

*A GOOD GIRL'S BAD-ASS
CONFESSIONS*

by
MARIPOSA

(tales of Guatemala and beyond)





How many men does it take to find the meaning of life? Hot flashes light a blazing fire under Mariposa as she sets out on a two-fold quest to understand both Guatemalan NGOs and Latin males. Magical men, married men, manic men... Mariposa rides the relationship roller coaster both at home and abroad until a tragic incident makes her realize that, to get the right answer, you first need to ask the right question.

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Adventures in Guatemala and Beyond

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**A GOOD-GIRL'S
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CONFESSIONS**

Adventures in Guatemala and Beyond

La Mariposa

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Prologue

Apart from a brief fall from grace at the age of thirty-six, I was a good girl for the first fifty years of my life. My rise to badasshood was sudden and, come to think of it, providential. Let's face it, good girl behavior makes for very poor reading.

I don't want to mislead you, dear reader, into thinking that I have a shocking story to tell. Compared to most stories that you read in the newspaper today, I am an angel. I am a badass only because I have dared to step a little out of bounds... and, thank you very much, had a wonderful time. Right now, having swung from good-girl to badass, I've taken time out to see where the pendulum will settle. That doesn't mean that my chakras are all rotating in perfect synchronicity, or that I feel loving kindness towards the jerk who stole my parking space this morning. It means that I alternate between overindulging when my devil takes over, and making up for it by engaging in an extra-long detox yoga session the following day. So, I'm not perfect. Are you? Good for you if you are. Here's a stone to throw. But remember, as my friend Dalia once said, good girls go to heaven. Bad girls go everywhere. So, I've decided to make no apologies for my badass behavior, and love myself just the way I am.

A month ago, I moved back into the house where I was born and raised. It seems odd to have gone back to where I began. An optimist would say I've come full circle. A pessimist would say that I've gotten absolutely nowhere. For me, it's a perfect place and time to step back and sort through the laundry of my life. Hell, maybe I'll even find a pair of matching socks.

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I consider myself to be a very lucky person. I don't have to invent stories. That's probably a good thing because I'm not so sure I could write fiction. In fact, I'm a little embarrassed to even be writing a book. I'm an English teacher, and I know what good writing is all about. I don't know exactly how this book will turn out, but I DO know that it will not be poetic. I'm a woman with a mission and my mission is to make sense of all this recent poppycock and balderdash. And this mission takes my mind off of the fact that I now live in two cramped rooms and eat a lot of canned food.

My friends say I seem to attract events that are worth narrating. I believe there's some truth to this. One attracts what one projects. Of course, I'm not sure how that works in the case of the bi-polar, obsessive and narcissistic personalities that I have met along the way. Hmmmm. We'll ponder that later. But I think that I don't so much attract exciting events, as I've learned to recognize opportunities which take me on a journey of discovery. I'll take Carpe Diem over chronic tedium any day. So I just plunge into whatever life presents to me, then write it all down as it happens.

My ex-lover, current friend Steven is a writer. He was responsible for the fall from grace that I mentioned previously. Now we're just friends. Whenever we meet, he eats up my stories. I know he wants to use them as food for his own writing. I've warned him many times though, that as appetizing as they may seem and as much as I like him... they're MY stories. So bugger off. Still, I'm thankful to Steven for having given me a description of this book. "You need a catchy subtitle," he told me. "How about ... How many men

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does it take to find the meaning of life?" Yes, I thought. Very good indeed.

So how many men does it take? A good many, I must confess...or so it seems. And so, let the confessions begin. Once upon a time, there was a very good girl...

The Problem with Butterflies

"Is it just me, or is it hot in here?" As it turned out, it was just me.

"Hormonal imbalance," my husband muttered in explanation. But while he may have been right about the hot flashes and the recent episode of pharmacy rage over being passed over at the courtesy counter, hormones were not to be blamed for the eventual demise of our thirty-year marriage. God, or Little Bastard, as I affectionately came to call him, was responsible. After all, who makes women's bodies fall apart just when you're getting set to reap the hard-earned benefits of Freedom 55. If this is all there is, I thought, I'd better make some changes... FAST.

