

FALSE STARS

by

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MJ

The blue nylon tarp was burning, but no one seemed to care. The monsoons had lingered longer than expected, and the tarp had been hastily erected to protect the funeral pyre from the rain. The day was smudged with a cinder-gray mist, but the rain hadn't arrived. It reminded me of the way the mist hung over the barren miles of the Texas Panhandle, but the comparison ended there. The fallout of burnt bone and flesh rose in great billows and then, after reaching the tops of the palms, fell to rejoin the earth. The human dust settled on us all—the mourners, the musicians and a throng of spectators, some of whom didn't even know the boy who was being cremated. He had died two years before, and the family had saved up thousands of rupiah to pay for the cremation. To me it was sad that he was only eleven when he had some freak accident, the exact nature of which I didn't understand. Sadness didn't seem to be part of the mindset of the mourners. No one was crying, and the mood made it seem more a wedding than a funeral. I guess going off to be with the gods is seen as a good thing. Life, even at its longest, is a spit in the bucket. Burning releases the soul from the body, so it can start to enjoy its freedom. If the living don't properly get rid of the body, the soul will hang around and re-enter it simply out of habit. This reminded me of the joke about why dogs lick themselves—answer, because they can—and has a similar, matter-of-fact reasoning behind it.

The body had been borne by dozens of men, who carried it on a float-like platform. An elaborate straw and bamboo sculpture that looked like a cross between a

pagoda and the Eiffel Tower stood over the body. Chinese paper money, flowers, fancy cloth, glitter and a million jazzy things I couldn't identify covered it. I've seen some fantastic parades in Dallas but this float would have taken the prize. The procession was wild and chaotic, a kaleidoscope of red and yellow and gold and white, of sarongs woven in fantastic patterns. There were graceful umbrellas on tall stalks as slender as the big-eyed kids. Banners and prayer flags snapped in the wind.

There was no marching band orderliness; the gamelan music was frenetic, at least to my ears, and propelled the people in fits and starts. They turned corners and changed directions, even if they didn't have to, and periodically the men would spin the platform around. It made me dizzy, and later I learned that this madness was designed to do just that—to confuse the soul of the deceased so that it couldn't find its way back home to haunt those of us left behind. The turning of corners aimed to lose any bad spirits who might be following the procession, since evil spirits are incapable of sidestepping moves. I knew this from the way they make the Hindu temples here—there is always a wall dead in front of the entrance doorway that prevents you from entering directly. Humans, of course, can walk around it, but it seems to be enough to keep evil out of the temple grounds.

The stream of mourners wound like a snake through the village to the cremation grounds. There was a long, unbroken white cloth attached to the coffin and a line of women held it above their heads as they walked along. I was invited by them to hold part of it. The more the merrier, I guess—the more people, the louder the send-off, the more important the family holding the cremation appears. As much as I hated the idea, the fact that I was lily white had a certain cachet in their eyes. I loved being in the procession,

and I forgot about myself and was happy to be part of something much bigger. You can become part of the bouquet if you give yourself the chance.

It's in my nature to want to be in the thick of things, and so it was only later that I realized I was covered in ash. That evening I scrubbed myself raw, driven by the idea that I had been coated in the remains of a once living and breathing person. Soap and water couldn't rid me of the smell of the ash, which lingered on a small area on my left wrist. I'm afraid that, in those moments when things take a dark turn, I will know it's there.

I had heard about the ceremony from the innkeeper where I was staying in Candidasa; actually it was Hart, the guy I was traveling with, who I heard it from. The owner of the inn was too proper a Balinese man to have spoken to me directly except to exchange pleasantries. I went to the funeral alone because Hart was flat on his back at the losmen, suffering from a wicked case of Bali belly and couldn't be ten steps from the toilet. I felt a little weird, leaving him like that, but I've done so much worse in my twenty-three years on the planet, even to him, that I got over it quick. I'm not sorry I went to the funeral without him. It was an incredible event. I mostly felt bad that he missed it; Hart is the one that turned me on to these kinds of things and I know he would have "creamed for it," as he says.

He was real good about it. There's something about older guys; they've been through some stuff you know, they don't freak out about every little thing. Like I was saying he was real good about it and told me—"Y'all go on, have a good time, it's a mighty rare opportunity." He kidded me about my accent, which I didn't mind 'cause I knew he found it charming—even though no charm was intended. He said he worried

some that I would be all right, what with the village being so distant, but I told him that I'd been traveling before I met him and that I was sure to be all right. The fact is I would have gone anyway, although I didn't tell him that, but it was nice to have his encouragement.

