

Bina Shah

Peter Pochmann Goes to Pakistan

Everyone had warned Peter Pochmann not to go to Pakistan: "You're taking your life into your hands out there! Don't be crazy, Peter!"

Yet here he was now, stretched out in his Emirates Business Class seat, earphones piping in a pleasant mix of "Golden Classics" as he flew from Dubai to Karachi, hoping nobody would kill him while he was on this three-day trip. Fleischer, his boss, had described it as a training session for the local staff, but the way he'd gripped Pochmann's hand in his own, squeezing down with his meaty fists and the manly clap on the shoulder, he might as well have said *suicide mission*, not *training session*. Darlene had even had tears in her eyes as she'd handed him his tickets, and Pochmann had almost given notice then and there.

But Pochmann knew that his life would end far quicker if he refused the assignment. The resulting demotion, eventual dismissal, and certain unemployment would dry up his meager savings account in the First Trust Bank within a month, and then he'd be homeless as well as jobless. Better to face a trip to Karachi, where they'd killed Daniel Pearl and bombed the US Consulate, than face a month without a paycheck in America these days.

Pochmann twisted the wedding ring on his finger and watched the screen in front of him as the little white plane inched closer and closer to Karachi on the electronic map. They'd be landing in the next fifteen minutes, he guessed. Suddenly, a disembodied voice on the PA system announced, without any warning: "duetosafetyregulationsatKarachiairport, wemustspraythecabin. Ifyouwearcontactsyoumightwanttocoveryour—" Then the flight attendants were running down both aisles holding aloft spray cans jetting out a sickly-smelling liquid which made Pochmann's eyes burn as if he'd been maced.

He began to scream out loud in pain and outrage, but quickly clamped his lips down over his teeth and tried to flush out his eyes with the contents of his bottle of mineral water helpfully supplied by the cabin purser. Just when he thought things were calming down, he picked up the complimentary pre-landing hot towel and pressed it to his face; the lemon perfume in the towel rekindled the fire in his eyes.

Pochmann sat quivering in his fully upright seat with an eye mask over his face until the plane screeched to a halt at the end of the runway. He remained motionless, surrounded by the sounds of seatbelts clicking, overhead bins springing open, dozens of exhausted passengers getting out of their seats and trooping towards the warm blast of air that came from the open doors.

"There, there," said the purser, patting him soothingly on the shoulder. "No need to be afraid. See, we're on the ground, safe and sound."

"Thank you," muttered Pochmann, removing the eye mask and blinking at the now-empty cabin.

"It's my pleasure. Really, sir, fear of flying's nothing to be ashamed of. I don't even like it myself!"

Pochmann's eyes were still stinging even an hour after he'd disembarked in Karachi, cleared Immigration and Customs, and collected his luggage, a bright fuchsia vanity case, from the baggage carousel. Mohammed-Mohandas-Moses was waiting for him outside the airport, holding up a sign that read "MR. PETER PACMAN", but Pochmann almost missed him, stumbling through the doors with his thumbs pressed into the corners of his watering eyes.

"Are you okay, sir?" said Mohammed.

“Yes, well, they sprayed something in the cabin before landing, I don’t know what it was, and I wear contacts, so it’s just stinging a little bit,” said Pochmann.

Mohammed was peering at Pochmann with a look of concern. “Will you be all right? Do you need any medicine?” He was a thin, slight man, his thighs in their tight black pants hardly any bigger than Pochmann’s upper arms. He could have been anywhere from nineteen to forty years old, but Pochmann guessed he was about twenty-eight. He spoke his English carefully, as if tasting a food he hadn’t ever had before.

“No, no. I’m fine. I’m fine.” Pochmann felt anything but fine: he was dizzy, seeing the crowds of people, feeling the afternoon heat pressing onto every inch of skin that wasn’t covered by clothing, breathing in unfamiliarly heavy, humid air. He took his thumbs out of his eyes and bent down to pick up his cases again, but Mohammed immediately reached forward for Pochmann’s laptop bag. Pochmann flinched and turned away, proffering instead the pink vanity case to him. When Mohammed bent a second time to retrieve the case from Pochmann’s tight grip, Pochmann had to make an effort to peel each frozen finger away from the handle.

The car was better than Pochmann had expected: a Toyota Land Cruiser, with powerful air conditioning and a GPS screen on the dashboard, which reassured Pochmann that he wasn’t in completely uncharted territory. But as soon as Mohammed arranged himself behind the steering wheel and switched on the engine, the GPS screen sprang to life and a woman’s voice came out of it, gabbling in Japanese. A map on the screen appeared to show the streets not of Karachi but of Tokyo, and the woman began to scream hysterically as Mohammed put the car into reverse and began to back out of the parking space – according to the map, they were about to drive off the Rainbow Bridge and fall into the Tokyo Bay.

“Oh yes,” said Mohammed calmly. “We haven’t changed the CD as yet. This car is very new.” He patted the dashboard in a gesture of appreciation.

“So there *is* a CD for Karachi?” Pochmann asked. If his luck held out, he’d get through the next three days, then go back home and quit his job – anything to never have to come back here ever again.

“There are many CDs for Karachi.” Mohammed eased the car around the curving exit road and waited for a green light at the intersection, in front of a row of dilapidated buildings. A looming billboard that advertised Magnum ice creams with a woman holding a huge chocolate bar, lasciviously poised half-in and half-out of her heavily lipsticked mouth. “But I do not trust any of them. Best to just ask someone who knows the city. Not all the streets have names. Some have many names.”

Pochmann was intrigued. “What do you mean?”

“Well, this road we are on, it is known as Drigh Road. But it is also called Shahrae Faisal.”

“Why?”

“It changed after the British left. Many roads changed. From British names to Muslim names. Elphinstone Street became Zaibunissa Street. Like that only.”