My health was lousy. I felt tired all the time. I had developed a capsulitis in my shoulder, had constant stomach pain and headaches. I felt like something was eating me up and that I was imploding. I dragged myself to work every morning, drank coffee just to get the energy to get from point A to B. Even the horseback riding, which was supposed to be my hobby, had become just another chore.

Yet I couldn't quite pinpoint why I was so unhealthy and unhappy. I had a stable marriage with an adoring husband, a beautiful and talented daughter in university, and a good job which allowed me time to do the things that I liked to do. It would have been easier if I my husband had been a gambler or my daughter was shooting up in the washroom, but there was nothing visibly wrong with my life. And the worst part of

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it all was that I felt GUILTY about feeling this way. After all, what did I have to complain about? Nothing.

That summer, my daughter had just turned 19. She had a boyfriend, and that changed a lot of things for me. We'd always done a lot of things together, including traveling. My husband liked to travel, but his main objective during a vacation was to rest. Resting for him meant going to an all-inclusive five star hotel by the beach to SIT SIT SIT.

I don't mind beach vacations, but after two days, I get itchy feet. I like to DO things. Anyway, I was born with a pale glow-in-the-dark complexion which doesn't handle beach frying at all well.

That summer I hemmed and hawed for a month, trying to convince myself that pulling the weeds between the interlocking bricks was a very edifying activity. Until one day, I had had enough of weeds that God damn never stopped growing. I picked up the phone and called Morris, a family friend who still worked at a travel agency at the ripe old age of 80. "Where do you want to go?" he asked me.

"Guatemala," I answered. As it turned out, that decision would change my life forever.

I'd gone to Guatemala three years previously, when my daughter wanted to learn Spanish. Since I would now be traveling alone, I wanted to go somewhere familiar. Besides, I knew where to stay and had kept in touch with my daughter's Spanish teacher, Vanesa. So it seemed like the logical choice.

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I left my weeds and protesting husband behind, and packed my bag. My husband was not too thrilled about my leaving him with all the yard work and cat care, but he wasn't about to go to a third world country where you had to throw your toilet paper in the wastepaper basket.

So I went to Guatemala. I had no particular plan in mind, nor did I really know why I felt so strongly about going.

If I'd wondered before the trip why I was going, I wondered even more once I got there.

Things didn't start out well at all. In typical Guatemalan style, I didn't get the room I asked for. I'd booked a room with Doña Margarita, a Guatemalan woman whose home I had visited the last time in Antigua. What I hadn't realized was that her home was on the bus route. Now forget everything you know about Canadian public transportation and imagine old, formerly yellow Canadian school buses, all painted up with bright swirls, flowers and slogans with a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe hanging from the rearview mirror and two hundred portly men and women squeezed into the vehicle like toothpaste. When the buses pass, the locals anticipate the billowing black exhaust smoke by putting their sleeve up to their faces. The more well-to-do put up a hankie instead of a sleeve. The tourists just choke, which amuses the Guatemalans to no end. And then there's the honking that occurs when drivers disregard the one way sign and both sides get sandwiched in with no way of backing out.

Inside the house, things weren't much better. My host family had forgotten that I was coming, and I didn't get the room I

wanted. Instead I got what looked like a storage room. It was a six by ten cement coffin...or so it seemed to someone like me who tends to be claustrophobic. It was at this time that I adopted an expression that was to become my favorite expression while in Guatemala. "Oh well", I said.

I tried to relieve my fear of the night in the coffin by visiting all the places that my daughter Emilie and I had visited. For those of you who haven't ever been to Antigua, let me describe it to you. Antigua isn't a big town. You can cross it and run around it twice in two hours. Sitting in *el parque* breathing in the perfume of the purple Jacaranda trees, I watched the Guatemalan women approaching the tourists with their bundles of textiles and colourful strings of beads. School had let out for the day, and uniformed adolescents laughed loudly and flirted outrageously around the fountain. An occasional break in the clouds allowed me to catch a glimpse of volcanoes Hanapu or Agua (water), as it is more commonly called, and Fuego (fire). Away in the distance, I could only imagine seeing the peaks of Pacaya and Acatenango.