It's a little embarrassing, the way I met Hart. I was traveling with this other guy, you know the way those things go—free, white and twenty-one and all. He was a Turk with some pretty messed up ideas about women—he could have used a course in feminist theory or a good smack upside the head. As if that wasn't bad enough he was younger than me and acted like a complete baby. He couldn't speak Indonesian at all, and his English was pretty bad. He grew up in Holland, Amsterdam I think, and I imagine that between learning Dutch and speaking Turkish his English caught short shrift. But he couldn't handle anything, and I ended up making most of the plans and arrangements. I was getting ready to leave him when I met Hart.

We were staying in the same guesthouse in Thailand up in Cheng Mai. It had a hokey name, "Peaceful Rest Guest House," which it lived up to. It was pretty, with lots of flowers. The Thai people love flowers—and it was very quiet. There were tables outside under a big trellis where we all hung out and ate. That's where I met Hart. But that's not the embarrassing part.

One night we were all sitting around drinking and talking; some people were smoking dope and getting so stoned they could hardly keep up the conversation. There was old Hart, talking a blue streak. He had fifteen or twenty years over most us at the table, but he kept that to himself. You know how older people can get the "been there, done that" attitude and lord it all over you that you're still a pipsqueak and don't know

much? Well, he wasn't like that. He had opinions on everything and liked to talk, is all. He took a shine to me straight off and paid me a lot of attention. Before very long we were playing footsie under the table and accidentally touching each other on the leg or hand. Baby Turk was sitting across the table, real stoned and increasingly worried. I didn't do that thing women do of getting all uptight and fussing around their guy to reassure him. It's so demeaning, like you're the mother and he's the child. The heck with that, I was fed up and planning to dump him anyway, so why bother? Plus, I was having a good time with Hart.

The next night was where it got embarrassing: I went into Hart's room. I hardly needed encouragement; the Turk and I hadn't had sex in a week or so, which is pretty weird if you're sleeping in the same bed, and I was horny and surely knew what to expect. Men often make the mistake of thinking that women aren't thinking the same thing as them, especially about sex. It was hardly an invitation. All he said was, "Hey, Red, busy?" He called me Red straight off, because of my hair. My friends call me MJ, short for my real name, which is Marjorie Joan Johnson, which I hate with a passion. I still introduce myself as MJ but Red stuck with us. I told him it sounded kinda masculine to me and all he said was "Honey, I don't think you need to worry about that." And I don't. He said that to me before we got together, but he has said it a lot since then. We've surely had a good time, and we did that first night too.

There's no telling why things happen the way they do, and that night is a good example. In retrospect it was all for the best. After all, here I am with Hart, but then it was real embarrassing and, I must admit, real sexy too. We were going at it like a couple of stray dogs on a bone when there was a knock on the door. It was Baby Turk, trying to

find out where I was. Why he came to Hart's room is beyond me. I guess he was nervous, seeing the heavy flirting we were doing, although I thought we were pretty discreet. He sounded pathetic and nervous and barely squeaked out his question, "You haf seen MJ somewhere?" I rolled off the bed and squatted down below the window. Hart went over to the window, which started chest high, and opened one of the shutters in order to talk. I still can't believe he was so cool. We hadn't exactly stopped having sex. In fact it seemed like he got more excited. I was busy seeing to that. Hart just spoke to him in a regular voice and told the Turk I went for a walk and was going toward the city gate when he last saw me. That's probably what did it for me, a partners in crime sort of thing. In truth it's more complicated. I know he's capable of some pretty bad things, in fact I think he enjoys it, so whatever I do won't seem that bad by comparison. There's a strange comfort there, although it might also insure that we'll never get marrying close.

Hart and I left together for the Golden Triangle two days later. I waited until I knew my boyfriend was going to be tied up in town, dealing with a visa issue. Official tasks take a long time in-country. The bureaucracy, the language barrier and the general level of corruption among petty officials see to that. I know it was a cheesy way to dump him, especially as I had sex with him the night before I left. I'm ashamed to say I went straight from a secret romp with Hart, still all sticky and hot, and gave the Turk a parting tumble. I didn't want to be forced to explain why I was going, that I was tired of his attitude, he was a baby and such. And although I didn't think he had it in him, I surely didn't want a scene with Hart. Hart seemed a little dangerous to me then, and this Turkish boy was sweet on me, and I didn't want him to get hurt even if I didn't want to be with him. I've since realized Hart isn't dangerous at all, just mighty reckless. But I

didn't know it then. I just packed my bag and left him a note that said, "See ya, goin back to Texas. Nice hookin up with ya, MJ." I laughed when I thought of him struggling with the vernacular.