Pochmann stared at arcing flyovers curling around picturesque gardens, concrete blocks with lines of washing hanging over miniature balconies, office blocks whose glass windows glinted in the afternoon sun. Beauty wrestled with ugliness all along the main artery, which Mohammed negotiated with the confidence of a Formula One driver. There was no concept of a fast lane and a slow lane. Motorcycles and rickshaws occupied the right side of the road with impunity; buses and trucks wove left and right in intricate patterns of roadmanship, all defying any traffic rules that might have been in existence. White-uniformed policemen slouched impotently at the intersections, while menacing commandos manned the overhead bridges, submachine guns slung carelessly over their shoulders.

I’m in the most dangerous country in the world, Pochmann thought to himself.

“Karachi has many odd names,” Mohammed added, warming to his subject. “Khamosh Colony: Silent Town. Macchar Colony: Mosquito Town. Geedar Colony:

Jackal Town. Karela Bus Stop: Bitter Gourd Bus Stop. Lakhpati Hotel: Millionaire's Hotel. A hundred Resham Gallis - Silk Streets. For the ladies." A pause and a sideways glance at Pochmann. "You like the ladies?"

"Yes, I like the ladies," said Pochmann absently. He pondered the odd names. He'd like to send Judy to Silent Town; Fleischer would be right at home in Mosquito Colony. The hairy ex-Marine would be torn limb from limb in Jackal Town. And where would Pochmann belong? Definitely not the Millionaire's Hotel, more like Bitter Gourd Town...

"Very good. And the ladies will like you, as you are tall and strong. And a *gora*."

"A what?"

"Excuse me. I mean an *Angreze*. A foreigner. White man."

Pochmann was suddenly alert. "Ladies like white men here?"

"Of course. They are considered very handsome."

"But I thought... well, don't women wear the burka here? Aren't they very strict about that?"

Mohammed laughed, revealing a row of very straight teeth that would have been white but for a series of harsh red stains that looked as though he'd been drinking blood. "This is Karachi. It is not what you think." Pochmann tried not to stare at his mouth, but was dying to know what could have spoiled the beauty of Mohammed's teeth. Mohammed turned off the artery road without signaling, and Pochmann, sitting in the passenger's seat on the left side of the car, yelped out loud before remembering that they drove on the wrong side of the street in this country.

They stopped in front of the Marriott Hotel, and the Land Cruiser was submitted to the various bomb checks performed by armed guards at the security barrier. A German Shepherd, solemn and still as a waxwork figure, watched Pochmann with coal-black eyes. Pochmann could feel the cold sweat breaking out on his lower back and working all the way up to his scalp. He wanted to get away from the barrier, rush into the sanctuary of the hotel, relax in his room with a shower and a cold beer. The red letters of the hotel logo comforted him, as if they, like the UN or the WWF, could bestow some kind of international protection over him from this heaving, brutal city.

Half an hour later he was ensconced in his room: a flatscreen television opposite a luxurious double bed, a desk and small sofa, a window that looked out onto a vast and beautiful park across the road. There was a Gothic church in the middle of the park. The US Consulate was to the left of the Marriott: with the church in front of him, his country's flag flying nearby, and CNN murmuring on the television, he was lulled into a feeling of jet-lagged calm. He stood at the window in his socks, watching the scores of dark hawks - *kites*, Mohammed had told him - circling overhead. Mohammed had a name for everything: the park was called Frere Hall, the road was the Clifton Road, the club next door was named the Sind Club after the province they were in.

He'd already unpacked his suitcase and arranged the contents in the cupboard - a few short-sleeved shirts, a dress shirt, two forlorn ties, some khaki trousers, a pair of sober blue Dockers. Then he placed his passport and ticket reverentially in the hotel safe. When he'd finished, he went back to the window, trying to ignore the suitcase that lay gaping open on the bed like a Venus flytrap waiting for an unsuspecting victim.

It was the one piece of luggage Judy had left behind when she'd left him: a fuchsia pink, hard-sided Samsonite vanity case that she'd inherited from her mother when the old lady had finally left Cleveland for an assisted living apartment complex in Orlando: fueled by canasta, bingo evenings, hot meals delivered to the apartment; three hundred old Jewish women, with a smattering of men (they always died quicker), compared the feats of their adult children and tried to outdo each other with the most blinding of senior citizen fashions: orange muumuus, electric blue pumps, hats shaped like colanders. On Sunday evenings, they assembled in the grand hall and danced the foxtrot to jazz tunes from the 1930s.

"Your mother seriously couldn't find enough room in the van to take this with

her?” Pochmann said one evening.

“She wanted you to have it, Peter,” said Judy, speaking out of the side of her mouth, since a cigarette and a straw attached to a Big Gulp occupied the center of it in turns. “She knows you especially love this color.”

She was tapping away at her computer, doing her taxes, or so Pochmann had been foolish enough to believe. But that was 1999 and they’d only just gotten an American Online account; Pochmann barely knew how to get onto the Internet, while Judy took a few classes at the tech center at the Church Street Library during the summer, and was soon so entranced by her new world that she barely had time to fix dinner three nights out of seven, let alone speak to Pochmann.

“You’re kidding, right?” Pochmann’s eyes bulged out the way they always did when he heard something he couldn’t quite believe. It was an unattractive look; he’d caught it once or twice in a mirror and immediately pulled his eyelids shut with his fingers, but it was an uncontrollable trait - something to do with myopia, detached retinas, an inherited condition from his unknown father or his feckless mother.

Judy sighed. “Yes, Peter, of course I’m kidding. Jesus. Do you always have to take everything so literally?”

“No...” said Peter, but Judy was giggling at something being typed on the screen by one of her hundred “pen pals”, as she liked to call them. She never laughed at his jokes anymore, not even the story about Fleischer and the extra-hot chili sauce, but let one little chime sound out from the computer’s tinny speakers and she was hoot-hooting like a chimpanzee surveying the \$3.99 Sunday morning fruit platter at the corner café.

