
“Eleven Past Eleven is an emotional journey of love and betrayal. Nima Mateen does a wonderful job with characters that makes you want to keep turning the pages. Don’t start reading this at bedtime if you have to get up early!”

Georgia Durante, the author of
“The Company She Keeps”



“Not since ‘Of Human Bondage’ have I read such a psychologically stirring insight into the bonds of love and obsession. Written with the candor and eroticism of ‘Tropic of Cancer,’ this provocative tale will titillate even the most passive reader.”

Gary Schmad, producer / director
Odyssey International / GrayStar Pictures

Eleven Past Eleven



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NIMA MATEEN

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On a heavily overcast late Sunday afternoon, William entered the office he shared with a few other accountants. In no time, he was clacking away at his tattered keyboard and crunching numbers. He was disgruntled at being the only soul in the entire two-story office building – as lifeless as an abandoned morgue, and miles away from the nearest beach.

His cell phone rang. As soon as he answered, a voice bellowed. “Hey, Willie, it’s me, Travis! How the hell are you?” William had not heard from Travis in over seven years – not since Travis had moved to Europe to live with a girl half his age. Now, Travis was returning to Los Angeles, and he wanted to know if he could ship his excess luggage to William beforehand.

“How’s Q doing, by the way? Are you guys still in touch?” William asked. There was a long pause – for a moment William thought he had lost the signal.

“Haven’t you heard?” Travis’ tone had turned somber.

“Heard what?” William asked.

“He’s been dead forever!”

Apparently, years earlier, while Q was driving through an intersection in Marseilles late one night, a gasoline tanker operated by a drunken driver had struck him. The tanker had overturned and caught on fire, which had then spread to and engulfed Q’s car. By the time the emergency crew arrived, Q’s body had been charred beyond recognition.

After he hung up, William found himself unable to concentrate. The news of Q’s demise saddened him. During the time, which Q had held an office only a few doors down from

his, William and Q had rarely spoken at any great length. On occasions, when they had passed each other in the hallway, Q had always displayed a guarded but cordial smile. Yet his presence had profoundly affected William.

Unlike Travis, who chased after anything that moved, Q was just a quiet, reserved individual who hardly ever paid attention to any of William's "lady friends." Although on a positive note, it meant less competition for William, he could not help but to suspect that Q might be asexual, until Travis told him that Q was married.

William needed a drink – actually three! So he opened one of the desk drawers, fished out a bottle of hard liquor, poured its content onto an empty soda can, then plunged his large frame on the battered couch with well-worn springs due to the abuse it had received from William's extra-curricular activities involving his lady friends.

He downed half of his drink in one gulp. Why did he feel so impacted by the death of a man he hardly knew? William drifted back to the last time he saw Q.



William had been just promoted to a senior accountant position based on the merits of his "impeccable professional conduct," which resulted in a combination of extra money, less work and more time to spend with his lady friends.

No one cared about any impropriety, which had brought the extra income to the major accounting firm for which William had laboriously slaved since he had relocated to Los Angeles from Seattle seventeen years earlier.

It was late in the afternoon and a light rain had started. William was in a jubilant mood when he heard a few knocks on the door. He lazily opened it, facing Q holding a bulging shoebox with its lid forced shut and securely taped in all directions.

"I have a favor to ask of you, Mr. Drake," Q had said in his soft-spoken, yet firm tone. William was not the formal type, but he appreciated Q's articulate and proper speaking manner.

“Shoot,” William blurted out.

“I am going away for awhile. Would you be kind enough to keep this for me?” Q asked with a desperate undertone.

William had casually shrugged and then nodded. “No sweat!” After William took the shoebox, Q extended his right arm for a firm, gratified handshake, then had turned around and walked away, never to be seen or heard from again.



William finished his drink and went for a second, but the bottle was empty. Luckily, he always hid an extra one in the closet. As he slogged through the pile of junk, he briefly paused to look at the shoebox that had been collecting dust for over seven years and wondered what might be inside of it, and why Q had chosen him, of all people, as its keeper. However, as a logical man, William reasoned that since Q was long dead, whatever it contained was probably worthless. He picked up the shoebox and tossed it in the trash.