It's been a real adventure since then. Hart and I give each other the courage to try just about anything that occurs to us—the idea only has to come to one of us and the plans to accomplish it spin out like silk from a spider. Before we know it, an intricate web of how and where and when is woven and we're sitting expectantly at the center with our hands on the strings. We never seem to address the why, preferring "why not?" to get ourselves going.

This is not as aimless as it sounds. I'm different than many women of my generation. I believe that experience is still the best teacher and that information from the media, even books, which I love deeply and have learned tons from, well, they remain media events and don't touch me the way the nitty-gritty does. It just isn't the same as snootful learning.

My mother says I should have been a man, but I think she means that I don't often take her advice and always do exactly as I damn well please. I wouldn't want to hurt her by telling her I mostly ignore her advice, because of the mess she's made. My God, five marriages and an on-and-off drinking problem aren't the best credentials for a role model. All the same I do love her dearly, and she raised me well and gave me a lot of loving. As I get a little older it seems I'm more often taking care of her, or at least worrying about her welfare. There's no telling how this figures into me signing up for the Peace Corps, or my plans to study for a master's degree in social work when I get out. I'm sure it figures somewhere.

Now, my Daddy is a different story. I never knew him. He went off to ‘Nam just before I was born and was reported MIA two years later. I kept a black “Lost but Not Forgotten” flag in my dorm, which freaked out a lot of my friends. Daddy would be just about Hart’s age right now. From all reports he was smart and wild and fun loving and is most likely the source of a lot of what is good in me. My mother has said that I have his eyes and his turned-up Panhandle nose that makes me look more girlish than I’d like. Maybe ten years from now I’ll think of it as an asset. Hart kids me about having trouble breathing through nostrils as tiny as mine.

This area of the world enchants me; it’s so remarkably different from the states—the look and feel of it, the people. In the countryside, whether it’s in Thailand or Burma or Bali, the people don’t have much in the way of things, but to me it seems as if they have a whole lot. They have this life that they’re born into and how they should be has been figured out for hundreds of years. There doesn’t seem to be such an adolescent angst about finding out who you are and why we’re here.

I don’t have delusions about this. I’m sure they have their problems too. Whenever I’m in the cities or big towns and I meet people my own age they seem as messed up as the rest of us. All they can talk about is wanting to get away, or in my pants. This group speaks English, otherwise I would be clueless about what’s on their mind besides sex, but it’s also part of their problem. If you’re spending your time at the dance clubs and hanging with the first world it’s like—how you gonna get ‘em back on the farm after they’ve seen Paree? I surely can’t go back and live in Texas, as dearly as I love the place.

Every now and again the thought hits me that my Daddy was shot down near this part of the world and a weird feeling sneaks up on me. Like at the funeral. When I watched the body go up in flames, I thought, this is how my father died, in a big blast of fire. It must be terrifying to see it coming, like he must have in the plane. It was different for the kid whose funeral I was watching. He was already dead; it wasn't how he died. For him it was a glorious send off. He was bathed and dressed in white and gold and set on a palanquin and covered with silk and lovingly mourned. There were all those people around him. It was different for my father. In the end, to be truthful? It just about adds up to the same thing.

We never found the body. It was the government that didn't find the body; they said he was missing in action and probably went down somewhere near the border. It makes for a peculiar sense of mourning. I think that's what set my mom drinking—that he could possibly come walking through the door at any moment. She didn't know if she was coming or going—she never buried the guy.

For me it's awfully strange to mourn someone I never met in the flesh. All I know of him are a few photographs and the fragments of stories I've been told. What puzzles me is, if I don't know what I missed, why should I miss him? I've come to believe that I learned to miss him through the lessons taught by my mother and his own father, my grandfather. Somehow I grew up calling him Papa.

At times I feel it might be only the idea of a father that I miss. Growing up, all my girlfriends had fathers and although I had Papa to look over me, he didn't exactly fit into the picture with these younger men. I remember Cheryl Ann, one of my friends, saying he was too old and I must miss not having a real father. I wanted to punch her in

her fat blonde face; instead, I went home to cry to my mother. On that very day the idea of missing the father I never had began. I don't fully understand the complexities. It was easier for me to think of missing my father as simply an idea. I felt more normal taking that slant—I was treated so well by Papa I like to think it hardly made a difference, and in reality I didn't miss anything.