And now she was with that burly ex-Marine, who she loved because he “read literature” and “understood symbolism”. Pochmann, who knew that the last book Judy had read was *The Scarlet Letter* in her eleventh-grade English class, translated this to mean that the Marine took her out for Surf’n’Turf at the lobster joint every month and didn’t complain about the check when it came. Oh yes, Pochmann understood symbolism very well. If only Pochmann himself had been more symbolic, she might be lying in his arms this very second, smoking a cigarette and laughing that low, guttural laugh that made the hair on Pochmann’s arms stand up in a discomfiting little polka of arousal.

As he stood at the window and watched the kites wheeling in the sky, his right hand went to his left in that little ritual he’d developed over the years, of twisting the wedding ring around his finger. Eight months since the divorce, he still couldn’t bring himself to take off the ring and secret it under his socks - his usual hiding place for precious items: a photo of Judy in her underwear, a pack of condoms he’d bought the day she walked out on him, his wallet, a ring of keys to cars and locking file cabinets that he no longer owned. He’d held a half-formed plan to blackmail Judy with the photograph into coming back to him, until he broke into her email account and saw that she’d been using a digital version of it to advertise her newly-single status to several Internet swains out in Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

He realized that a woman who was willing to send pictures to her potential second husband of herself in a polyester bra-and-panty set (bought from Victoria’s Secret by her first husband) would not be easily pressured into doing what he wanted. It was the first moment of perception he’d had about his wife in the ten years they’d been together; that it had come only after they were divorced was an irony entirely lost on Pochmann.

Pochmann turned away from the window and reached for the telephone. He’d been told by the receptionist, while checking in, that foreigners were allowed to consume alcohol in their rooms. He’d turned to Mohammed, who was standing at his elbow, and raised his eyebrow. “That true, Mohammed?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Pochmann. Nobody will mind if you drink. You are a foreigner. The rules are only for Muslims. And not even Muslims follow them, I am sorry to admit.”

Well, it was time to see if he’d been telling the truth. “Room service? Can I get a beer, please?”

The voice on the phone coughed politely. “You want what, sir?”

“A beer? A cold beer?”

“Ah... yes. This is Mr. Peter... Poachman?”

“Peter Pochmann. Can I get a beer?”

“Yes, of course, sir. Please have your passport ready.”

“My what?”

But the man had already hung up. Pochmann looked at the phone in his hand, then shrugged and went over to his laptop case and rummaged around inside it until he found his passport. He had already unpacked the contents of the vanity case and hung them up in the closet and dresser drawers. He had not removed the condoms from the case, afraid that a curious housekeeper might find them. So maybe Mohammed was right that he wouldn't be whipped for drinking alcohol, but the Pakistani hadn't volunteered any similar information about sex, and Pochmann was too embarrassed to ask. He tried for a minute to think about lovemaking; when he closed his eyes it was not a veiled Eastern woman, but a brazenly naked Judy that lay on the bed in his mind, holding her arms out to him, eyes lazily surveying him and a warm smile sweetening her face.

The knock on the door ended his nostalgia and Pochmann lumbered over to open the chain, after peering through the peephole. Two uniformed waiters stood outside. Pochmann grew alarmed at this. Why two? What if they weren't waiters at all, but terrorists, who had been sent to ambush him? He hesitated, then, at the second, more insistent knock, undid the chain. He was a big man. He'd go down fighting, and be buried with the American flag draped over his coffin.

“Good afternoon!” The first waiter held a tray covered with a napkin, hiding two lumpy objects underneath.

“Good afternoon,” said the second waiter, a little more sepulchrally. “Your passport, please, sir.”

Pochmann did as he was told. The waiter took out a notebook from under his arm and wrote something in it. “Sign here, please.”

When the little ritual was over, the first waiter flicked aside the napkin, revealing a can of Heineken and a glass filled with ice. Pochmann watched, bemused, as the first waiter opened the can, poured the beer, and presented it to Pochmann.

He took it gingerly. The two waiters held their breaths until he took a first sip. Pochmann swallowed. In the beer was something he recognized: a mouthful of home.

“Everything fine, sir?” said the first waiter.

“Oh yes,” said Pochmann. “That's just great.”

The two waiters exhaled.

Pochmann signed the bill, placed a crisp red hundred-rupee note in the folder, and nodded to them pleasantly. They turned to leave him in peace with his beer.

“Say, wait a minute.”

The two waiters halted, one bumping into the other.

“Why are there two of you?”

The first waiter beamed. “I am here to serve you the beer, sir.”

“And him?”

“He is here to make sure you are not a Muslim. And to make sure I do not drink your beer, sir.”

The men filed through the door, closing it softly behind them. Pochmann looked at the glass of beer in his hand and raised it to his forehead, pressing it against his sweaty skin, shaking his head in disbelief at where he'd ended up.

The telephone jangled in Pochmann's ear while he lay in bed, the eye mask from the plane clamped down over his face and ear plugs wedged firmly in his ears. He was completely naked, except for a pair of socks. He always felt chillier on his feet than the rest of his body, and in hotel rooms, with their impersonal central air conditioning, sometimes his toes would turn blue with cold.

Judy had always made fun of his habit of wearing socks, but the gentle chiding had

turned to open derision once she'd made her first few forays onto the Internet. One night when they were about to make love, Judy looked down at Pochmann's legs as he clambered into bed. "Oh my God, Peter! You've got those socks on again. Take them off right now!"

"But I'm cold," Pochmann began to complain. He was eager to take comfort from a long day by crawling into her arms.

"Nothing turns me off more than those socks, Peter. For God's sake. You look like a middle aged man. You might as well wear your robe and slippers too!"

"You've never minded before."

Judy folded her arms across her chest, squeezing her breasts into plump little mounds that bulged above and below her arms. Pochmann bent over and perched on one foot while he peeled off first one sock, then the other. He lost his balance and fell half on top of Judy, who howled her resentment out loud and then turned her back on him and pretended to fall asleep, while Pochmann lay beside her, disconsolate, his feet numb and disappointed at the end of his legs.

