

CHAPTER 1

Are You Gonna Go My Way?

International baggage claim in the Brussels airport was large and airy, with multiple carousels circling endlessly. I scurried from one to another, desperately trying to find my black suitcase. Because it was stuffed with drug money, I was more concerned than one might normally be about lost luggage.

I was twenty-four in 1993 and probably looked like just another anxious young professional woman. My Doc Martens had been jettisoned in favor of beautiful handmade black suede heels. I wore black silk pants and a beige jacket, a typical *jeune fille*, not a bit counterculture, unless you spotted the tattoo on my neck. I had done exactly as I had been instructed, checking my bag in Chicago through Paris, where I had to switch planes to take a short flight to Brussels.

When I arrived in Belgium, I looked for my black rollie at the baggage claim. It was nowhere to be seen. Fighting a rushing tide of panic, I asked in my mangled high school French what had become of my suitcase. ‘Bags don’t make it onto the right flight sometimes,’ said the big lug working in baggage

handling. ‘Wait for the next shuttle from Paris – it’s probably on that plane.’

Had my bag been detected? I knew that carrying more than \$10,000 undeclared was illegal, let alone carrying it for a West African drug lord. Were the authorities closing in on me? Maybe I should try to get through customs and run? Or perhaps the bag really was just delayed, and I would be abandoning a large sum of money that belonged to someone who could probably have me killed with a simple phone call. I decided that the latter choice was slightly more terrifying. So I waited.

The next flight from Paris finally arrived. I sidled over to my new ‘friend’ in baggage handling, who was sorting things out. It is hard to flirt when you’re frightened. I spotted the suitcase. ‘Mon bag!’ I exclaimed in ecstasy, seizing the Tumi. I thanked him effusively, waving with giddy affection as I sailed through one of the unmanned doors into the terminal, where I spotted my friend Billy waiting for me. I had inadvertently skipped customs.

‘I was worried. What happened?’ Billy asked.

‘Get me into a cab!’ I hissed.

I didn’t breathe until we had pulled away from the airport and were halfway across Brussels.

My graduation processional at Smith College the year before was on a perfect New England spring day. In the sun-dappled quad, bagpipes whined and Texas governor Ann Richards exhorted my classmates and me to get out there and show the world what kind of women we were. My family was proud and beaming as I took my degree. My freshly separated parents were on their best behavior, my stately southern grandparents pleased to see their oldest grandchild wearing a mortarboard and

surrounded by WASPs and ivy, my little brother bored out of his mind. My more organized and goal-oriented classmates set off for their graduate school programs or entry-level jobs at non-profits, or they moved back home – not uncommon during the depths of the first Bush recession.

I, on the other hand, stayed on in Northampton, Massachusetts. I had majored in theater, much to the skepticism of my father and grandfather. I came from a family that prized education. We were a clan of doctors and lawyers and teachers, with the odd nurse, poet, or judge thrown into the mix. After four years of study I still felt like a dilettante, underqualified and unmotivated for a life in the theater, but neither did I have an alternate plan, for academic studies, a meaningful career, or the great default – law school.

I wasn't lazy. I had always worked hard through my college jobs in restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, winning the affection of my bosses and coworkers via sweat, humor, and a willingness to work doubles. Those jobs and those people were more my speed than many of the people I had met at college. I was glad that I had chosen Smith, a college full of smart and dynamic women. But I was finished with what was required of me by birth and background. I had chafed within the safe confines of Smith, graduating by a narrow margin, and I longed to experience, experiment, investigate. It was time for me to live my own life.

I was a well-educated young lady from Boston with a thirst for bohemian counterculture and no clear plan. But I had no idea what to do with all my pent-up longing for adventure, or how to make my eagerness to take risks productive. No scientific or analytical bent was evident in my thinking – what I valued was artistry and effort and emotion. I got an apartment with a fellow theater grad and her nutty artist girlfriend, and a

job waiting tables at a microbrewery. I bonded with fellow waitrons, bartenders, and musicians, all equally nubile and constantly clad in black. We worked, we threw parties, we went skinny-dipping or sledding, we fucked, sometimes we fell in love. We got tattoos.

I enjoyed everything Northampton and the surrounding Pioneer Valley had to offer. I ran for miles and miles on country lanes, learned how to carry a dozen pints of beer up steep stairs, indulged in numerous romantic peccadilloes with appetizing girls and boys, and journeyed to Provincetown for midweek beach excursions on my days off throughout the summer and fall.

