

TIM PARKS

SEX IS FORBIDDEN

'Clever, funny and insightful'

Daily Mail



VINTAGE

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About the Book

Sex is forbidden at the Dasgupta Institute. So what is Beth Marriot doing here?

Beth is fighting demons. A catastrophic series of events has undermined all prospect of happiness, leaving her with no alternative but to bury herself in the austere asceticism of a community that wakes at 4am, doesn't permit eye contact, let alone speech, and keeps men and women strictly segregated. But the curious self dies hard. One day, Beth stumbles on a diary in a guest's room and soon finds she cannot keep away from it, or the man who wrote it.

About the Author

Born in Manchester, Tim Parks grew up in London and studied at Cambridge and Harvard. In 1981 he moved to Italy where he has lived ever since. He is the author of novels, non-fiction and essays, including *Europa*, *Cleaver*, *A Season with Verona* and *Teach Us to Sit Still*. He has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He lectures on literary translation in Milan, writes for publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, and his many translations from the Italian include works by Moravia, Calvino, Calasso, Tabucchi and Machiavelli.

Also by Tim Parks

FICTION

Tongues of Flame
Loving Roger
Home Thoughts
Family Planning
Goodness
Cara Massimina
Mimi's Ghost
Shear
Europa
Destiny
Judge Savage
Rapids
Cleaver
Dreams of Rivers and Seas

NON-FICTION

Italian Neighbours
An Italian Education
Adultery & Other Diversions
Translating Style
Hell and Back
A Season with Verona
The Fighter
Teach Us to Sit Still

International acclaim for *Sex is Forbidden*

‘Tim Parks’ novel is impressive, sometimes wonderfully
ironic, sometimes very much in despair and then again
restfully quiet’
ZEIT Literatur

‘Tim Parks’ battle with the wise sayings of Buddha is full of
self-irony and humour’
Deutschlandfunk

‘A moving portrait of a young lady who is finally able to face
her own guilt’
Brigitte

‘Highly entertaining’
Sueddeutsche Zeitung

‘A thrilling novel by a master of the inner monologue who
deals with his themes with great care and irony’
Der Spiegel

‘Tim Parks has developed many of his thoughts into a
fictitious, playful, amusing tale which is ironically
instructive’
NDR1 Radio Niedersachsen

‘A clever reflection on possibilities and limitations of
therapeutic writing’
Tagesanzeiger

‘Tim Parks’ great writing skill is that he gives the reader the feeling of actually listening to someone else’s thoughts. *Sex is Forbidden* is very touching and sensitive though also risqué and funny. The author is so interested in his heroine that his interest is perfectly conveyed to his reader. As Beth has to find out: Sex is no solution but the gurus haven’t got a clue either’

WDR 5

‘That the questions from *Teach Us to Sit Still* appear again in *Sex is Forbidden* is not a mere repetition of moves. By posing them in a novel, Parks creates the possibility of dealing with them on a more emotional level, not as rational statements but as a *cris de coeur* that may be even more thought provoking’

NRC Handelsblad

‘This is a spiritual novel and by far the best I have ever read’

VolZin

‘To be witty and deep at the same time is a combination that only a few writers are blessed with’

Happinez

TIM PARKS

Sex is Forbidden

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Enough of worldly affairs! I shall concentrate my mind in
meditation, dragging it from false paths.

The Bodhicaryāvatāra

Sex is Forbidden

SEX IS FORBIDDEN at the Dasgupta Institute. That's one of the big advantages of working here. Of course I'm a volunteer, they don't pay me, so I don't mean *really* working. I'm a server, officially. Harper says it's unusual for anyone to serve for more than three or four retreats in a row. Which makes sense. Parents don't put you through school to have you spend your life cooking and cleaning for free. They have ambitions for you, they have their plans. It's hard to disappoint.

All the servers here are young, or youngish, between things anyway. I suppose, if you think about it, people are always between things, there's no other way to be. But you know what I mean. Summer jobs, gap years. Sometimes I wonder what things I'm between. I suppose it should be pretty easy to say what the stuff behind you is, how you came to be here and so on. Most people's worries are about the future. But the longer I stay at the Dasgupta Institute the less certain I am about what happened before. In the early days here, when I first sat and tried to meditate, the past hammered on in my head. Everybody gets that. You sit and close your eyes and the thoughts start barking like crazy dogs. They used to, and I haven't forgotten. Just that nowadays I'm not so sure any more what it added up to. Perhaps, churning over and over, the old thoughts have worn themselves out. The torment has faded. Perhaps the truth is I'm not between things at all at the Dasgupta. I'll

live here for ever maybe, or if I go, the Dasgupta will live with me.