"Mr. Pochmann, sir, I am waiting downstairs for you."

"What the - what time is it?" Pochmann blinked at the traveling alarm clock on the bedside table, but his eyes were too blurry to be able to make out the numbers.

"It is nine-thirty. I am waiting."

"Uh..." Pochmann sat up in bed and put a hand to his forehead. His eyes were throbbing, no doubt an allergic reaction to the chemicals in the plane. "Look, it's going to take me a little while to get ready. I'm afraid I overslept. Sit in the café and have some coffee. I'll be down in fifteen minutes."

Twenty minutes later Pochmann was in the front seat of the massive SUV, after having showered and grabbed a quick cup of coffee. He had no sense of night or day so couldn't tell if he was hungry or not, but was heartened to see a passing Dunkin' Donuts shop on the street. The familiar orange and pink sign took him back to America, the scent of hot cheap paper cups of coffee and freshly baked donuts rising in his nostrils. Mohammed followed his glance and smiled. "Shall we stop? Are you hungry?"

"Maybe later. We're already late, and it's my fault. I'm sorry."

"I can get some for you at the office. Don't worry."

"You know what I do need, though? Some aspirin. I've got a headache the size of Alaska."

"I will send someone to the chemist straightaway."

As they idled in the early-morning rush hour traffic on the main Shahrae Faisal road, Pochmann felt a sudden rush of affection for Mohammed, his calm, measured voice, his thick pompadour like a rooster's comb atop his skinny body, his control of the car on the violent Karachi roads. It didn't matter that Mohammed probably didn't know where Alaska was. In a day and a half Mohammed had shown him more concern than Judy had in their entire marriage. Sudden tears of self-pity came to Pochmann's eyes, and he allowed them to trickle out, secretly relishing their anesthetic effect.

The next minute he sat bolt upright, staring out the window. In a tiny road parallel to the main artery, two men were trying to shove a goat - a real, live goat - into the back seat of a rickshaw. The goat allowed himself to be pushed into the odd-looking vehicle - three wheels and a roof decorated with tinsel flowers and other garish ornaments. But when the men turned their backs, it lunged onto the street and began to chase one of them with a lowered head and vicious, bared teeth. The man ran around the rickshaw in circles while his companion clutched his belly and howled with laughter.

Mohammed saw what Pochmann was looking at, but this time he didn't smile. Pochmann thought he saw a flush of embarrassment creeping across the man's cheeks, but Mohammed's skin was too dark for Pochmann to discern whether or not the man was truly capable of a blush.

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The day in the office melted into the haze of a hundred other days spent addressing

employees in various seminars, conference rooms, and training halls that Pochmann had inhabited in the course of his career. Once Pochmann had gotten used to the strange accents – like Indians but less sing-songy, more low-pitched – he switched into Trainer Mode and strode up and down the room, emitting the energy of a thousand-watt light bulb, commanding the multimedia projector, the whiteboard, the erasable pens like Lewis and Clark charging up the Northwest Passage.

He was astonished by how shy the men were. There were four of them to every woman in a room full of forty people. The men – boys, really – were docile, their voices nervous. Some wore the pockmarked skin of adolescence, even though most were well into their twenties. The women – girls, really – spoke up more than the men, asking questions and looking directly at him for his responses, rather than turning their heads away as he'd expected them to do. He thought they'd be in veils or burkas; they wore scarves on their heads but paired them with tunics and jeans, like American college students. He was drawn to their eyes, deep, dark pools of liquid, rimmed with kohl and widely spaced, so different from the usual blues and greens and light browns of the women of the Midwest.

He took them through an introductory session, talking about the projects planned for the next year, and what was expected of them as programmers working for an American market. Nobody took notes; they simply gazed at him, concentrating more on his mannerisms and his clothes than what he was saying. He felt less like a trainer and more like a special exhibit in the zoo.

In the lunch break, he went to Mohammed's office and sat down on a plush sofa, a glass of water in his hand and a packet of painkillers on the table in front of him. Little twinges of pain were exploding all around his skull. He wished he was back in Cleveland, where his ophthalmologist lived down the street from him and always saw him in the morning before Pochmann had to be at work.

He stared at the five flat white tablets in a foil wrapper. He was used to multicolored capsules in sterile white bottles: Tylenol, Advil, Excedrin for the really bad days when the migraines danced around with whips and chains in his head. He ripped open the foil and put two of the tablets on the table, eyeing them with suspicion. Disprin. What was that? Some form of opium? *Be a man, Peter!*

He dropped the two tablets into the water and watched them. By now his eyes were feeling like two peeled grapes dipped in vinegar. They did not dissolve. He picked up the glass and gave it a good shake, sloshing water over the sides. The tablets still did not dissolve. He tried to swallow them whole with an extra large gulp of water and almost choked. They still did not dissolve. Finally, he crushed them as well as he could with a spoon and ate them like Jell-O straight out of the glass. Even as they went down his throat, they still felt completely whole, scraping the insides of his throat and esophagus on the way down.

Half an hour later he was back in the meeting room; the Disprin seemed to have done some of its work. On the other hand, the Quarter Pounder he'd had for lunch sat like a stone in his belly, and he found himself reluctant to start talking about coding or quality control. He thought for a moment, then said, "Why don't we get started with some questions? Is there anything you'd like to ask me about the morning session?"

A few hands went up. Pochmann chose a man in the front row who had a burgeoning dark beard and a skullcap perched on his head, like a yarmulke. "Yes?"

"Who are you voting for in the election?"

Pochmann did a double take at the man, who looked like Bin Laden's younger brother. They were all leaning forward, eyes fixed on him, awaiting his response, more interested and awake than they had been all day.

"Uh, well... that's a very personal... well, you know, I'm not decided yet..."

"Are you a Democrat or a Republican?" The girl who asked him this looked fifteen years old. Heavy glasses obscured half of her face.