When winter set in, I began to grow uneasy. My friends from school told me about their jobs and their lives in New York, Washington, and San Francisco, and I wondered what the hell I was doing. I knew I wasn't going back to Boston. I loved my family, but the fallout of my parents' divorce was something I wanted to avoid completely. In retrospect a EuroRail ticket or volunteering in Bangladesh would have been brilliant choices, but I stayed stuck in the Valley.

Among our loose social circle was a clique of impossibly stylish and cool lesbians in their mid-thirties. These worldly and sophisticated older women made me feel uncharacteristically shy, but when several of them moved in next door to my apartment, we became friends. Among them was a raspy-voiced midwesterner named Nora Jansen who had a mop of curly sandy-brown hair. Nora was short and looked a bit like a French bulldog, or maybe a white Eartha Kitt. Everything about her was droll – her drawling, wisecracking husky voice, the way she cocked her head to look at you with bright brown eyes from under her mop, even the way she held her ever-present cigarette, wrist flexed and ready for gesture. She had a playful,

watchful way of drawing a person out, and when she paid you attention, it felt as if she were about to let you in on a private joke. Nora was the only one of that group of older women who paid any attention to me. It wasn't exactly love at first sight, but in Northampton, to a twenty-two-year-old looking for adventure, she was a figure of intrigue.

And then, in the fall of 1992, she was gone.

She reappeared after Christmas. Now she rented a big apartment of her own, furnished with brand-new Arts and Crafts-style furniture and a killer stereo. Everyone else I knew was sitting on thrift store couches with their roommates, while she was throwing money around in a way that got attention.

Nora asked me out for a drink, just the two of us, which was a first. Was it a date? Perhaps it was, because she took me to the bar of the Hotel Northampton, the closest local approximation to a swank hotel lounge, painted pale green with white trellis-work everywhere. I nervously ordered a margarita with salt, at which Nora arched a brow.

'Sort of chilly for a marg?' she commented, as she asked for a scotch.

It was true, the January winds were making western Massachusetts uninviting. I should have ordered something dark in a smaller glass – my frosty margarita now seemed ridiculously juvenile.

'What's that?' she asked, indicating the little metal box I had placed on the table.

The box was yellow and green and had originally held Sour Lemon pastilles. Napoleon gazed westward from its lid, identifiable by his cocked hat and gold epaulettes. The box had served as a wallet for a woman I'd known at Smith, an upper-classwoman who was the coolest person I had ever met. She had gone to art school, lived off campus, was wry and curious

and kind and superhip, and one day when I had admired the box, she gave it to me. It was the perfect size for a pack of cigarettes, a license, and a twenty. When I tried to pull money out of my treasured tin wallet to pay for the round, Nora waved it away.

Where had she been for so many months? I asked, and Nora gave me an appraising once-over. She calmly explained to me that she had been brought into a drug-smuggling enterprise by a friend of her sister, who was ‘connected,’ and that she had gone to Europe and been formally trained in the ways of the underworld by an American art dealer who was also ‘connected.’ She had smuggled drugs into this country and been paid handsomely for her work.

I was completely floored. Why was Nora telling me this? What if I went to the police? I ordered another drink, half-certain that Nora was making the entire thing up and that this was the most harebrained seduction attempt ever.

I had met Nora’s younger sister once before, when she came to visit. She went by the name of Hester, was into the occult, and would leave a trail of charms and feathered trinkets made of chicken bones. I thought she was just a Wiccan heterosexual version of her sister, but apparently she was the lover of a West African drug kingpin. Nora described how she had traveled with Hester to Benin to meet the kingpin, who went by the name Alaji and bore a striking resemblance to MC Hammer. She had stayed as a guest at his compound, witnessed and been subject to ‘witch-doctor’ ministrations, and was now considered his sister-in-law. It all sounded dark, awful, scary, wild – and exciting beyond belief. I couldn’t believe that she, the keeper of so many terrifying and tantalizing secrets, was taking me into her confidence.

It was as if by revealing her secrets to me, Nora had bound

me to her, and a secretive courtship began. No one would call Nora a classic beauty, but she had wit and charm in excess and was a master at the art of seeming effortless. And as has always been true, I respond to people who come after me with clear determination. In her seduction of me, she was both persistent and patient.