This morning I felt very lazy. The gong sounds at four. Servers don't have to start preparing breakfast till six, so I usually sit in the first hour and a half of meditation and leave when the chanting begins. This is definitely the best part of the day. Why? I don't really know. Nothing hurts before dawn. You walk to the meditation hall through the dark. The morning air feels soft, everything's damp and dewy and it's very quiet. If you are one of the first, you'll see rabbits in the grass. There are stars, and the stars are bright here. Chilly. People wear fleeces with hoods and look like monks or ghosts. Everything feels kind of ghostly and on hold. In the hall your cushion and blankets welcome you. The lights are dimmed. You close your eyes and listen to the others coming in, snuffling and fidgeting and coughing. That can drive you mad. A voice starts in your head: Hey, I didn't get up so early to listen to your coughs and farts, thank you very much. I get enough stink cleaning loos. Then you realize these sounds are cosy. They protect you. That's a strange thing. You're going crazy with someone for constantly blowing her nose and you feel protected and humbled too. This person is making a big sacrifice coming to the Dasgupta and trying to change her life. Who are you to be so critical? In the end it's good to feel humbled and say to yourself, Stop bitching about the poor woman's snuffles, Beth Marriot. You've no idea the shit she may be going through, or the bad things she's between.

So I let the coughs and snuffling be. I accept them, like an itch or a cramp, or the crows scrabbling on the prefab roof. Those crows can make quite a racket. I love the morning session. It's the best. But today I felt lazy. When the gong sounded I didn't get up. Something must be changing. *Anicca*. Feel the change. *Ahneechaaa, ahneechaaaa, ahneechaaaa*. I love the way Mi Nu says that word in her singsong Asian voice. Feel the pulsing in your

wrists, Beth, feel the tingling in your cheeks. Change. *Anicca*. Maybe it's the same change that made me pick up a pen. Today, on impulse, I picked up a pen. Writing is another thing that is forbidden at the Dasgupta Institute. Writing and sex.

Not that I ever minded the writing ban. The only rule that really got to me when I first came to the Dasgupta was the Noble Silence. No talking. No singing. For me there are moments when it just seems natural to say right out loud – Good morning, folks! Could you pass the water jug? Hey, you've forgotten to take your shoes off! Or other moments when I *have to* burst out singing, *When the working day is done, Girls just wanna have fun!* I just have to rock and shake and stamp my feet. So silence was hard for me. In fact what's nice about being a server is that you can talk a bit, at least in the kitchen. No, you *have to talk* to get your job done. Though never to the meditators of course. The meditators mustn't be disturbed.

Actually, I tell a lie. The no-smoking rule drove me crazy too. I'd brought three packs to get me through the ten days and smoked them in the bushes at the bottom of the field. People must have seen. But I never finished them. Eight months later I still have half a pack. You'd think this was a major event in my life, chucking smoking. God knows, I'd tried often enough, with Carl on my back. But now I can't even remember when it happened. Meditation does that. We live in a trance at the Dasgupta. An endless *jhāna*. I like that word. One day I found I wasn't smoking. One day I realized I had stopped thinking, of Dad and Mum and Jonathan and Carl and Zoë. I'd stopped thinking of Pocus, stopped thinking of the future. So the Dasgupta technique does work. I had grown in Dhamma. Except now here I am all of a sudden writing this down. Me who never wrote anything but songs in the past. Actually, I still don't mind the no-writing rule. I mean, it was nice smoking when I wasn't supposed to smoke. I didn't stop because of the rule.

And it's nice writing now and knowing I'm not supposed to write. It's made me feel pretty intense this morning. Intensely Beth. Maybe I'm about to switch from being a model Dasgupta server to a crazy, bad-girl rebel breaking all the rules. Then they'll chuck me out and I'll find out what things I've been between all this time.