I was content with this way of thinking until I talked with Hart about how I felt. We were discussing John Lennon and how, although neither of us ever met him, we thought we knew him. The countless records, photographs, films and videos made everyone think they had a connection. It didn't matter that all most of us ever had were his public persona made of light on a screen. Although I was only a girl when he was killed, I mourned and missed him, as did everyone. Hart asked me if I thought it peculiar that people missed him, never having known him. I replied that I missed my father, of whom I knew far less and who was less involved in my life than the Beatles whose records I listened to ad nauseam—so no, I didn't think it peculiar. But when I thought further I was forced to admit there was a difference and I didn't miss them in the same way. With John Lennon it seemed more of an idea that circulated in my head; with my father the missing was stored deep inside, I'm not sure where, but it's in a place which is not so easily gotten at with words.

I don't cry easily, but the conversation triggered a vein of grief in me that I thought would break me down the middle. Hart tried to comfort me. I might have read it incorrectly, but he seemed more caught up with the responsibility that he brought on my tears than with my sadness. Hart claims his own father was such a prick, his words, that it was hard for him to understand how I felt. "He didn't do you any harm," was the best

he could muster. I think Hart is so accustomed to seeing the world through a camera that the world is one big photo to him. He tidies up with his camera and, despite his talk about being a champion of experience, I have my doubts about how directly he feels things.

My mother once told me that when she was with her second husband Billy, the first of my four stepfathers, she thought she saw my father standing in the corner of the bedroom watching her and Billy. It freaked her out so badly that it was the beginning of the end for her and Billy Boy. My mother mercifully spared me the sordid details of what she and Billy were doing. She's treated me as a younger sister most of my life. She can be inappropriate, and it would not have been out of the question for her to "fill me in," an expression she uses when the subject involves sex. She was seventeen when she had me and about the same age as Hart, so maybe that's why we get on so well. I have a leg up on how he thinks because of my mother. I'm not sure he has much of a clue as to where I'm at.

Hart would probably like my mom. When I told her about him she sounded a little too interested to me, so I warned her I'd never forgive her if she flirted with him. She got all huffy, as if that was the furthest thing from her mind, and instead of reassuring me she launched into a lecture. I knew this was coming because she addressed me as Marjorie Joan, a definite preamble to a load of bull. I stopped her short. I could tell she was drinking, told her so, and hung up the phone. When I called her the following week she didn't remember our spat; she didn't even remember the call. She said she was worried sick that I hadn't checked in with her the week before.

Maybe her being such a mess is the reason I've become so damned independent and why I speak my mind so plainly. Beating around the bush never made much sense to me—it never worked with my mother. She'd pretend not to get it so you had to beat her over the head to make sure she listened. When she's sober she's shrewd and listens more carefully than you imagine and can twist your words so you hardly recognize them as your own. But I love her anyway and she has her good side; she loves me to death, she's generous to a fault and she has a big heart. I just wish it wasn't filled with so much sorrow.

I know if she can be happy about some of the things that I do. I hate to admit that I came out as a debutante—it's a big thing where I come from—but I did. Between her urging and my grandfather's coaxing I didn't stand much of a chance. I went to the opening ball with Richard, my boyfriend at the time, a cadet and ROTC type. My mother thought he was handsome and looked like my father; my grandfather looked fondly on the distinguished military career he imagined he would have. He was a little too squeaky clean for me, but I loved his good manners and thought he had a bit of a wild streak, which I loved more. Mainly, my family approved of him and that was a relief from the response I usually got when I brought someone home, like, "Marjorie Joan, what do you ever see in that boy?"

So my mom and I went into Dallas and presented ourselves at Neiman Marcus to buy the gown. All the sales people bowed and scraped and couldn't do enough for us. My grandfather was R. J. Johnson, which might not mean much to anyone outside of Dallas, but he was a big shot oil lawyer, and they all knew who he was. I wanted this chic, slinky, strapless number my mother thought was too sophisticated—in the heat of

our argument “too sophisticated” was transformed into “it makes you look cheap.” I think it was too difficult for my mother to see me so sexy, sexier than her in particular, and we settled on a gown in which mother said I looked “radiant”. I hated it but thought I could probably manage to get through the evening in it and told my mother that, just this once, I would give in to her wishes. It wasn’t worth the hassle—I was doing this to please her and my grandfather—and in my book the whole thing was superficial and elitist to the point of boredom. The endless teas and goody-goody parties, where you got to eat mini sandwiches trimmed of their crust, made me wretch. I needed about thirty of the little squirts to make a meal, plus you had to eat them in a dainty manner that covered up the fact that it would all turn to shit anyway. I usually left hungry.