Alcohol was taking effect, so William decided to relax for a while before he left for the evening. Soon, he was napping blissfully.

When the janitor, a transplant from New Jersey with thick muscles and undersized tee shirt, spotted the shoebox, he hoped to find a pair that would fit him. However, once he opened it, disappointment moved across his face.

Figuring it must have gotten into the trashcan by accident, he was about to place it on William’s desk when he knocked a chair over and startled William. “Sorry, Boss, I thought it was trash,” the muscleman, who even called his own mother “Boss,” said ruefully, worrying that William might accuse him of thievery. He then swiftly left.

Acting upon his primary instinct, William picked it up, intending to throw it back in the trash, but his curiosity had kicked in; he saw no harm in first taking a glimpse inside.

After he duly examined the few pieces of notes, he concluded that Q’s handwriting was worse than any doctor’s prescription written

after a heavy drinking stint.

He managed to decipher a few random paragraphs here and there. Based on that, he figured it was some sort of a personal diary. He certainly was not concerned with anyone else's affairs, dead, alive, past, or present, though he knew exactly who might be interested: his twenty-one-year-old niece Ashley.

He shoved everything back in the shoebox, replacing the lid to re-tape it shut. He then called his sister, Carmen.

"Sis, is my little Ash around?"

A few seconds later, Ashley's voice came through. "Uncle Willie!" From her delighted tone, anyone could tell that she and her uncle were close.

"I've got some stuff you'd love to look at! So trick your mom into whipping up my favorite dish!"

Later on that evening, as the salivating William deeply inhaled the whiff of the simmering stew, he could not wait to vacuum it all down. Carmen would not allow him to until the meal was served. Disgruntled, William dashed out, and went straight to Ashley's room.

She was in front of her computer, putting the final touches on an article she was writing about the effects of carbon monoxide as one of the principal causes of the depletion of the ozone layer. She had planned to submit it to a science magazine. She needed to hurry up and finish it, so she could get back to her packing.

A flapped open suitcase was on the bed with clothing scattered around it. The following afternoon, Ashley and a group of college friends were leaving on a weeklong cruise during spring break. Her generous uncle had not only paid for, but insisted she should take the much-needed vacation. William loved his sister's only child, whom he had helped raise since she was three, when Ashley's father died.

After giving his niece a fatherly hug, followed by a kiss on her cheek, he gestured toward the suitcase. "You're only gonna be gone for five days, but it looks like you're packing for an entire season! I'm gonna be lonely with the two most important women

in life abandoning me at the same time!” William said with a mock sadness, referring to Carmen’s impromptu decision to visit a childhood friend, Tiffany, in Sedona, while Ashley was gone.

William held Ashley at arm’s length and marveled at how his “Little Ash” had so rapidly grown into an attractive woman with a runway model figure. He wondered why instead of going out with boys, she would waste her time in front of the computer and write about things beyond her control – or anyone’s control, like the environment.

Ashley’s view drastically differed from her uncle’s. She strongly believed it was not the multinational corporations to be blamed for their coercion and complacency in the destruction of the planet, but rather each individual. That a corporation was a nameless, faceless entity with no conscience or soul. That each human being had a soul and conscience; therefore, it was through reckless behavior, singularly or collectively, consciously or subconsciously, directly or indirectly, that humans accelerated the demise of the planet.

William already knew the reason his virtuous, independent-thinking niece was not popular with the boys. Unlike the “cool girls” her age, who readily dropped their panties upon a boy’s glance, Ashley believed in the touch of love. Moreover, when it came to matters of the heart, she stood at the extreme end of the spectrum from her beloved Uncle Willie, who warned Ashley that if she kept wishing for the magic to happen, she could turn eighty-one and still be waiting.