One of the male servers has a BlackBerry. I was pretty mad when I saw it. Ralph. He's German. Servers get to be around members of the opposite sex when they're cooking. There's only one kitchen and we cook the same stuff for everyone, men and women, new students and old, though there are some things old students are supposed to renounce, of course, like cakes and afternoon fruit. I came in a few minutes early for the breakfast shift and Ralph was sitting on one of the counters bent over the little screen. Ralph is proud of being a server. His cute face goes smooth with devotion. He likes to think of the good he is doing. Without us the meditators wouldn't have the freedom to live in silence, they wouldn't be able to offload their bad karma and *sankharas* and start purifying themselves. Well, first he tried to slip the thing in his apron pocket, then when he saw I'd seen what he was up to, he asked if I'd like to check my email. He wanted to make me a party to the crime. I nearly reported him. Maybe I should have. 'That's really against the spirit of the Dasgupta,' I said. 'You should be ashamed of yourself. What's the point of us creating this pure atmosphere here if you're polluting it looking at porn on your BlackBerry?'

That upset him. It was pretty funny. How could I think he was looking at porn? he said. He has a strong German accent. 'Why do you zink zat?' I was struggling to keep a straight face. 'All men look at porn,' I told him. Which is the truest thing on earth. 'Why did you try to hide it otherwise?'

But if I had reported Ralph, to the Harpers, or Mi Nu, they would have been sterner with me for telling tales than

with him about his BlackBerry. At the Dasgupta each person must obey the rules *because they want to*. So long as they're not disturbing someone's meditation, rule breakers don't need to be reprimanded. I suppose I could have made out that Ralph was disturbing me, but I'm not sure a server counts. As an old student, a server is supposed to be above being disturbed. Otherwise why did we learn the method? Still, it *does* disturb me. It itches, thinking of him having access to the net, thinking of what it would be like to open my email again. Or Facebook. Christ. Perhaps now I've got pen and paper I could write an anonymous note. RALPH HAS A BLACKBERRY. HE SURFS FOR PORN. Perhaps now I've started writing, I'll start smoking again too. I could finish what's left of that last pack. Then Ralph could report *me*. I'd let him get a whiff of smoky breath while we were scrubbing carrots. They'd ask me where I got cigarettes from, since I haven't been out of the grounds for months. I'd confess and say I was sorry. To Mi Nu maybe. Mi Nu Wai. I'd like to have a reason to confess some stuff to her. I could tell her I skived off to the pub some nights. But I don't think Ralph would report me. Ralph likes me. He's always there to help scrape the plates and pull the gunk from the plughole after lunch. Perhaps he let me see his BlackBerry on purpose. Ralph likes me, but he's too young, too sweet, too *German*. I never went for sweet boys. There must be dozens of more attractive men here. And women for that matter. It's a good job sex is forbidden at the Dasgupta. Maybe there are good reasons for forbidding writing.

I didn't go back to sleep again when I stayed in bed. The others got up with that lovely submission we all have in the morning. They went to meditation. But I lay in bed thinking. After about ten minutes Meredith came back to ask me if I was ill, but since even servers are only supposed to speak when they have to, I didn't answer. Meredith's a chubby kid, rather pretty, I suppose. She has a pretty smile.

She's going to start at Cambridge at the end of summer, so she says. I didn't answer. I didn't even shake my head. Now she'll be wondering what's up or what she did to offend me. Jesus. Why am I so mean? I don't know. I enjoy it. I enjoy being nice and I enjoy being mean. I think Meredith deserves a bit of meanness. She definitely needs to lose some weight. If I ever had a chance of going to Cambridge, I blew it way back.

So I didn't go back to sleep but lay there thinking. It's been a while since I did this. In the past when I lay in bed thinking I'd be planning planning planning, I'd be anxious and excited. I'd be writing songs in my head, sorting out practice sessions, rehearsal space, gigs, emails, the website, money. But when I arrived at the Dasgupta I'd jump out of bed as fast as I could because the thoughts were *horrible*. The moment I woke up my head was pounding. No, that's not right. There'd be one split second of peace before the thoughts came down like an avalanche and buried me. Then I'd curse that second of peace for making the avalanche so much worse. You've got to get over these thoughts, I kept telling myself. Got to got to. You have to kill these thoughts before they kill you. Kill kill kill. The Dasgupta is a great place for killing thoughts. I understood that. I realized at once how lucky I'd been to come here. I'd have died. But those days are gone. They've faded. This morning I just stayed in bed to think about yesterday's find. I wanted to enjoy thinking over something new that's happened, the first in months. Yesterday's find has started me writing. I should be careful.

