

# Mrs. Daswani

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The vomit basin next to the bed is full, dripping through cracks in the floor, onto the black sand of this Arabian Sea beach in Mumbai. The American man lies face up on the rancid mat of newspapers, eyes clenched, springs pressing into his back like a bed of 16-penny nails beneath the thick-skinned man at the circus. Light from candles shows a tiny brown elderly woman with no teeth, sitting on a stool in the squalid hut, failing to notice the flies that have come to celebrate the stench of this wondrous, almost miraculous process. She holds a marijuana cigarette between her dried, smiling lips, pinches it, draws in its smoke. Eleven romance novel-sized pages are stapled together, and she holds them in her tiny spider hands, her skin like a shelled walnut.

The American man is, well, irrelevant.

He is ten hours through the minimum of eighteen, and then there will be another American junkie, another heroin addict who has paid Mrs. Daswani 9,000 rupees to bring him down from heroin addiction with illegal doses of Ibogaine, the same process that can be obtained legally at no less than three clinics in Mexico for five times the cost.

Mrs. Daswani stands and exits through the black tarp door. It's high tide. Debris washes against the front steps: dead fish, busted lawn chair, faded Pepsi-Cola can.

The French newspaper journalist, who has been waiting, approaches, smiles, her bare feet pressing into the sand. She speaks adequate Urdu and asks questions of Mrs. Daswani, which she has paid for the right to do with rupees and a Band-Aid box full of marijuana cigarettes. Her liberal newspaper will run the story in a week, exposing

completely this underbelly of detoxification with anonymity of names and locale. The slow chicken cluck of Mrs. Daswani's voice answers the reporter's questions: *These pages are the book of Genesis. Most seeking the iboga shrub are Christians. Neeta, the boy there, reads to them. Drug is from West Africa. Illegal in U.S. and Belgium only.*

She answers many more questions. Her head is bald, wrapped in a sullied kerchief a female American junkie gave her. It hides a head that resembles a large coconut, a head that lost its gray hair to radiation treatments she receives free in the city because of her poverty, according to public records.

It's dark now after the long interview, after the reporter has left. The American man is not breathing. Mrs. Daswani calls to Neeta, whispers to him through the tarp, hands him candy. Neeta knows what to do, runs through the sand, smiling, plugging his mouth with the candy, his pay for fetching the two men who will exchange dragging away another junkie for two needles of heroin each. As they carry the American man down the beach, across a few abandoned lots to the large burning pit, they smile, heads up, facing the sky. It looks a lot like rain.