Ashley favored a good book over marching up and down mall aisles, wasting her money on overpriced junk and debasing her mind. The avid bookworm had probably read more books than her entire class would collectively in all their lives.

She looked at William with demanding anticipation. “So, what is it you wanted to show me?”

William paused, as he was aware of the gravity of what he was about to reveal to her. He needed to give himself more time to mull it over, so he declared that he was starving and could not think straight on an empty stomach – perfect timing, since at

that precise moment Carmen announced that dinner was ready. “Saved by the stew!” he thought to himself.



William felt and must have looked stuffed from the sumptuous meal he finished, and when Carmen returned from the kitchen with dessert, he was suddenly appetite incarnate once more. But he had barely swallowed a bite when Carmen addressed her older brother.

“So, William, have you found a...” William was jolted and didn’t have to wait for Carmen to finish her question. He had heard it far too many times, so he quickly got up, carrying his plate.

“Sis, me and Ash gotta chat about something.”

But Carmen went on. “There’s this new teacher who just transferred to our school. She’s single, and she’s real nice. She wants to start a family. I was thinking of inviting her over for dinner one night!”

As William followed Ashley to her room, he wished he had forgone his favorite dish and instead had taken Ashley out to dinner. Could Carmen ever realize that some men are just not marriage material? William muttered as he pushed the suitcase aside to make room to sit on the bed, and then deliberated before he spoke. “Ash, you remember Q, don’t you?”

Of course she did! Why would he even ask her, when he knew well that she remembered Q! She got up from her chair and stood in front of her uncle, as a half-hidden surge of excitement rushed through her. “Did you finally hear from him, Uncle Willie?”

Not knowing how to answer Ashley was difficult for William, so he took his time to ease into the revelation. “Travis called out of the blue.”

The mention of his name triggered an unpleasant feeling and instantly shot a visible shiver through Ashley’s spine. She had never told her uncle about the lewd conduct displayed by the pervert one day when she had encountered Travis in the hallway.

William anticipated the effect of what he was about to say, but he believed there were occasions when the best way to reveal something is the most direct. "I'm sorry, Ash, but Q is dead. He died a few years ago."

Ashley's complexion flushed. She felt weak in the knees and sat next to William, who quickly wrapped an arm around her for comfort. Her eyes started to gather tears as she drifted back to a moment frozen in time, when she had just turned thirteen.



To earn extra money to buy books, once or twice a week after school, she would ride the bus to her uncle's office to help with the paperwork.

One such afternoon, Ashley was within yards of William's office when she noticed a man walking toward her. Typically, the shy Ashley would just keep her face down and continue onward, but for a strange reason as they got closer she looked up timidly, long enough to utter an innocent "Hi." Q simply acknowledged her with a shielded smile.

However, in that fleeting moment when she looked him in the eyes, she felt an unfamiliar sensation, causing her to have an internal shudder. She was positive it was not sexual, although she was attracted to him. Instead of continuing onward, Ashley stood there, immobile, and gazed after the stranger as he strode the entire length of the corridor before he turned and disappeared from her sight.

Once inside the office, and after a quick hug from her uncle, Ashley rushed to the window overlooking the parking lot just as Q was walking to his car. William had noticed the change in Ashley and curiously stood right behind her. The somewhat introverted Ashley sheepishly uttered a few words that surprised her uncle: "He's so charming!"

Noticing Ashley's lingering stare at Q, William teasingly warned her. "Okay, Lolita, he's a married man, and old enough to be my grandfather!" Naturally, he was exaggerating, but he wanted to make a point. Ashley bashfully glared at her uncle,

and then in a somewhat innocent and affected manner, clarified that she had not meant it in that particular way; while in the same breath, she stated that Q looked younger than William did.

William put a loving arm around her. "I remember when I was your age, Ash. I had this huge crush on my math teacher. And I just hated math!"

Ashley turned and looked up at her uncle, blushing. "I don't have a crush on him!" Ashley could fool herself all she wanted, but it would certainly take a whole lot more to convince William, the seasoned womanizer she had for an uncle. William grinned and asked Ashley if she wanted to go get some ice cream.