In one of the men's rooms I found a diary. While the meditators meditate, the servers clean. The male servers clean the men's side and the female servers the women's. Every day the toilets, every other day the showers and the washbasins. Replenish the loo paper, the paper towels, tampons and sanitary pads, replenish the hand soap and the bio powder for people washing their socks and panties.

Fish out the hair blocking the plugs. There are still people who chuck tampons in the loo. I don't mind, the day passes. It's weird how easily you can slip from meditation to washing floors, as if it was the same thing. But we had run out of disinfectant. Of course I'm not supposed to, but I went round to the male side. I hate to leave a job half done and the meditators were all away in the hall. Ralph and Rob were digging weeds from the path. 'Cupboard at the end of the corridor,' they said. 'Dormitory A.'

I got the disinfectant, then, walking back down the corridor, I pushed open a door to see what the men's rooms were like. Why do I do stuff like this? Someone could have been in there, meditating alone, and I would have offended him with my female form. Or even masturbating! You never know with men. Mrs Harper would have a heart attack.

It was a single room, so for someone elderly or disabled, or important somehow. No way I ever had a single room. A suitcase was open on the bed and it was full of red exercise books, which is against the rules. There were pens too, half a dozen biros. I picked up one of the exercise books. Just seeing the handwriting made me feel anxious. It was tall and very slanted, like a strong wind was blowing along the lines, bending the tops of the letters, pushing them towards the edge of the page. I read a few words and knew at once this guy was in serious trouble. *Since evidently you're incapable of deciding who you are you may as well become nothing.* Stuff like that. *Since you've destroyed everyone you've had anything to do with, don't you owe it to them now to destroy yourself?* No, it was more stylish than that. I can't remember the exact words. Or more pompous. Definitely an oldie, I thought. Or maybe not. What do I know? Maybe a pompous handicapped kid or a teacher's pet. One notebook was only half written and the last pages had this week's date and stuff about arriving at the Dasgupta and only realizing when it was too late that he wouldn't be able to get back to the locker where he'd left

his mobile. *No mobile for ten whole days.* I smiled because the same thing had happened to me the first time. Happens to everyone. It's a trick they play. *Why do I always write as if this were for somebody else?* he'd written. That got me weirdly excited.

I took one of the notebooks and brought it back to the female side. Not smart. While the others were in the hall this morning I read it. I mean I flicked through it. The handwriting is terrible and I'm not sure I care that much. Then in the next hour of Strong Determination, when the coast was clear, I took it back, with the disinfectant, before hurrying to the hall. We all have to go to Strong Determination, servers and students alike. It wasn't smart because after reading it I couldn't concentrate on my meditation. Suddenly all the old thoughts and memories were shouting and screaming and stamping their feet again. Suddenly I'm wondering whether all my time at the Dasgupta hasn't been completely wasted.

Total Surrender

EVERY TEN DAYS there is a changeover at the Dasgupta. The vow of silence is lifted before lunch. The meditators chatter like crazy for an afternoon, make their donations while they're still excited and leave the following morning. Retreat over. So if I don't go back to look at the diary for another eight days it will disappear with whoever wrote it and I'll be safe. Another group will arrive and I'll sink back into Dasgupta ways. I've already managed one day. I'm feeling better, my equanimity is returning. I can tell by the tension level in my thighs when I'm sitting. Of course I've no way of knowing who wrote it because I can't be on the men's side when people go back to their rooms. Even then I'd have to be right in the dormitory corridor to see who went to that door or right outside the room when he came to the window to draw his curtains. I don't really know which women are in which rooms. Why should I? There are so many. We don't clean the bedrooms during the retreat, but at the end when you sweep under all the beds it's amazing the stuff you find. Cigarette packs, food wrappers, Cadbury's, Mr Kipling. A brandy bottle once. People look so solemn when they walk to the Metta Hall before dawn with their hoods over their bowed heads but nearly all of them have stuff they shouldn't in their rooms.