"I'm a... well, Repub..." Pochmann quickly changed his mind. "I'm independent. I don't belong to any one party."

“Is that allowed?”

“Do they check who you vote for?”

“Do you have to sign a contract?”

“Did you vote for George Bush?”

Their questions shot past him like Indian arrows flying past General Custer’s head. Pochmann took a step back and raised his hands, overwhelmed by the dizzying torrent of words. Gradually they quietened down and waited for him to speak.

“Who would you vote for in the election?”

Forty blank faces stared back at him.

“Come on, don’t be shy. I want to know what you really think. Please...” It was a delicate moment. Pochmann felt his heart pounding in his ears.

Another girl raised her hand. Pochmann pointed to her and smiled. “Yes, you in the... green... who would you vote for?”

The girl said, “I wouldn’t vote for Obama. I don’t like him.”

“Why not?” said Pochmann, nonplussed. Surely they’d be happy to see the end of George Bush’s term? He knew what Muslims thought of America. Guantanamo Bay. That prison in Iraq where they’d made the Iraqi prisoners pile up in wobbling naked pyramids and took photographs that even he considered obscene. There were days when he himself was ashamed to be American. He wanted them to know that, but this wasn’t the time or place for half-baked confessions of international guilt.

“Well, Obama is a Jew, isn’t he? I don’t like Jews.”

Daniel Pearl, Daniel Pearl, Daniel Pearl! The name came roaring into Pochmann’s head, along with the pain in his eyes, and he sank down into a chair, his legs weak and his armpits damp with cold perspiration. “I think that’s enough politics for today. Let’s get back to work.” As they settled back into their seats, Pochmann reminded himself not to talk about politics until he was back in America.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Pochmann?”

Pochmann looked up at Mohammed and sighed. He couldn’t go through one more round of “Call me Peter” - “Okay, Mr. Peter, sir” - “No, just Peter” - “Okay, Peter, sir” - again.

“The training went very well, Mohammed. Thanks for all your help.”

They were traveling back to the hotel along Shahrae Faisal, bumper to bumper in the heavy evening traffic. Pochmann gazed at the tired faces all around him, the men crammed into the hulks of commuter buses, fathers ferrying their wives and children home on tipsy motorcycles, traffic cops whose white uniforms were laden with the grime of a million exhaust pipes from a million trucks powered by diesel and unleaded fuel. He felt his own energy draining away in steady waves, and he put his fingers to his eyebrows and pressed down hard.

Mohammed saw him wince. “Mr. Pochmann, do you have headache still? Didn’t the Disprin work?”

“It’s my eyes, Mohammed. I think it’s an allergic reaction to something or other...”

“Oh!” A high-pitched, girlish squeak escaped from Mohammed’s lips. Pochmann glanced through his fingers to see Mohammed switching gears and changing lanes. A chorus of angry horns and klaxons rose up all around them, but Mohammed ignored them, cutting across three columns of traffic with the determination of a water buffalo in heat.

“What are you doing?”

“You need eye-drops. We will go to Colby’s. They have all the foreign medicines. You will find something from America there.”

“Mohammed, I’m all right, really...”

“No you are not. Your eyes are bleeding. I mean, they are bloody. You are our guest and we must take care of you. We are going to Colby’s.”

Pochmann gave himself up into the hands of Mohammed, his protector, his

translator, his interpreter of maladies. The man's kindness was a warm coat placed around his weary shoulders. He closed his eyes for the next twenty minutes. The next thing he knew, he was being gently shaken awake by Mohammed. "Come, Mr. Pochmann, we're here."

Pochmann looked up at the sign: it read *Kolbees*, not *Colby's*. Once inside, Pochmann blinked his watering eyes at the idea that this small, cramped store was a supermarket. Hell, this place was like a chicken coop! Chocolate and potato chips, videos and wrapping paper, expired items bulged out of racks at the front of the store, while crooked aisles led away into more confused space in the back. He nearly tripped over a column of supermarket trolleys and almost tumbled into the arms of a shop assistant, who smiled at him and nodded in the direction of the medicine counter - one glance at his bloodshot eyes was all anybody needed to know where Pochmann should go.

The medicine counter was a center of chaos. People pushed and shoved, waving prescriptions desperately to the assistants. Pochmann heard words that sounded like "tranquilizers" and "blood pressure medication" - made sense, given how stressed out everyone looked, except for the shop assistants, who were all looking at him and grinning. He was the only white man in the shop. They wouldn't be able to tell he was American if he didn't open his mouth.

Pochmann tried to make sense out of the boxes and bottles stacked nearly all the way up to the ceiling. There was Pepto-Bismol, Seven Seas Cod Liver Oil, GNC supplements all thrown together - but no Visine, no Gentalin or Bausch & Lomb.

"Yes?" The man behind the counter, a grizzled, grey-haired grandfather, addressed him in an English that was somewhat recognizable "What you need?"

"Uh..." Pochmann turned to Mohammed, but the man had disappeared down one of the long aisles. *Do a British accent! No, just say you're Canadian...* "Well, I need eye drops. Eye drops? For my eyes?" He pointed at his eyes, blinked exaggeratedly two or three times. "See? They're all red? They really hurt? Do you have anything?"

"Hmph," grunted the man. He shouted something to a younger assistant, who was standing right next to him. The younger man disappeared head first under the counter, then re-emerged like a diver with buried treasure, clutching a small white box in his hand. The grandfather took the bottle out of the box, checked the seal, and waved it in front of Pochmann's nose. "This very good. This good for eye. You bad eyes."

"Yes, I know." He looked down into the glass counter. Rows of condoms lay next to packets of small pills. The pills looked like sample sizes, the kind you saw in doctors' offices back home. They looked like the advertisements he saw on TV. They were blue and diamond shaped. They looked like...

"Is that Viagra?"