Over the months that followed, we grew much closer, and I learned that a number of local guys I knew were secretly working for her, which proved reassuring to me. I was entranced by the illicit adventure Nora represented. When she was in Europe or Southeast Asia for a long period of time, I all but moved into her house, caring for her beloved black cats, Edith and Dum-Dum. She would call at odd hours of the night from the other side of the globe to see how the kitties were, and the phone line would click and hiss with the distance. I kept all this quiet – even as I was dodging questions from my already-curious friends.

Since business was conducted out of town, the reality of the drugs felt like a complete abstraction to me. I didn't know anyone who used heroin; and the suffering of addiction was not something I thought about. One day in the spring Nora returned home with a brand-new white Miata convertible and a suitcase full of money. She dumped the cash on the bed and rolled around in it, naked and giggling. It was her biggest payout yet. Soon I was zipping around in that Miata, with Lenny Kravitz on the tape deck demanding to know, 'Are You Gonna Go My Way?'

Despite (or perhaps because of) the bizarre romantic situation with Nora, I knew I needed to get out of Northampton and do something. My friend Lisa B. and I had been saving our tips and decided that we would quit our jobs at the brewery and take off for San Francisco at the end of the summer. (Lisa knew

nothing about Nora's secret activities.) When I told Nora, she replied that she would love to have an apartment in San Francisco and suggested that we fly out there and house-hunt. I was shocked that she felt so strongly about me.

Just weeks before I was to leave Northampton, Nora learned that she had to return to Indonesia. 'Why don't you come with me, keep me company?' she suggested. 'You don't have to do anything, just hang out.'

I had never been out of the United States. Although I was supposed to begin my new life in California, the prospect was irresistible. I wanted an adventure, and Nora had one on offer. Nothing bad had ever happened to the guys from Northampton who had gone with her to exotic places as errand boys – in fact, they returned with high-flying stories that only a select group could even hear. I rationalized that there was no harm in keeping Nora company. She gave me money to purchase a ticket from San Francisco to Paris and said there would be a ticket to Bali waiting for me at the Garuda Air counter at Charles de Gaulle. It was that simple.

Nora's cover for her illegal activities was that she and her partner in crime, a goateed guy named Jack, were starting an art and literary magazine – questionable, but it lent itself to vagueness. When I explained to my friends and family that I was moving to San Francisco and would be working and traveling for the magazine, they were uniformly surprised and suspicious of my new job, but I rebuffed their questions, adopting the air of a woman of mystery. As I drove out of Northampton headed west with my buddy Lisa, I felt as if I were finally embarking on my life. I felt ready for anything.

Lisa and I drove nonstop from Massachusetts to the Montana border, taking turns sleeping and driving. In the middle of the night we pulled into a rest stop to sleep, where we awoke to see

the incredible golden eastern Montana dawn. I could not remember ever being so happy. After lingering in Big Sky country, we sped through Wyoming and Nevada until finally we sailed over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco. I had a plane to catch.

What would I need for my journey to Indonesia? I had no idea. I packed one small L.L. Bean duffel bag with a pair of black silk pants, a tank dress, blue-jean cutoffs, three T-shirts, a red silk shirt, a black miniskirt, my running gear, and a pair of black cowboy boots. I was so excited, I forgot to pack a bathing suit.

Upon arrival in Paris, I went straight to the Garuda counter to claim my ticket to Bali. They had never heard of me. Freaked out, I sat down at an airport restaurant, ordered a coffee, and tried to decide what to do. The days of cell phones and e-mail were still in the future, and I had no idea how to reach Nora; I assumed something must have gotten lost in translation. Finally I got up and went to the newsstand, bought a Paris guidebook, and picked out a cheap hotel that was centrally located in the sixth arrondissement. (My one credit card had a very low limit.) From my little room I could see the rooftops of Paris. I called Jack, Nora's old friend and now business partner in the States. Snide and superior and obsessed with prostitutes, Jack was not one of my favorite people.

'I'm stranded in Paris. Nothing Nora told me is right. What should I do?' I asked him.

Jack was annoyed but decided he could not leave me to my own devices. 'Go find a Western Union. Tomorrow I'll wire you money for a ticket.'

The wire didn't come for several days, but I didn't mind; I wandered Paris in a haze of excitement, taking everything in. Alongside most French women I looked like a teenager, so to

counter this I bought a pair of spidery and beautiful black crochet stockings to go with my Doc Martens and miniskirt. I didn't care if I ever left Paris. I was in heaven, all alone.