'What we are asking of you for the next ten days,' Harper says, when people arrive, 'is total surrender.' It's the only time he actually makes a speech and he keeps it downbeat and straightforward. 'You must put yourself

totally in our hands. That is the only way you will get results.' People look solemn and accepting. They've read the spiel on the website, so it's hardly a surprise. But they all hold something back: a magazine, cigarettes, an MP3, something of themselves to hang on to through ten days of silence. Once I found an anal massager. That upset me. It made me laugh. I showed it to Harper. I get pretty angry when people break the rules. You can see they're exchanging looks when they shouldn't. Noble Silence also means no eye contact, no intimacy, no sniggering. You think, Why should I bother, if they're not going to? But it makes me smile too and I'm glad they do it. After all, I talked a fair bit myself the first ten days I was here. There was a nice French girl in my room who hugged me when I cried and gave me mints. She was sweet and very soft. I forget her name. Carl and I used to talk a lot about giving yourself. He said with love the only way was to give yourself absolutely, totally and completely. That's what love was. I said it wasn't something a person could just decide yes or no. Some people gave totally when they didn't want to and others couldn't give when they did want to and that was the same with music and with anything that needed commitment. You did or you didn't, you could or you couldn't, depending on you, depending on the situation. It wasn't a decision you could take. Now I've started sneaking looks at the men in the Metta Hall wondering which one it could be. Why do I want to know? Two days ago I would have taken refuge in the triple gem. *Buddham saranam gacchami. Dhammam saranam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami.* It was a pleasure just to say those words. I take refuge in the Dhamma. But not now. I'm not going to now. Something has changed. *Anicca.*

Three refuges and also three places on the site where you can check out the men. It's amazing how sly the Dasgupta people are about separating the sexes. When the first-timers arrive, in their cars, or ferried from the bus

stop in the minibus, they have the impression they're walking into an ordinary old farm building. There's a porch and a corridor - everybody is chatting, laughing - then a locker room on the left. You put your things in a locker, like at the swimming-pool, your money, books, pens, phone, laptop. Then when you turn the key, it pops out in your hand, so you don't feel you've lost touch with your stuff. You have the key. You can go back any time. You think.

Next there's a huge room, an old barn it must have been, or cowshed, with rows of tables for eating, and the women go to register on the far right, the men on the left. Then while Harper's saying his piece about total surrender the locker room is locked up and the door leading back to the entrance and the outside world is shut and placed out of bounds. And as he's winding up his speech, wishing everyone a good retreat, two servers quietly unfold a partition wall down the middle of the dining hall between the men's and women's tables and bolt it into place. And that's it. You can't get back to your stuff in the locker room, or out to the road, and you can't talk to the other sex any more. The only way out of the hall now leads to the bathrooms, the dormitories, the meditation hall and the recreation field, all strictly divided into male and female.

Sometimes, when there are couples, someone gets upset. They knew they were going to be split up, but they haven't had time to say goodbye. I remember one pregnant woman getting really hysterical. There's always at least one couple expecting a child, always their first child. They want to feel holy and consecrated. They're in awe about creation. This woman rushed over as we were pushing home the bolts. I quite like rolling out the partition. I always volunteer. She started shouting and banged a fist on the screen. 'Goodbyes are overrated,' I told her.

After this separation there are three places where you can get a look at the men, or more likely see them trying to get a look at you. The wire fence that runs from the

bathroom block to the Metta Hall isn't completely covered with climbers yet. There are gaps. So we're talking about seeing the opposite sex through wire netting and breaks in jasmine and dog roses, you walking, them walking. With a bit of luck you might get a glimpse of a nice hippie type, but mostly it's gloomy, gangly boys or older blokes shambling about with their heads bowed over their paunches. It must be tough for older guys at the Dasgupta. They've had more time to pile up their bad karma and *sankharas*. I bet their thighs and ankles burn like hell through the sittings of Strong Determination. Girls get through their shit younger, I suppose. By thirty I reckon I'll be purified or dead.

Beyond the hall there's another fence dividing the big field, then the wood. There is no ivy or anything on this fence, but the paths are miles apart and the grass either side is left unmown, so it's deep and wet. If you turn your head while you're taking a walk round the field you can maybe see a guy stepping slowly along in his loose meditation pants and shabby top. We're all shabby at the Dasgupta. Or maybe there's someone sitting on the bench at the top of the field looking out across the countryside. People sit and stare without really seeing. But that's about it. Of course, if you pressed on across the field and into the wood, then left the path and fought your way through the brambles to the fence, theoretically you could talk face to face with a man there. I bet some couples do that. If you were desperate you could even climb over and kiss. It's not so high. Couples have to sign a special clause at the Dasgupta saying they won't speak to each other or touch each other for the whole ten days of the retreat. But why am I thinking of this? I shouldn't. I shouldn't be thinking of lovers promising they won't even try to look at each other. What a luxury! Imagine a couple, in love, she's expecting a baby, he's in adoration, and they make a solemn vow not to speak to each other or even look at each other for ten days.

