched her as she worked her way down, smoothing her blouse (which was so stretched around her middle age bulging that it needed no smoothing), tucking and pulling her leggings and wide belt until she reached her socks, which, strangely enough, were pulled up over the bottom of her leggings.

"Well?" she asked impatiently as she straightened again.

"Come again?" replied Kyle, with a calm, world-wearied voice.

"Well, is he here yet?"

"Who?"

"Barry!" When Kyle shrugged, she added "Barry Manilow. Have you seen Mr. Manilow come through this way? He is supposed to be picked up by his helicopter from this pad."

Kyle continued to smoke and stare at the woman.

"Speaky English? I am talking to you, son! I asked you a question!"

"I don't know any one named Barry and I haven't seen anyone during the approximately twenty minutes that I have been sitting here," Kyle was trying deadpan to indicate his disinterest.

"Well, did you see the helicopter? You could not miss a helicopter landing on... Heeeeey," her voice dropped an octave and lost the hysterical note. "What are you doing up there, young man? What are you thinking...?"

She seemed to freeze in place, arms immobile in another attempt to tame her perm. The only part of her body that moved was her glued-on eyelashes, which were blinking at a regular rhythm.

Kyle couldn't help but blink a couple of times in rhythm before he thought of something to say. "Don't worry, ma'am. I am not thinking anything. Just trying to get a little privacy," with this he tried to grin disarmingly but it came off more like a smirk. So he brushed some ashes from his now gone-out cigarette from his jeans.

"You can't fool me," persisted the woman, "I know what you are doing up here. I have an instinct for things like this. And I can tell you, it ain't worth it. Come on down off that wall, now. That's a coward's way out."

This angered Kyle, but he tried to not show it. "Look, lady, I don't know you think you are seeing, but I can assure you..."

"Don't 'lady' me. I know what you are thinking about. And if you aren't, then you won't have any problem just slowly coming back down onto the roof here with me." Her hands were slowly stretching out, palms down and fingers splayed, as if she were doing Tai Chi.

"Aw, come on!" he said, losing his patience, "Can't a guy have a bit of solitude?"

The two people were so engaged with the conversation, they didn't notice a slight girl of about twenty sneak up to them. When she spoke, they both started badly, Kyle dangerously so.

"Uh, sorry to interrupt you. But do either of you know where the elevator to Floor 38 is?" All three individuals could only stare and blink for a moment. "Sorry, my name is Kim," said Kim as she stuck her hand out into the space between them as if to shake hands with both simultaneously. She had a shy, geeky air about her and gave the impression she didn't have contact with humans very much.

"I'm Lisa, nice to meet you," said the older woman, briskly taking Kim's hand and shaking perfunctorily, "Maybe you can talk this young man out of jumping off this wall."

Lisa shrank back. "Uh. Don't do it?" was all she could come up with on short notice.

"Look," said Kyle. "Despite what this la... person is saying..."

"It's Lisa," said Lisa a bit indignantly.

"OK... despite what Lisa is saying, I am not going to jump. So you can both just keep moving on and leave me in peace." Kyle looked back and forth from the two frozen faces for a moment. "The elevators are over there," he waved vaguely back to the left, "And I think I saw that guy you were looking for go that way," waving now to the right. OK? So you can both just proceed on your various ways now..." he let his voice trail off in a meaningful way.

"Are you really going to jump?" asked Kim. The situation was clearly beginning to sink in.

"No"

"Yes, he was," butted in Lisa, "but he won't now that we are here. Will you... what's your name anyway."

"Look lady, I mean Laura, Lisa whatever..."

"Just tell me your name, OK. It isn't gong to kill you to say your name," Lisa had her balled up fists on the bulges her hips made beneath the tight belt. She looked like Kyle's mom and he instinctively said his name.

"Well, Kim, it looks like Kyle here needs some intervention." The others could see that Lisa was warming to her task.