As they were walking in the hallway, she knew she was profoundly affected by Q, albeit in a pure way, with an image already imbedded in her mind. "Why don't you believe in love, Uncle Willie?" Ashley asked, without much thought behind it.

"Because it's only a myth to fool some people with!" he responded, and then he paused before he continued. "But I do believe in one thing! That you're only thirteen, not thirty-one!"

Over the subsequent months, every single time Ashley entered the building to go to her uncle's office, her heart started to race, hoping she would run into Q, but the opportunity never arose.



The rain was gaining momentum. Relieved from having to deal with Ashley's emotions, William sat behind the wheel of his car, trying hard to convince one of his lady friends for a hurried late-night get-together. Using the pretext of getting some fresh air, he had left Ashley's room to allow her to be alone for a while. He collected the shoebox from the passenger seat and, dodging the heavy raindrops, he hurdled back inside his sister's house.

Ashley was still in a trance-like state when William softly knocked, then entered her room. He placed the shoebox on her computer desk. "Q left this behind." She looked at it curiously. "What's in it?"

"Find out for yourself." He sat back on the bed next to her.

This time she leaned sideways and rested her head on his shoulder.

They were both quiet for a few moments, before William recounted the entire episode surrounding the shoebox. Ashley started to peel off the tapes to open the lid, but decided to wait. William sensed that maybe she needed some privacy to ruminate, so he asked her to call him first thing in the morning. He hugged her again before he left the room, saying that he had to rush back to the office to finish his work – a convenient lie.



That evening Ashley cried more while she finished her article. Then, as she continued packing, she attempted several times to open the shoebox, but refrained. She was afraid of knowing intimate details about the man with whom she had been infatuated for over seven years. She scooted the heavily packed suitcase off the bed and retired for the night.

Reading always helped put her to sleep, but that night, even after switching to three different books, she was still wide awake. Her mind was focused on the contents of the shoebox. She carried it back to bed, where she nervously un-taped and opened the lid.

She sporadically sifted through the labyrinth of notes written on loose sheets of white and other colored papers, backs of envelopes, torn pieces of grocery bags, napkins; each containing dates, times and locations – some very detailed and a few bearing just a short sentence or two.

Ashley decided to stay up. What had started as simple inquisitiveness had turned into an intense quest for discovery of a man who no longer existed in physical form. The more she delved into it, the more she felt drawn to the material. From what she had read so far, it became obvious to her that a seductress named “Veronica” was the object of Q’s desire, or the cause of his erosion, depending on one’s perspective.

As she dug deeper into the shoebox underneath the immense stack of papers, she located a thick sealed envelope, with Veronica’s name and her last initial written on it. Ashley

was finally so tired that she could barely keep her eyes open. She decided to put the shoebox away until she returned from her trip. She turned off the lights, closed her eyes, but her mind kept racing. Ashley could not wait to find out what was the letter about, but nonetheless it was addressed to Veronica.

Suddenly a simultaneous, violent crash of thunder and lightning startled Ashley, who bolted out of her bed. For a fleeting moment, she thought she saw Q standing by the door, holding the exact same shoebox. A chill shot up her spine, giving her an eerie feeling as she raced to her mother's bedroom, where she found her awakened as well. Carmen opened her arms for a comforting embrace, and Ashley snuggled up against her.

Carmen's entire world revolved around Ashley; not only were the two close, but best friends as well. When Ashley had just turned sixteen, Carmen had kicked out a man with whom she was seriously involved and was thinking of marrying until she found out he was trying to get a little too close to her daughter as well. After a similar incident that followed a year later, Carmen vowed to allow no other man enter her life until her daughter has moved out.

As she lay next to her mother, on the side where her father had slept years earlier, Ashley could not help but feel lucky for having Carmen as her mother. She admired her for having sacrificed her pleasures. Carmen had remained celibate and had devoted her entire existence to raising her daughter. Ashley gently hugged, then kissed her mother on the cheek.