For ten precious days of her pregnancy they will be silent and devout, sitting in meditation and purifying their minds to be ready for the birth of their firstborn. They're quite near to each other, physically – the Dasgupta is not exactly huge – but they don't try to make contact in any way, except of course in their heads they will be sending constant whispered messages of affection and encouragement: I love you, Treasure, I love you, I really do, our baby will soon be born strong and beautiful and I will love him all the more, or her, because she will be our baby, I will love you in him, or in her, and of course both these parents-to-be are safe in the thought that even though they're not actually in each other's arms, the other can't be cheating on them, it's impossible, how could anyone cheat on anyone at the Dasgupta Institute? so for the whole ten days they'll be feeling so pure because they've abstained from talking and touching and at the same time completely secure in the knowledge that the moment they're home, still feeling clean and holy and chattering about all their weird and wonderful meditation experiences, they're going to jump straight into the sack together and make the most loving and delicious love.

I knew I shouldn't have started thinking about this. I shouldn't have started writing. One thing leads to another when you think and write your thoughts down. False empty fantasies, painful formations of the mind, *sankharas*. These couples know exactly what things they're between when they come for their ten days at the Dasgupta Institute. They're between kisses and caresses. No wonder they don't bother with the brambles in the wood. It would just spoil the fabulous time they're going to have when they get their purified selves or non-selves back between the sheets. No condoms since she's already got their baby in her belly. So much for renouncing attachment. So much for overcoming cravings. I knew I shouldn't have started thinking about this. The time Jonathan came back from Australia. God. The

mind is fire. That's a true thing Dasgupta says. Words are sparks. Ideas are fireworks. You light the blue touchpaper and it's always too short. The ideas blow up in your face. But I wouldn't want their happiness. Really. Or their baby. No, I wouldn't. They will let each other down soon enough. Be sure. All of them. They will live in fear of being let down, in horror of letting down. Or both. Love is waiting for betrayal, doesn't matter which of you is guilty, then the turmoil, then the emptiness. So much for equanimity. The guy with the diary knows this. But I don't want their illusions. I don't want to write songs about their illusions, or their disappointments. A song about happiness is always a song about disappointment in the making. The more the happiness the more I hear people crying. I don't want to write about them or imagine them. Or their baby. Mummy and Daddy. Still, I wish them well. I do. I try to. May they be fully enlightened, may they be filled with happiness and sympathetic joy, may their child grow healthy and beautiful in the path of Dhamma. May all beings be happy and peaceful, may all beings be liberated, liberated, liberated.

The third place, I was saying, where you can see the boys is the Metta Hall itself. They're on the left, we're on the right. Seventy mats their side, in rows, all with blue cushions and grey blankets. Seventy mats our side with blue cushions and white blankets, or sort of off-white. With a broad aisle between. The men with their video screen high on the wall up front. Us with ours. Our gazes mustn't tangle when we watch Dasgupta's talks. A man is a distraction for a woman and a woman is a huge distraction for a man. Of course, if you came into the hall a little late for the hour of Strong Determination, then you'd be able to check out all the men in a single glance across the other side as you walked to your place. But my mat is quite a distance from the aisle and I have no excuses for going closer. I like it that way. What do I need to look at men for?

Unless I faked some reason to go and kneel before Mi Nu Wai, some special request.

People coming into the Metta Hall take their shoes off in the porch, men in their porch on the left side, women in our porch on the right. They pad into the hall in socks or barefoot, go to their designated mats, fuss over their cushions and blankets, settle themselves, close their eyes. No one looks around, except the teachers and their assistants. Two male assistants, two female. They are checking us in. They have lists. The recording won't start till we're all in our places. They check your clothing too. I got sent back once because I'd forgotten my bra. That was a long time ago. My T-shirt was tight, they said. I was embarrassed, but pleased too. On the way I stopped in the bathroom to look in the mirror. They were right. You could see the nipples. Anyway, today I glanced up and across to the left for a moment as I was walking between the cushions. But because the teacher's assistants are always watching you, you can't really check out the other sex. You'd be noticed. And without my glasses, what would I see anyway? I'm not going to start wearing glasses to meditate. In the end I don't care who the diarist is. He's another troubled man. A pig or a loser. Maybe both.