And so began the strangest conversation that Kyle had ever experienced. Lisa continued to try to talk him out of suicide in an eerie imitation of his mom. And Kim contributed a lot of rather esoteric allusions that he just couldn't follow. He steadfastly refused to admit that he was not considering suicide and embarked on a long list of the reasons he had to keep on living.

He got sidetracked however, when it slipped out that his beloved girlfriend (who actually never slept with him) was bonking his roommate and former best friend. After that, he couldn't hold back and the long, bitter tale started to come out.

While Kyle was pouring out his guts to the two unlikely listeners, Barry Manilow sat out of sight on the other side of the roof and sighed.

He too was looking at the miniature traffic and thinking *If I jumped now, I would never have to sing 'Copacaban' ever again.* Plunged into the standard post-concert depression, he felt further dejected by the lateness of his pilot.

No one cares anymore, he pondered miserably. *Not even the people I pay to serve me. I am an old, washed-up has-been that can't even get laid after a concert.*

He considered the concert he had booked for his 65th birthday and was feeling the two intervening years melt away. It had been rash, making a commitment like that. When he did it, his intention was to go out with a bang. But now he was regretting the contract and wished he could just go to sleep for the rest of his life.

These morbid thoughts were disrupted by the approaching beats of a helicopter. As he moved out from the overhang and turned to look in the direction of incoming aircraft, he noticed a movement at the far side of the roof. In the poor lighting of the helicopter pad, he could only make out what looked like three people at the wall. Galvanized into action, he began jogging as fast as his exhausted legs could carry him toward them. As he neared, disregarding the approaching helicopter, he could make out that two of the people, a man and an older woman, were on the ledge and seemed to be struggling. A third person, possibly a girl, was standing by them and was either trying to pull or push the man. Just as Barry picked up speed, the woman looked up at him.

Throwing her arms up in a manner that upset the balance of the struggle, she shrieked, "Baaaaaarryyyyyy!"

Thanks to Nick Hornby for the plot convention that gets all these characters onto one roof.

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No where to run

In the stinking damp of a dark alley, Weng paused to catch his breath and listen for running foot steps behind him. He bent down, palms on his knees and gulped air into his burning lungs. After a few minutes, he could breath again and, other than the pounding of his heart, the alley was quiet.

It seemed that he had eluded his pursuers -- for the moment. Trying to discern the objects strewn in the alley he silently stepped around knocked-down garbage cans and spilled refuse into the darkest shadow to collect his thoughts and come up with a plan.

He had to accept that he was going to miss his performance. Even if he could find the theater again, which was doubtful, he knew some of Cheng's thugs would be waiting for him. He had no idea where he was, other than he was pretty sure he was still in San Francisco, and he could think of no one who could help him.

For the millionth time, he cursed Cheng and the day he had borrowed money from the gangster.

How had they found him so fast? He had fled to California without telling anyone what he was planning and had done everything possible to leave no evidence of where he had gone. He hated hurting Fatima like this, and had broken down and called from Singapore during the layover. But he was sure she wouldn't talk and, even if she did, they could only trace him to the busiest airport in the Eastern hemisphere.

Weng was certain that Cheng would find him, regardless of where he fled or how. But he had been hoping to make enough money to pay him back before the inevitable meeting. And, to make his frustration more potent, he would have had the money by the end of the week, if Cheng hadn't been so clever.

Weng was astonished how much money he could make with one gig. And he arrived just before Halloween, unbeknownst to him, is a time when Elvis impersonators are in high demand. He could pass as Chinese and use a different name – no one had a problem paying him under the table. So he was making money hand over fist. Here, he was just one of many Elvises of Asian descent and, until this evening, he felt relatively safe.

It was out of the question that he return to the cheap room that he had rented in China town. There was actually no reason to ever return to that dirty, tattered room with hypodermic needles in the window sill. Everything of value that he owned was on his person. Fortunately, he was fully dressed in his costume (his money sewed into the lapels) when the gangsters had located him.