When I got off the smoky thirteen-hour flight from Paris to Bali, I was surprised to see my former brewery coworker Billy waiting for me, towering above the Indonesians with a big grin on his freckled face. Billy could have passed for my brother, strawberry blond with bright blue eyes. 'Nora's waiting at the resort. You're going to love it here!' he said. Reunited with Nora in our luxurious room, I felt shy with her in this unfamiliar setting. But she acted as if this were all perfectly normal.

Bali was a bacchanalia: days and nights of sunbathing, drinking, and dancing until all hours with Nora's crew of gay boys, any pretty locals who wanted to help us spend money, and young Euros and Aussies we met in the clubs at Kuta beach. I went to the street market to buy a bikini and sarong, bartered for carved masks and silver jewelry, and walked the back roads of Nusa Dua talking to the friendly locals. Expeditions to temples, parasailing, and scuba diving offered other diversions – the Balinese scuba instructors loved the long-finned, jeweled, and elegant blue fish that had been tattooed on my neck back in New England and eagerly showed me their own tattoos. But the festivities were punctuated by tense phone calls between Nora and Alaji, or Nora and Jack.

The way their business worked was simple. From West Africa, Alaji would make it known to select people in the States that he had 'contracts' for units of drugs (usually custom-built suitcases with heroin sewn into the linings) available – they could turn up at any number of places in the world. People like Nora and Jack (essentially subcontractors) would arrange to

transport the suitcases into the States, where they were handed off to an anonymous pickup. It was up to them to figure out how to manage the transport – recruiting couriers, training them on how to get through customs undetected, paying for their ‘vacations’ and their fees.

Nora and Jack were not the only people with whom Alaji worked; in fact, Nora was now competing with Jonathan Bibby, the ‘art dealer’ who had originally trained her, for Alaji’s business. The tension I observed in Nora derived from how many ‘contracts’ were available, whether she and Jack could fulfill them, and whether the units of drugs would actually arrive as scheduled – all factors that seemed to change at a moment’s notice. The job required lots of flexibility and lots of cash.

When cash ran low, I would be sent off to retrieve money wires from Alaji at various banks – a crime itself, although I did not realize it. Then I was sent on one such errand in Jakarta, one of the intended drug couriers asked to come along for the ride. He was a young gay guy from Chicago who was heavily into Goth but cleaned up well and looked the part of the perfect prepster; he was bored by the plush hotel. During the long, hot ride across the sprawling city, we were transfixed by the gridlock, the cages of barking puppies for sale at roadside, and the human strata that the Southeast Asian metropolis offers. At a traffic light a beggar lay in the street asking for alms. His skin was almost blackened by the sun, and he had no legs. I started to roll down my window to give him some of the hundreds of thousands of rupiah that I had with me.

My companion gasped and shrank back in his seat. ‘Don’t!’ he shouted.

I looked at him, disgusted and perplexed. Our taxi driver

took the money from me and handed it out his window to the beggar. We rode on in silence.

We had tons of time to kill. We blew off steam in Bali beach clubs, Jakarta military pool halls, and nightclubs like Tanamur that were borderline brothels. Nora and I shopped, got facials, or journeyed to other parts of Indonesia – just the two of us, girl time. We didn't always get along.

During a trip to Krakatoa we hired a guide to lead us on a hike in the mountains, which were covered by dense, humid jungle growth. It was hot, sweaty going. We stopped to eat lunch by a beautiful river pool at the top of a towering waterfall. After a skinny-dip, Nora dared me – double-dog-dared me, to be precise – to jump off the falls, which were at least thirty-five feet high.

'Have you seen people jump?' I asked our guide.

'Oh yes, miss,' he said, smiling.

'Have you ever jumped?'

'Oh no, miss!' he said, still smiling.

Still, a dare was a dare. Naked, I began to crawl down the rock that seemed like the most logical jumping place. The falls roared. I saw the churning, opaque green water far below. I was terrified, and this suddenly seemed like a bad idea. But the rock was slippery, and as I tried in vain to edge back like a crab, I realized that I was going to have to jump; there was no other way. I gathered all of my physical strength and flung myself off the rock and into the air, shrieking as I plunged deep into the green gorge below. I burst the surface, laughing and exhilarated. Minutes later Nora came howling down the falls after me.

When she popped up, she gasped, 'You are *crazy!*'

'You mean you wouldn't have gone if I had been too scared to jump?' I asked, surprised.