When I've settled on my mat the only person I look at is Mi Nu Wai. Meeee Noooo Waaaiiii. She sits up front on a broad, low stool, almost a table, with a white cushion, in loose white trousers and blouse. Her shoulders are slim as a bird's, and when she pulls her shawl around her it's as if her dark hair were the top of a pale triangle floating a little above us. Her back is straight but not vertical, she leans forward slightly, towards the meditators, and her face is upturned in earnest serenity. She is so still, so pale, so timeless, so almost not there that you can't help but gaze at her, the way you stare at something on the horizon about to disappear. I sit and pull my ankles into my crotch. I want to be like Mi Nu Wai. I want her stillness, her ghostliness.

Beth Marriot is too fleshy and fidgety with her big thighs and her big tits squeezed in their bikini top under her fleece. You're a giggle of tits, Betsy M, Jonathan said, a gaggle a giggle a gurgle a goggle a google of tits. I always preferred bikini tops. I don't need support. Just to hide the nipples. Drove him nuts. To his nuts.

Stop.

Breathe.

Observe your breath.

The in-breath, the out-breath.

The left nostril, the right nostril.

Breathing is so beautiful, when the faintest back and forth just tingles your lip.

How does Mi Nu sit so still? In a single move she settles and gathers herself and right away she is still. Not like something turned off or dead, switched on more like, luminous and alive. Her stillness glows like the moon. I can feel it from five yards away. Mi Nu is the moon, leaning over me from her raised seat, pale and bright and still. A faint smile lifts the corners of her mouth. I must become like her. Sometimes I think she is rocking a little, just barely, back and forward, like she wants to sink herself deeper into stillness and silence. Or maybe it's me. I'm in a trance watching Mi Nu. My eyes are half closed. A slow, stoned tenderness wells up in my chest. Then I can't say if it's her rocking, very slightly, or me. We are fastened together, the way your eyes fasten to the moon at night, or the endless stars, on your back on a beach. 'Are you moonstruck or what?' Carl asked. 'What are you thinking about, Beth? For Christ's sake. Talk to me!'

I keep my eyes on Mi Nu. What is behind is behind. I must become like her. I love her black hair spreading on the whitish shawl. She never fusses when she settles. The soft white wool gathers round her and falls still. I love it when she wears her hair in a ponytail. Her skin and shawl melt together, ghostly and softly glowing. The air is a halo

for Mi Nu. She is a cone of light. She is a cone of pale light gathering the room around her stillness. But already the chanting has begun. Only five minutes to go. Mi Nu has tied me to her stillness for a solid hour. I haven't suffered or fidgeted at all. No strong determination required. Only adoration. Her face doesn't respond to Dasgupta's throaty voice, opening the chants. *Buddham saranam gacchami*. Not even a flicker of reaction. The smile floats, bright and quiet. The moon sails through time in quiet stillness. I love Mi Nu Wai.

Then the recording is over and in a single move she is on her feet. The shawl slips from her back. She rises in one quick, slinky move, like a snake from its basket. Not a trace of stiffness. She looks around and grins, pretty sassily actually, and tosses back her hair. Oh, I adore Mi Nu. I adore her flat chest. I want to be like her, sit beside her, eat beside her, meditate opposite her. I want to be on stage and sing with her, bump hips with her. I want to have my periods when she has hers, share the same bathroom, the same bed, share our clothes. I want to smell her breath and tie up her hair for her. Who gives a damn about sick men and their pompous diaries? Who needs their tales of misery and woe? Mi Nu has no story at all. She is a flow of stillness. Not like zinged-up Zoë, popping pills and lining up lovers. All the same, getting to my feet, I cast a glance towards the men. I can't help it. They are stretching their stiff legs and shuffling and groaning. I'd need my glasses to make out much at this distance. A guy with a red bandana. Not him. One hefty oldie has built himself an armchair of cushions. But there are seventy guys over there. I want to spend my life with my eyes fixed on Mi Nu.