After she had returned to her own bed, Ashley pondered. She tried to discount the image she saw of Q as a hallucination, but she could have sworn what she saw was real. Once more, her mind was on the envelope and its significance. On the other hand, she reasoned, whoever this Veronica was, if indeed she existed, she must have moved on, so what was the point, since Q was dead? She also entertained the possibility that the entire ordeal with Veronica could have stemmed from Q's wild imagination. However, the very particular details, evident in some of the notes, discounted that notion.

Then, a little voice that occasionally spoke to her came alive. “Ashley, there is a reason you have the shoebox.” The voice told her that it was her mission to locate Veronica and deliver the envelope. Once the voice had stopped, Ashley found herself silently talking back to it. “But my allowance barely pays for my expenses, and my mother hardly has any savings! How would I go about looking for this Veronica? I don’t even know her last name!”

Then she wandered into the realm of metaphysical possibilities. “What if Q knew of his fate already?” She had read books on complexities of human minds and various philosophical views about the origins of life, death, and beyond. One book in particular had illustrated an account of a man who not only had decisively predicted his upcoming death, but the manner in which he would die.

She wondered if there was a connection between Q and her on a much deeper level than she could comprehend. She had once read that some souls are connected throughout various life cycles.

Unlike William, who treated life as a blank notebook to write in to fit one’s needs and wants on a daily basis, Ashley unwaveringly believed that life was a book with a certain number of chapters and specified number of pages. Therefore, each of us merely turned a page into a blueprint of the events of that day, meaning that every single action in life happens as if predetermined by a mysterious force incomprehensible to the limitations of the human mind. It was her destiny to receive the shoebox that otherwise would have been left in the trashcan.

On a whim, she decided to forgo her planned excursion and spend the time instead reading and transcribing every single note. She would then set out to locate Veronica at any cost. She was aware that her decision to stay behind would make her friends mad, except Janet, who could not afford to go.



The following morning, Ashley swiftly arranged for Janet to

take her spot on the cruise and assured her that it was a gift. Ashley felt very excited, but she could not pinpoint whether it was due to the fact that her gesture had made Janet ecstatic, or because she was about to delve into the private life of the man she had encountered for only eleven seconds.

Later that evening, when she received a call from Janet, who was so thrilled and wanted to reiterate her gratefulness, Ashley realized that the darkness of night had fallen and many hours had elapsed. During that time, she had painstakingly gone through every single piece of paper and categorized them with proper markings in accordance with the date written on each one.

She covered her bedroom walls from one corner to the other and from top to bottom, with the taped notes in an alphanumerical order. When she finally ran out of space, she utilized the back of her bedroom door as a last resort.

After she finished the conversation with Janet, Ashley felt exhausted and could barely keep her eyes open. In spite of her physical tiredness due to the lack of sleep from the night before, her mind was racing. She knew she could not wait another day, or another hour, another minute, or even a second to start her new self-imposed quest.

She plucked the first sheet and clipped it to the copyholder to the right of the monitor. She situated her hands on the keyboard. Her left little finger pressed and held the shift button, while her index finger softly touched the “F” key.

FRIDAY, APRIL 11. The phone rings jarringly; it snaps me from a nightmarish trance – the same exact nightmare I have agonizingly endured for the past consecutive seven nights. In it, I see the same dreadful image, as if through a portal; my body is stuck knee-deep in quicksand, encircled by violent fire. As my body tries to take a step, it sinks deeper. The heat is unbearable, the smoke dense. A ghostly female figure appears, dancing in place in slow motion, her arms whirling. She gradually becomes clearer in form, as she comes to life in fully saturated vibrant colors, as if by delicate strokes of an invisible paintbrush. There is something unique about her eyes – full of tears. I cannot distinguish if she is crying out of sorrow, or cheering the imminent demise of my body. The fire spreads wider, engulfs my body. I feel the heat as I watch myself being charred.