After going through the short list of implausible options again, he decided that he would simply have to get out of San Francisco and look for work somewhere else. He had heard that Los Angeles had sufficient venues that paid for Elvis impersonation. So, the only option that he had at the moment was to find transportation to the city of angles.

Taking a deep breath and invoking the name of his hero, Weng walked out of the shadows and into the dazzling light at the end of the alley.

For a moment he was confused by the sudden appearance of a loud, colorful crowd. As he was attempting to orient by looking at the buildings over the heads of the people around him, he heard a woman squeal, "Look! It's ELVIS!"

He tried to locate the source of the sound and when he could focus, he saw a small group, standing at the edge of the parading crowd and consisting of a petite cowgirl wearing neon pink from head to toe, an enormous extraterrestrial with a green sequenced uniform and black skin, a tall woman in evening wear and too much makeup with a meter-long blond bouffant and five o'clock shadow and a woman who looked eerily like a thinner, younger version of Margaret Thatcher.

Without missing a beat, Weng sauntered over and drawled "At your service, Ma'am!" which made everyone except the alien squeal with delight. After kissing the women's hands and belting out a line or two of *Heartbreak Hotel*, Weng found himself attached to the group and drifting along in its wake towards some sort of big party.

It seems that Margaret Thatcher (Maggie, as her friends kept calling her) was an expatriated American and had invited her London friends to San Francisco to experience a real Halloween party. Weng was only too glad to become immersed in a crowd so spectacular that he would not stick out and that was moving away from where he had just come. He actually could not have picked a better form of camouflage or transportation if he had the opportunity to plan it out.

Before Weng knew what he was doing, he was swept along into a taxi and whisked away. After a long drive up a winding road, they came to a large, brightly lit building that was vibrating with a party. In another twinkling, they were out of the taxi and following Bo, the alien with dread locks, who was navigating the little group through the boisterous crowd with determination. Finally, they arrived at an enormous pool around which a crowd of tall, dreadlocked aliens were dancing. Bo was talking and hugging all the other aliens and Fiora (the cowgirl) was introducing everyone to everyone. The aliens spoke a sing-song language that Weng had never heard before, although Maggie and Fiora seemed to understand what was going on.

After a few minutes of not understanding a thing that was said, Weng contented himself with dancing poolside to a Caribbean beat, occasionally swinging his hips to entertain his new friends. He politely declined the homemade cigarettes that were being passed around and alcoholic drinks, as he always did when in costume. He had an image to keep up, but this evening he also had a particular desire to stay mentally prepared for anything.

At about 5 AM, the crowd started to thin out and the poolside music was turned down to a level that was no longer ear-drum bursting. Weng found himself sitting in a pool chair listening to Maggie (whose real name, he learned, was Bridgette) talk about the relative merits of living in the States or the UK with Fiona, the transvestite and a large blue ogre named Rog who had an English accent. Gradually, the conversation drifted into Hollywood, as Rog was trying to get work as an actor in horror films.

Weng leaned back into the chair and drifted in and out of consciousness. He felt relatively safe and was pretty sure that Cheng's thugs had lost his scent – at least for now. There was talk in the little group of driving up to LA, and Weng was hopeful that he

could soon catch a safe ride out of San Francisco. His thoughts drifted slowly to Fatima and his life in Malaysia. He began dreaming about the river behind Fatima's family home when he was suddenly jerked awake.

The ground was vibrating like the party had gone out of control and everyone was jumping up and down in a frenzied dance. Weng grabbed the arms of the pool chair so he wouldn't fall out as it danced around on the cement. He noticed that the surface of the pool was chopped up oddly into bluish white peaks about a meter high.

Then it dawned on Weng, this was not the party. This was an earthquake.

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chapter 3 stories

Notes to round 3

This round of 1minutestories was written in three chapters with the following guidelines:

Chapter 1

Each contributor contributed one topic.

Each contributor writes a story about each topic.

The story must include at least two characters.

Chapter 2

Each contributor writes a story about two characters from any chapter 1 story(s).

Chapter 3

Each contributor writes a story that brings two Chapter 2 stories to conclusion.