He thought he'd only said it in his head, but he realized that he'd spoken aloud. Whirling around, he clapped his hand over his mouth, deathly afraid. *This is a Muslim country! They stone people for having sex here!*

But he couldn't stop himself. This was the last place he ever expected to find the dirty little secret of so many men his age, though, men who were approaching middle age or had already approached it with nothing to show except for broken marriages and children who didn't speak to their parents and parents who didn't speak to their children anymore.

And whenever they advertised it on television, they made it look so seductive to the millions of fat bastards all over America who were having *intimacy problems* and *reduced sexual performance*.

As if swallowing a little blue pill could stop your wife from running away with a hairy ex-Marine.

As if being able to have sex with her for three hours straight would make her love you again.

As if sex was the answer to everything that plagued a man in these times of soulless struggle, a striving towards an inexorable end that everyone was too scared to talk about.

They were all like little children, swallowing this pill or that in the hope that it would make everything all right, hiding their heads under their pillows in the hope that death would never come their way.

As if.

A sudden commotion at the checkout counter caught his attention, and his head swiveled around to look at a young woman standing in front of one of the cashiers, throwing her head back and laughing in a way that was calculated to draw the eyes of every man in a ten foot radius. She was dressed in skin tight jeans, stiletto heels, and a tight top that exposed her midriff; her hair was long and streaked blonde, her face decorated with makeup so thick it looked like warpaint. Her arms jangled with cheap gold bangles and large gold hoops dangled from her earlobes.

She leaned over the counter and stared straight into the cashier's eyes, smiling and winking at him. Her back arched, turning out her hips and bringing up her breasts to the top of her neckline in a warm bronze bas relief. In front of her, on the conveyor belt, sat a single box of biscuits and a lonely packet of gum.

Around Pochmann, all the men breathed out in a way that needed no translation: *Sweet Jesus!* They were staring at the girl, each and every one of them, from the youngest tea-boy to the junior man behind the medicine counter. The only person who wasn't moved by the display was the grizzled pharmacist, who frowned and picked up a set of prayer beads kept conveniently hidden in the glass counter.

The girl wriggled her hips, her giggles exploding in the air around her in little bursts. The cashier's eyes grew wider and wider in his dark-brown face, and he tried not to meet the smirking glances of the men standing directly behind the girl.

But she must have sensed something, because she abruptly whirled around, sticking her hips out in their direction, as if offering them a free show. She spotted Pochmann standing amongst the other men, and looked directly at him as she lifted one eyebrow and called out in a chiming, confident voice, "Are you enjoying my Versace?"

Then she slapped one hand on her rounded hip, and laughed uproariously. She gathered up her things and sauntered out of the shop.

Pochmann felt as though he'd been hit by an atomic bomb. He turned around slowly. The old pharmacist was holding out the small packet of pills to Pochmann. "Is Viagra. You want? Rupees three ninety-five for one."

In the US, one pill would cost at least twenty dollars. "Don't I need a prescription?"

The man stared at him blankly. "You want?"

Pochmann started to refuse, but then a vision of the girl in her tight fake Versace jeans came dancing into his head. "I'll take three." He didn't miss the sharp intake of breath from the younger assistant, the admiring glance from the fellow behind the electronics counter next to them. Pochmann proceeded to the checkout, choosing the same cashier as the one the girl had flirted with. The aroma of her, cheap perfume and cigarettes, lingered in the air. He handed the cashier his receipt and the items were brought over in a paper bag stapled closed for privacy's sake. Just as Pochmann was about to give the cashier his credit card, Mohammed suddenly materialized at his elbow, whipping out his wallet. "I will pay, please."

"But, Mohammed..." Pochmann was cringing with guilt. The eyedrops were only a hundred rupees. How could he explain the almost fifteen hundred-rupee bill to his new friend? Why the hell had he bought the Viagra in the first place? He was hardly about to go on a Tantric sex session any time soon.

"No, no." Mohammed waved Pochmann's protests away with a generous hand, took the bill away from the cashier, and crumpled it into a ball. "You are our guest. It is nothing."

As they left the supermarket, Pochmann stopped and stuffed the paper bag into the back pocket of his trousers. Then he joined Mohammed in the car. The young man was shaking his head and muttering, "They should be more careful who they are letting in here these days."

Pochmann whispered, "Terrorists?" He had seen the armed guards standing outside the supermarket, pump action shotguns balanced on their knees and bandoliers slung around their shoulders. He remembered the metal detector at the hotel door and how hair on the back of his neck stood up like the bristles of a toothbrush when he had to walk through it.

Mohammed bent close to Pochmann's ear. "Prostitutes. They are everywhere. Very dangerous."

Pochmann could feel the Viagra burning a hole through the foil and the paper bag and the fabric of his trousers, branding him with the scarlet letter V - or W for Wiagra, since he was in Pakistan - on his flabby pale buttocks.

Pochmann leaned his head back on the sofa and sighed. The chilled air of the hotel room tingled like champagne on his skin. In a few moments he would step into the shower and wash the day off him, rub his thinning hair with hotel shampoo, wrap himself up in a giant soft towel and stretch out on the generous, giving bed.

His flight out of Karachi was scheduled for tomorrow evening. He wouldn't quite miss this place when he was gone, but he no longer felt so afraid of it. He'd go back home and tell them all how he'd survived Pakistan. Fleischer would no longer make jokes at his expense; he'd put an arm around Pochmann and tell everyone: "This is our man who went out to Pakistan!" Even Judy would be impressed, when she heard about it. And Pochmann would make sure she heard about it.

He blinked his eyes and gazed at the television, the picture no longer blurred and grainy: The eyedrops were starting to do their work, and now, a day and a night later, the pain had all but disappeared. Was pleasure simply the absence of pain, or something more tangible than that? Pochmann wasn't quite free of the pain he'd felt when Judy walked out the door, but now, he could at least look ahead and envision a day when it wouldn't hurt anymore.

The phone rang, interrupting his reverie. He yawned, stretched, and reached out for it. "Hello?"