I still tremble, soaked in sweat, as I glance at the digital clock. It is 11:11 A.M. I am late by two hours to be in Long Beach, but feel immobile. My eyes are transfixed on the textured ceiling through the slow rotations of the fan blades. I am experiencing a strange, unfamiliar anxiety.

I finally manage to move my numb body out of the room. As I shower, I try to analyze and grasp the significance of the recurring vision. After each vivid nightmare, I am usually able to somewhat decipher its message. A wise man had once told me that a dream is a combination of events of the past, those that will happen in the future, and specific incidents subliminally collected and stored in one's subconscious mind since one's physical birth. I now tend to believe that a dream may even carry over from a previous lifetime, and even transcend into a future one. But this reoccurring nightmare has so far perplexed me.

I get to Long Beach. I start editing a friend's film project. He has spent his life savings on it. He has so far twice refinanced his house and borrowed from a host of people, including myself, to finish it.

The progress is smooth. He is pleased. At five pm, I get a call from Anthony. He wants me to pick him up an hour later than previously scheduled. I had totally forgotten about Adam's

party tonight. He is a friend, who is throwing a party at a trendy Santa Monica club to raise capital for his next film. He begged me to drag along Anthony. Adam knows Anthony enjoys mingling with “aspiring actresses,” so he stressed that the party would be riddled with available female hopefuls, who could smell money when they sense its presence. In Anthony’s case, the smell is always intoxicating – even from miles away.

However, I have another commitment. I have to go home and participate in my wedding anniversary! I do not look forward to it, but it is an obligation I have endured for seven long years in a row!

I decide to skip the celebration at home. I am not so certain if my decision is based on my intention of possibly helping Adam, or not wanting to make Anthony mad! Due to the nature of the entertainment industry, the so-called “friendships” are brittle, and the people involved are superficial.

It is almost eleven o’clock now, as Anthony and I take the elevator to the nineteenth floor. The super loud music muffles the crowd’s noise. Flanked by his fiancée, Suzanne, Adam glows when he sees us – actually, Anthony!

Adam had prepared his “leading lady” to be overtly friendly with Anthony. I know Suzanne rather well. She never needs any coaching. She has her own agenda. Soon, she will be celebrating her thirty-eighth birthday, with no viable acting career in sight. Adam has told me that once his project is completed, he and Suzanne plan to get married – later this year.

As planned, Suzanne strategically guides Anthony to a reserved table at a tucked away corner, so she can fill him in about Adam’s project.

I cannot help but to notice as she discreetly unfastens yet another button on her top, further revealing her surgically enhanced, braless breasts. Adam conveniently gets out of sight to allow his fiancée to employ her real talent.

I get a glass of iced tea and find a spot to watch the crowd. It fascinates me to see how not even one person is being his or her true self! I sense I am being watched as well. From my vantage

point, and Anthony's demeanor, it seems he is extremely interested in the project. It is hard to believe he is the same person I befriended a few years earlier.

Anthony grew up in Las Vegas and worked as a "shill" in a casino, then tried to outsmart the licensed thieves. After a long stint in prison for "tax evasion," he relocated to Los Angeles for a fresh start. He landed a job as a security guard at an apartment complex where I rented a small unit. We became friends. He kept promising me that once his rich aunt died, he would invest in my projects. I never took him seriously.

For years, Anthony had been working on a "fool-proof scheme" to beat the casinos odds on roulette. His dream was to save up enough so he could go back to his hometown in style, riding in a specific model car, and act like a "high roller" for a weekend.

However, when Anthony was struck with cancer, the once lover of life who saw passing away as a natural occurrence which seemed light years away, was frightened by the ominous shadow of death. Our conversation mostly revolved around his funeral arrangement. As much as I abhorred gambling, I paradoxically had encouraged him to pursue his scheme. One Friday, I arranged for his favorite car, gave him all the cash I had, including the rent money, and wished him good luck. He returned from Vegas with his pockets full. He said he would never forget my gesture as long as he lived.