‘No fucking way!’ she replied. Right then and there I should have understood that Nora was not to be trusted.

Indonesia offered what seemed like a limitless range of experience, but there was a murky, threatening edge to it. I’d never seen such stark poverty as what was on display in Jakarta, or such naked capitalism at work in the enormous factories and the Texas drawls coming from across the hotel lobby where the oil company executives were drinking. You could spend a lovely hour chatting at the bar with a grandfatherly Brit about the charms of San Francisco and his prize greyhounds back in the U.K., and when you took his business card on the way out, he would explain casually that he was an arms dealer. When I rode the elevator to the top of the Jakarta Grand Hyatt at dusk, stepped into the lush garden there, and began to run laps on the track that circuited the roof, I could hear the Muslim call to prayer echoing from mosque to mosque throughout the entire city.

After many weeks I was both sad and relieved to say goodbye to Indonesia and head back to the West. I was homesick.

For four months of my life, I traveled constantly with Nora, occasionally touching down in the States for a few days. We lived a life of relentless tension, yet it was also often crushingly boring. I had little to do, other than keep Nora company while she dealt with her ‘mules.’ I would roam the streets of strange cities all alone. I felt disconnected from the world even as I was seeing it, a person without purpose or place. This was not the adventure I craved. I was lying to my family about every aspect of my life and growing sick and tired of my adopted drug ‘family.’

During a brief stay in the States to visit with my real and very suspicious family, I received a call from Nora, who said that she needed me to meet her in Chicago. O’Hare Airport was known

as a 'safe' airport, whatever that meant, and it was where the drugs were flown. I met her at the Congress Hotel on Michigan Avenue. *What a dump*, I thought. I was used to the Mandarin Oriental. Nora explained tersely that she needed me to fly out the next day, carrying cash to be dropped off in Brussels. She had to do this for Alaji, and I had to do it for her. She never asked anything of me, but she was asking now. Deep down I felt that I had signed up for this situation and could not say no. I was scared. And I agreed to do it.

In Europe things took a darker turn. Nora's business was getting harder for her to maintain, she was taking reckless chances with couriers, and that was a very scary thing. Her partner Jack joined us in Belgium, and things went downhill rapidly. I thought he was greedy, lecherous, and dangerous. And I could see that Nora trusted him far more than she cared for me.

I was scared and miserable, retreating into almost constant silence as we all moved from Belgium to Switzerland. I moped around Zurich alone, while Nora and Jack schemed. I saw *The Piano* three times in a row, gratefully transported to another place and time as I cried throughout the movie.

When Nora informed me in no uncertain terms that she wanted me to carry drugs, I knew that I was no longer valuable to her unless I could make her money. Obediently I 'lost' my passport and was issued a new one. She costumed me in glasses, pearls, and a pair of ugly loafers. With makeup she tried in vain to cover up the fish tattooed on my neck. I was told to get a conservative haircut. Caught in a cold Saturday afternoon rain-storm trying to find a hairdresser who would transform my overgrown blond tresses into something presentable, I staggered dripping into a tiny salon, the fifth I had tried. I had been met

with an arctic Swiss reception in the previous four, but now a soft familiar accent asked, ‘Y’all need some help?’

I almost cried when I saw the fellow who was asking – a sweet young southerner named Fenwick who looked like Terence Trent D’Arby. He took my wet coat, sat me down in his chair, and gave me hot tea and a haircut. He was curious but gentle when I balked at explaining myself or my presence in his salon. He talked about New Orleans, music, and Zurich. ‘It’s a great city, but we have a terrible heroin problem here. You see people just lying in the streets, out of it.’ I felt ashamed. I wanted to go home. I thanked Fenwick profusely as I left his salon, the only friend I’d made in months.

At any time, with one phone call, my family would have helped rescue me from this mess of my own making, yet I never placed that call. I thought I had to tough it out on my own. I alone had signed up for this misadventure, and I alone would navigate it to some conclusion, although I was now petrified that it might be a very dismal end.

Nora and Alaji developed an elaborate and risky scheme to switch suitcases inside the Zurich airport, but mercifully the drugs she wanted me to carry never showed up, and I narrowly avoided becoming a drug courier. It seemed like it was only a matter of time before disaster would strike, and I was in way over my head. I knew I had to escape. When we got back to the States, I took the first flight to California I could get. From the safety of the West Coast I broke all ties with Nora and put my criminal life behind me.