I couldn’t describe the gown if my life depended on it, except it was an unpleasant color somewhere between shrimp and bone. Until this day I imagine myself going through the evening dressed in the sex-bomb dress I fancied. There was some sweet revenge in that I didn’t wear any panties and went through the night deliciously aware of my nakedness. My little flirtation with being risqué backfired. After the ball Richard and I took a stroll onto the fairway behind the cotillion. We began making out. I was already worked up, having spent the evening with my lascivious little secret and I could feel him poking me through his pants and the stiffness of the gown. He was concerned about getting grass stains on the gown, which he knew cost a small fortune and, to bring his attention back to what counted, I let him know I wasn’t wearing any underwear. This was more than little Richard could handle. He wilted so totally that the only stiffness left was in the gown.

Richard, of course, is in the Air Force now, engaged to a manageable, blonde ditz who is most likely delirious with the thought of her life as a military wife and mom. And I'm in Indonesia hanging with Hart, following a map that we draw up as we go along. Go figure!

HART

Red is off on an adventure and I'm sick as a fucking dog. I don't think I've ever recovered from the dysentery I had in Nepal. I'm sure the amoebas are having a field day, eating and multiplying in the mysteries of my large intestine. Red and I needed a break from each other anyway—we've been within twenty feet of each other twenty-four-seven since we began traveling together—but I'm pissed that I'm probably missing some great photos of the funeral. I made up for it.

I perked up in late morning when a girl came by to tend the small shrine outside my door. She might have been a young woman, but age is difficult to discern because their beauty is so blinding it masks years of wear and tear. I watched her as she made offerings at the house shrines. She first placed banana leaves with bits of rice, salt and some chili pepper on them in the corners of the walled courtyard, paused for a short prayer at each and then walked toward the small shrine outside my door. She does this daily, and it's such a common sight throughout Bali that one hardly notices.

This country is intense, and the complex system of spiritual checks and balances makes my head spin. It's funny that I should come here to rest up in between my tramping around in the jungle, as if it were a terme in Switzerland. Real funny that my stomach is turning like a cement mixer and I can't be more than five steps away from the john.

The girl took a longer time at the shrine outside my door. She was more particular and the offerings, more elaborate. She put a small square of banana leaf with the requisite rice into the shrine and sprinkled a few drops of water from a bottle she carried. After that came the incense, a bird woven from straw, and a jasmine blossom. The scent of the flower wafted through my open window and lingered until she fired the sandalwood incense. She added a fresh rambutan to the mix. The spiky reddish shell of the fruit looks like the pod of a horse chestnut, but the sweet, silky pulp inside is another story—that can put a smile on the face of the most bad-assed spirit. The fruit is a little bit like Red.

It was like peeking in on a woman at her bath. She was quiet and absorbed in her devotions. She proceeded with grace, her movements edited for the job. I thought her older than I imagined earlier. She was certainly sexy, and I entertained a few quick fantasies along those lines before I grabbed my camera. A generator exploded into action behind the house and, using it for cover, I snapped half a roll of pictures. The racket from the two-stroke machine ended as unexpectedly as it came on and, bingo, I was busted. She heard the click of the camera, now loud as a gunshot, and snapped her head around to look at me. I took one more shot—her startled expression was too much to pass up—which I think totally flipped her out. She gathered herself and her basket of gear and stepped down from the terrace to put on her flip-flops. I shot her again as she gave me a little bow and got ready to scoot away.

I called her back and we exchanged greetings in Bahasa, which is how they refer to Indonesian, which I speak well enough to actually have a conversation. I've never attempted Balinese, which comes in high, middle and low varieties; the challenge of

learning the simpler trade language has been enough of a struggle. Much of the poetry of Bahasa still escapes me—its apparent simplicity is only skin deep—but I get by. She knew I was sick, apparently everyone connected to the losmen knew, and told me that her offerings that morning were made with my health in mind. For insurance she recommended the usual bananas and rice cure-all. Once we got started she was quite talkative and not shy at all. Her name was Nengha, which told that she was the second born in the family and from one of the higher castes.