A few months after his trip, Anthony called to ask me to join him to "rejoice" his aunt's demise. She had indeed left him millions in cash, plus a few prime real estate parcels. Wealth does change people, and Anthony was no exception. We maintained contact, but I no longer considered him a close friend. He had become a filthy rich somebody who occasionally invested in my projects!

My eyes dart to the right and I see Giselle. I quickly brace for an unpleasant encounter. How did she know about the party? Then I remind myself that I had referred her to Adam. A mutual friend had introduced Giselle to me. She had recently auditioned

for me, but she was not right for any parts. I admire those tenacious actors for continuously partaking in the dreadful task of auditioning, only to face rejection. I am surprised no actor has gone postal yet!

Giselle walks up to me and barely says hello, when she spots a hot guy and chases after him. I finish my drink and set the glass on the counter for a refill. My pager goes off; it is the wife. She is probably soaked in alcohol already! I have tried hard to encourage her to stop drinking, but to no avail.

I wonder if any of her previous three husbands, who had respectively fathered her five boys, including a set of twins, had attempted to help her as well. Or maybe that's why they had all abandoned her!

I reset the pager to check the time. It is 11:11 P.M. It has been exactly twelve hours to the minute since I awoke from my nightmarish vision. I begin to experience the same feeling of unfamiliar anxiety.

I fight my way through the drunken bunch toward the public phone. As I grasp the receiver with my left hand, a delicate female hand simultaneously reaches for it, and partially touches mine. I instantly feel a strong current transmitting into my body. I look to my left and face a woman.

I am frozen, unable to talk. In every single way, she embodies a fictional character in my current story: her overall look, contour of her body, her height, length of her hair, especially her alluring eyes – even the slightest of details, like the rapid fluttering of her eyelashes.

How could this be true? How would she react, if I had told her all that? Have I seen her before? Yes, I have. She is the woman in my dreams!

Our eyes lock. I feel an instant mutual attraction, but it could be my imagination, or being wishful. I believe not! Her eyes convey it.

“The battery’s dead,” she states, holding up the cell phone. Her other hand is still touching mine. I release the receiver. She dials. I take a few steps back to allow her privacy.

A hand grabs my right arm from behind. It is Adam. He says he owes me a “big one!” He has been discreetly monitoring the progress between his fiancée and Anthony. Would I do the same if I were in Adam’s situation? I do not know! Each one of us is equally capable of turning into a pimp, a mass murderer, a serial killer, or a rapist, if the right circumstance presents itself. By denying such human capabilities, one only makes oneself more susceptible to the temptation.

I walk back to the bar and find a fresh glass of iced tea waiting for me. I tactfully glance at the public phone, only to find out that the woman in my dreams has disappeared. My heart sinks. I blame myself for not having had the courage to speak my mind, regardless of how she would have reacted.

I am unable to get her image out of my mind – especially the fluttering of her eyelashes. One could regret immeasurably not seizing an opportunity, but it is futile to dwell on it! I join Adam and a few others I know, all huddled in a booth. I observe as he burns his throat with shot after shot of hard liquor. Is he truly enjoying himself, or is the function of the alcohol to subdue the unsettling and depressing thoughts about the coming attraction involving Anthony and Suzanne, inevitably taking place later tonight in Anthony’s oversized jacuzzi in his humongous bathroom? It seems apparent that in one way or another we are all whores in the making, or in denial!

I hear Giselle’s voice again. “Hey, Q, you mind if we joined you?” I look up and instantly all my concerns in life become irrelevant, as I see the woman in my dreams standing next to Giselle! I involuntarily rise.

The same Giselle, whom I tried to avoid earlier, has now turned into a messenger of the universe. Acting upon a timely signal from Adam, two of the freeloaders expediently leave the table to make room for Giselle and the woman in my dreams, who soon sits across from me. She extends her right arm; our handshake is electrifying.