"Mr. Pochmann, good evening. I am calling from Public Relations. You are to check out tomorrow afternoon, yes? Have you had a pleasant stay?" The voice was pleasant, the English good. Pochmann smiled at the sound of words he had to make no effort to understand.

"Oh, yes, it's been great, thank you." He leaned over to pour himself a glass of water from the bottle sitting on the coffee table in front of him. He had finally stopped worrying that he would get sick from brushing his teeth with the mineral water supplied by room service.

"Everything to your satisfaction?"

Pochmann began to down the water thirstily. "Very much."

"And is there anything else we can do for you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Nothing...special?"

Pochmann stopped, mid-swallow. "What do you mean?"

"We are here to provide every comfort to you. Perhaps you need something to help you relax... or someone?"

Pochmann was speechless for a minute, trying to work out the inner meaning of the man's pleasant questions.

"Mr. Pochmann? Do you want drugs? Or a girl?"

Pochmann began to tremble violently.

"Perhaps a boy?"

The water traveled all the way up from Pochmann's mouth and into his nose, and he began to cough violently, unable to breath.

The disembodied, polite voice waited until he had stopped coughing. "Mr. Pochmann? Do you need a doctor?"

“No... no...”

“So, would you like me to send you a very special young lady? She is beautiful. Very sweet. Very nice. Very friendly.”

Pochmann had never been with a prostitute in his entire life. It was dirty. It wasn't like him. That was what other men did. While he was sitting at home with Judy, they went to strip clubs and gentlemen's clubs and lap-dancing clubs. While he was listening to Judy complain about him. While he watched Judy sit at the computer for hours, talking to God-knows-who in the middle of God-knows-where.

While he sat on the sofa and watched television commercials for Viagra, feeling so lonely that at any moment he could get up, walk to the next room and put a bullet in his brain.

“All right,” he squeaked. He replaced the receiver on the cradle, and sat motionless for fifteen minutes. His bones had turned to jelly. His breathing was labored. When he lifted his hands up, they shook like leaves in the wind.

Pochmann went to the door and stood there till he heard the knock, a gentle tapping of a ringed finger, accompanied by a soft scratching of the carpet on the floor outside his room. “Who is it?” he whispered hoarsely.

“Room service.” The voice was unmistakably female, in a hotel where the only waiters Pochmann had ever seen were all men.

As Pochmann undid the chain, the blood slowed in his veins. Standing there was a woman dressed in a pink baggy shirt and trousers - the shalwar kameez. She wore a scarf over her head, but when Pochmann let her in his room she pulled the scarf off, revealing white flowers twisted into the long dark braid that hung down between her shoulderblades.

Pochmann tried not to stare, knowing it was considered rude, but he couldn't help himself.. She didn't seem to mind, smiling shyly with downturned eyes, dimples appearing at the sides of her mouth. Her skin reminded him of maple syrup. She was short and rounded, completely the opposite of the American women Pochmann had known - all sharp angles and long bones.

She was putting her purse down now on the table. She lifted her hands to her head and undid her braid. Her head was bowed in a shy, downward angle, and he thought of how Judy liked to strip her clothes off nonchalantly, as if changing in front of her female friends in the locker room at her gym.

When she turned back to face Pochmann, she was holding the flowers cupped in her hands. She smelled them before holding them out to him, and he saw a small nosering winking in one delicate nostril.

Pochmann took a hesitant sniff. Jasmine mingled with sandalwood from her fingers. “Won't you sit down? Would you like some water?”

She nodded, sat down, and held out her hand to take the glass that he poured out for her, sloshing some of it over the sides in his nervousness. Clutching it with both hands, she sipped at the water delicately. Pochmann towered over her, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his feet sweating in his white cotton tube socks. She patted the sofa seat beside her, and he plopped down in it, splaying his legs out in front of him.

“Is it too cold for you?”

“?”

Pochmann tried again. “What's your name?”

“I Shehnaz.” At least she understood that much English.

“Oh, that's a pretty name. Where are you from?”

“?”

“That's a dumb question. Of course you're from here. What am I thinking? My name's Peter.”

“Pee-ter...”

“That's it. There are plenty of Peters where I come from... not so many Shehnazes, I guess...”

She gave him a blank stare, which halted his feeble attempts at conversation. Then

she got up from the sofa, walked over to the bed and sat down on it, patting the mattress beside her. *She doesn't like to waste any time!* He was slightly disappointed that she looked nothing like the Versace - Wersace - girl in the supermarket. She was more the typical Indian dancing girl, a goddess on a temple frieze or an illustration from the Kama Sutra, than that laughing vixen in her tight jeans and streaked blonde hair. Still, he couldn't send her away now.

She put a hand on Pochmann's thigh, but without even having to cast down a glance at his trousers he could sense the disaster that lay ahead. Ever nerve jangling and every cell on red alert, his penis was the only part of him that lay sleeping peacefully, coiled up inside his underpants like a happy little shrimp. Pochmann's face turned bright scarlet, and Shehnaz, mistaking the change in hue for a flush of anticipated pleasure, reached up to circle her strong brown arms around his neck.

He jumped away with a yelp, a thousand volts of electricity circulating through his body, and ran for the bathroom. He locked himself in, panting like a dog, exhaling droplets of fear with every ragged breath. He slapped himself a few times and tried to stare himself down in the mirror. He grabbed his crotch and tried to shake his penis awake. Nothing worked. If he even dared think of last time he'd had sex, with Judy, his entire body would rebel and paralyze him.

Pochmann sank down onto the toilet and groaned. He was a prisoner in his own bathroom! Maybe if he stayed here long enough, Shehnaz would just get bored and leave. But no - she wouldn't go without being paid. Another groan escaped Pochmann: Her pimp was probably waiting around the corner down the hall, and would beat him senseless if he made her go away without paying her for services rendered. Even if there were no services being rendered tonight.