I asked her if she could explain more particularly what she had been up to with her devotions, and would she mind if I photographed her while we were talking. She had directed a particular prayer on my behalf to Shiva—the god most often involved in sickness. Her voice became a backdrop for the pictures I was taking. I couldn't rid myself of the desire to see her naked, preferably spinning around on my lap. I concentrated on the pictures to steer me away from that line of thought.

The beauty of the local girls swayed me but I hadn't a clue, even after half a dozen lengthy stays, how to approach them. An incident some years ago while I was in Japan stops me cold any time I think of putting the moves on a local. I was spending time with a woman who I had been introduced to by a mutual friend. Kiko was stunning and looked as if she had stepped out of a Japanese woodcut. She was a classic beauty with a long, aquiline nose, lotus white skin, jet-black hair—I was crazy about her. She was great company, and we bopped around Kyoto together visiting shrines and gardens that I had long dreamed of photographing. Our dealings had been friendly but had the slight remove of Japanese formality, which seeps like water into any crack. It suited me

just fine. We would hang out for a week, then I would go off to shoot in another place and return to Kyoto, where we would pick up our little dance.

After a month or so I realized that we had visited only those places I had wished to see—she had put herself in my service, like any good Japanese woman. I let it happen—when in Japan, do as the Japanese. It didn't occur to me that she might have been compromised in some way. In fact, when I asked her where she wanted to go, she was at first surprised, and then delighted. Kiko promised me a very special outing but deferentially asked if I would do one thing for her—could I leave my camera at home? I reluctantly said yes, and when I asked her why she said, “It is a very special place.”

Three days later she came by to pick me up in her car. By then I was a web of fantasies and had no idea what to expect. We drove to the outskirts of Kyoto to a small temple and garden. The temple complex was famous for its teahouse, considered to be one of the finest examples of this type of architecture. The garden and temple were so-so and I didn't regret not bringing my camera. Kiko was exceptionally attentive to me and seemed anxious that I was enjoying myself. She explained the finer points of the teahouse, and we casually made the rounds of the small shrines that dotted the grounds. We bowed together at a Shinto shrine and clapped our hands at the end of our prayers. Kiko was a little flushed with excitement and took my hand as we walked back to the car. I don't believe we had ever touched before, and this little gesture was exciting to the point of delirium. It never went any further.

Weeks later, back home in the States, I was speaking with my friend Tom, the Japanese man who had introduced Kiko and me. He wanted to hear all about my trip and particularly about Kiko, who was a childhood friend. I gave him the rundown of events.

I told him how crazy I was about Kiko. I was delicate about it. Although she was forward thinking—she spoke English and hung out with me, for fuck’s sake—she was from a fancy, traditional, family. I explained to Tom how I had kept myself in check, not wanting to be the dumb, rude gaijin, and how clueless I was about what Kiko might have thought of me. Everyone was excruciatingly polite in Japan and Kiko probably would have treated a serial killer with the same friendliness.

In relating our comings and goings I mentioned the special place she had taken me to. I have since forgotten the name, but it was fresh in my mind then, and when Tom heard it he burst out laughing. He was having a good time at my expense and I was sure I had committed some cultural blunder that was to follow me the rest of my incarnations. I wasn’t far wrong. Tom explained that this special place was where lovers and future lovers went to declare their feelings for each other. Entering the teahouse together was as good as saying you wanted to hop into bed. I wanted to shoot myself for not knowing—and I couldn’t blame it on the camera.

Now, Red is an entirely different story. We speak the same language and she can be as duplicitous as I can. There’s a lot to her and its hard to believe she’s only twenty-three, except for her skin and her sweet little body. I hardly remember what it was like to be that young; although I’m certain I was a lot more lost than she seems to be. She says she plans to enter the Peace Corps next year. I don’t know if it’s in the works or just a dream, but it would be a good place for her. Red is wrapped up in the idea of helping people. I tease her that she could become a missionary, but she’d have to give up sex in all but one position. She said that’s why she chose the Peace Corps—it wouldn’t be such a big deal if she slept with the natives. At times her helping-hand routine gets air-headed

and too goody-goody for me. But one of the pleasures of being young is that you can be naive without being considered ignorant. Another, if you're young and female, is that you can be excused your lies because you don't know when you're lying. Red takes full advantage of being young and female.