“Hi, I’m Veronica. I’m an actress!” Normally, such a mundane, tacky and pretentious statement would repulse me, but there is

something very special about Veronica, and she knows it. After moments of eye contact, all I am able to muster up is a guarded smile. Every time I look, she is looking back.

I sense that Giselle wishes she had not brought Veronica along, but the irreversible damage is done. Giselle staves off her regret and resentment by stuffing herself with the hors d'oeuvres.

Minutes pass. I am still unable to verbalize. Veronica does not realize her mere presence has revived my reason to live. I contain my feelings. If I express them, she'll think I am just like the rest of the men, who would like to have sex with her. And I do. But not to have sex – to make love to her! Is there a difference? I am not so certain; yet, some women have told me there is!

Giselle hastily gets up to leave, citing an early morning audition. Veronica asks if I would like to have her phone number. I hide my excitement, euphoria. She borrows a pen from me, writes down her information on a piece of paper and hands it to me.

My eyes follow Veronica until she and Giselle get into the elevator. She discreetly throws a look in my direction, just before the doors close – to remind me that the show is over.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 30. The construction work at the house is finally completed. I move back downstairs into my home office, which doubles as my sanctuary. Behind my desk, I find the piece of paper with Veronica's number. I call her. She is waking up. There is a long pause before she responds. She asks if she could come over. I am shocked. She doesn't know me! Why would she want to do that? I tell her it is not a good idea. She is smart enough to figure out that I must be involved, so she invites me to go to her place. Is she a prostitute or an actress? Is there a difference? It doesn't matter. She's the woman in my dreams. I shave and shower at a supersonic speed.

She buzzes me in. She lives in an upscale apartment, minimally furnished. She wears a yellow short dress, which liberally displays her magnificent legs and thighs. I mention her physical similarities to the fictional female character in my

story. She laughs through a sardonic, mocking glare.

I have brought along a copy of the script as the proof. She takes it; sits on a chair, in such a way to expose the essentials between her legs. She has no underwear. I used to wear none myself, but that was a long time ago. She reads the character description while I read her voluptuous body. My mind is filled with lust. She senses it, enjoys it. I am the game, she is the hunter – a perfect scenario!

She accuses me that I wrote the stuff quickly after our initial meeting, as a way to get into her pants. I point to the registration date printed on the title page, which is seven years earlier. She puts down the script, tells me that it does not matter, adding that I have already disappointed her. “Any other guy would’ve dropped everything to follow me around when we met that night, but you showed no interest.” I cite my shyness, but also that I was mesmerized by her presence.

She is satisfied, but wants to know why it took me nineteen days to call her. Has she kept track of days? I explain my reason, citing the construction. She does not buy it and stresses that I am no different from the others – a game player. I resent her comment.

I pick up the script and proceed to leave. She grabs me by the arm. “Where’re you going?” I look at her sternly. “Wait here! Let me go get some pictures, they’re in my car.” She leaves. I have an urge, propagated by natural human curiosity, to know what her bedroom looks like, but my scruples remind me that it would be an invasion of her privacy. She has trusted me by leaving me alone. I sit and wait.

When she returns, I naturally expect to see her headshots, but what she hands me is a stack of semi-naked four by six photos, explicitly showing her private parts in various poses. Could anyone blame me for suspecting that Veronica might indeed be a prostitute? Sadly, she is the woman in my dreams!

We are standing within inches of each other. I feel her body heat; ask if I can kiss her. She nods, keeps her lips sealed. I prolong my action, she responds, our tongues tangle. Minutes elapse.

She pulls away to catch her breath. She is aroused. I can tell by her protruding erect nipples. I am aroused as well. When she presses her body against mine, it makes the matter even worse. Her tone now carries a subtle tinge of sensuality.

“Why did you kiss me like that?”

Instead of verbally responding, which I am unable to, I worship her with my stare.

“Why are you looking at me like this?”

I have no answer.

Confusion reigns; her languishing gaze is so tender, so amorously pensive. “My life’s too complicated,” she utters, then pauses. “I’m involved. I can’t see you.”