As he cast his eyes desperately around the bathroom for an escape route, he found one: his toilet bag on the marble countertop. He lunged for it and pulled open the zip, seeking the three little blue pills he'd bought in the supermarket. He didn't even have to rummage around for them; they leapt right into his hand, like magnets to a lump of iron. He imagined little raised V's on the pills, hoping they would give him the victory he so badly needed.

He popped open one of the pills and downed it quickly with a glass of tap water. Then he took a few deep breaths, leaned his hands on the sink, gazed into the mirror. *Who's a big boy now?* It was one of the erotic phrases that Judy used to squeal when he was on top of her, forearms locked to the point of cramping, the pinched nerve in his back sending him into spasms of pain that she always mistook for a violent, heaving orgasm. It came into his head now, and he said it aloud once or twice, hoping his body would take the hint. *Who's a big boy now?*

It would be thirty minutes or so for the Viagra to have any effect, and he couldn't spend them locked up in the bathroom, so he squared his shoulders and sauntered out as if nothing was wrong. Shehnaz sat in the same spot on the bed, except that she had kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up underneath her. As soon as he reappeared, she smiled at him and flopped onto her stomach, throwing him a coy glance over her shoulder.

"Hello," Pochmann murmured.

"Come," said Shehnaz.

"Oh, I plan to," Pochmann replied. The relaxation was moving through him, big gentle waves of calm. He had no idea what he'd been so afraid of. He stretched out on the bed beside her. She gazed into his eyes, drawing him in to the darkness of her irises and her lush eyelashes. He reached out for her and drew her into his arms for a long, lingering kiss. Her mouth tasted like sharp cloves and sweet honey. She was so soft, so pliable. He closed his eyes, and his body sank down into the depths of a warm, soft sea.

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The phone rang and rang and rang. The noise cut into Pochmann's head, rousing him from the fog of his dreams. He opened one eye and glanced at the window; the graying sky, the kites wheeling overhead. What time was it? Where was he? *Who was he?*

He tried to rise from the bed to answer the phone, but his arm had gone to sleep underneath him. It hung like a dead weight from his shoulder; no amount of budging would get it to move. Lunging for the phone, he only managed to knock it off the bedside table. He groaned and cursed as he tried to stand up, but lost his balance and slid down to the floor. Finally, he picked up the receiver and held it to one throbbing ear. "Hello?"

"Mr. Pochmann? I am downstairs, waiting for you. Are you ready to go?"

Pochmann rubbed his eyes as recognition slowly came to him. "Mohammed? Where are we going?"

"To the airport, sir? It's time for your flight."

"WHAT?!"

"It's seven o'clock, Mr. Pochmann. You have to check in three hours before departure for an international flight..."

"But..." Pochmann was bewildered. The last thing he remembered, he had been lying on the bed... but he hadn't been alone... And then with a rush, it all came back to him: the smooth voice on the telephone, Shehnaz, the little blue pills. He could still smell the scent of the flowers she had worn in her hair.

"?"

"Are you all right, Mr. Pochmann?"

"Uh... uh..."

"Should I come upstairs to help you with your things?"

"NO!" Pochmann scrambled upright, but the floor swayed under his feet. "You stay there. I'll be down in ... uh... just stay there."

Think, Peter, think! He looked around the room wildly, his hands pressed to his eyes to stop the brain cells from sliding out of his head. The first thing he had to do was pack. He had placed everything neatly in the hotel cupboard and dresser drawers; all he had to do was throw them all into the vanity case, which was on the luggage rack in a corner of the room.

But the pink vanity case was gone.

He stumbled from the dresser to the cupboard, wrenching open the drawers, pulling open the doors. Gone. Everything was gone. His clothes. His laptop case. His shoes. Pushing his way into the bathroom, he searched for his toilet bag, but that too had disappeared. The only thing on the countertop was a twisted piece of foil; he grabbed it and turned it over. Two little blue pills still nestled in their plastic shells, and an empty shell where the third one had been.

Pochmann brought the foil close to his face, and stared at the pills, forcing his eyes to focus. Imprinted on them was a single raised letter W. The writing on the foil completed the puzzle: *Viagra - Herbal Medicine for Meximum Sexual Play.*

Pochmann charged out of the bathroom and dived for the closet, where he sank to his hands and knees, desperately scrabbling for the hotel safe, his fingers trembling as he punched in the keys: 1964, the year Judy was born. It was all her fault, that bitch! If she hadn't left him, he wouldn't have had to turn to a prostitute to try and prove that he hadn't been castrated by her. He wouldn't ingested fake drugs to prove himself a man. He could have died, the pills could have poisoned him! He could have been murdered while he was unconscious!

If that had happened, Judy would have been a murderer, Pochmann a hapless victim of circumstances. But Pochmann knew that he was a complete and utter fool. He had been a fool to marry Judy. She may have loved him in the beginning of their marriage - and Pochmann knew that he would find evidence that she had if he really thought hard about it - but he had been a fool to put up with her condescension, her pettiness, her ingratitude for all his years spent slaving for her. All along he had come to her with a sincere heart; and by the end she had held nothing but contempt for his willingness to serve her in good faith, for better or worse.

With a sudden beep and click, the safe door swung open. He could have cried when he saw that his passport and tickets were still inside. Pulling them out of the metal

box, he glanced down at his hands and realized with a groan that Shehnaz had even stolen his wedding ring. The ring finger of his left hand looked oddly naked, a small thin white line underneath his knuckle marking the place on his hand that the sun hadn't touched for the last ten years.

But it didn't matter now. Mohammed would buy him a pair of shoes on the way to the airport. He slammed the safe door shut, stood up, and holding his passport and tickets in his hand, made his way to the door. He didn't give the room a backwards glance. It was time to leave Pakistan, to go back home to America. And when he got there, he would call Judy up on the cell phone that he still paid for, and tell her that he was cutting off her service, and that she could go to hell. It was time for Peter Pochmann to be reborn; to try and find someone who would truly care for him with all his faults, even his bad back, his sweaty feet, his weak eyes, and his fractured heart.

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