There was no doubt in my mind why Antigua had been chosen a part of the "*patrimonio de la humanidad*" by UNESCO. I could feel the energy coming from the cobbled stones under my feet. Rocked by earthquakes and muffled by lava, Antigua had long ago lost the title of capital of Guatemala, but its history is crowded with stories about interesting characters like founder Don Pedro de Alvarado, who died in 1541 after falling off his horse, and of his widow Doña Beatriz who died just ten hours later when an earthquake set off a mudslide from the volcano's crater.

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Apparently she'd had a premonition, and had painted the palace black just before the tragic events. Poor woman. When she died, the locals dubbed her the Sin Ventura (Without Luck). I walked past the Sin Ventura Hotel and passed under the Arco de Santa Carolina to the Convento de las Capuchinas, where women with little matrimonial prospects ended up cloistered for a lifetime. I could almost hear their whispered sighs coming through the cracks in the walls of the ruins. Then I nosed around the Bodegona, the local grocery store that sells one of everything but, to everyone's frustration, rarely stocks it twice. Tired of walking, I sat in the garden of Santa Domingo where one night's stay was a month's salary for the average Guatemalan.

By suppertime, I had revisited all the familiar places and ended up at my favorite Italian restaurant. As I sat there, to my great astonishment and confusion, I started to cry. The feeling was overwhelming and, to my great dismay, uncontrollable. By the time the waiter came over with my plate of spaghetti, I was dabbing at my eyes with a very soggy napkin. By the time I'd forced down a couple of bites, I'd given up on the napkin, and a steady flow of tears and mucus was dripping from my chin onto my plate. By now, everyone in the restaurant had noticed my odd behavior, and I was getting puzzled looks from the other diners around me. I was so embarrassed. My poor waiter was squirming, thinking that I didn't like the food and that he would be blamed for it.

"Oh, suck it up," said a voice. I looked around, but there was no one standing anywhere close to me.

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This was to be the first of many conversations with my little angel, the emissary of Little Bastard, as I affectionately called the Good Lord. "Okay, so this isn't the same trip as last time. But you're here now, so what are you going to do?" she asked me impatiently.

Ignoring the looks of the other diners, I swiped some dry napkins from the empty table next to me and scrawled my answer....AZOTEA and VANESA. Tearless and fearless, I determinately walked back to Doña Margarita's, convincing myself I WOULDN'T have that dream that I was buried alive and desperately groping in the dark for the way out. I WOULD find something interesting to do the next day. The voice inside my head sounded like the little engine that could. I know I can, I know I can.

But I couldn't and I didn't. I woke up in a complete panic, my heart beating wildly... and stared wide-eyed at the ceiling for the rest of the night.

Now, there's one thing about me that you must understand, dear reader. I'm very impulsive. But, then again, it usually works for me. So, the following morning, when I saw the free shuttle waiting for passengers going to the Azotea, I remembered my plan, pitched my chai latte in the nearest garbage can and jumped into the van without asking questions. I just knew that was where I should go.

By the way, the Azotea in nearby Jocotenango is a coffee plantation and a riding stable. I had been there with my daughter on my last trip. When I got there this time, there was a very quirky Canadian named Ralph giving a lesson. I

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signed up for lessons on the spot. From that day onwards, I would go every day to the Azotea to take an early morning riding lesson then go back to Antigua.

With the first name crossed out on my napkin list, I now decided to get in contact with Vanesa, the second name on the napkin. Vanesa had been my daughter's Spanish teacher, and I'd kept her number. So I called her, and arranged to take a Spanish lesson every day at 4 o'clock. With this cozy little routine now established, I stopped having anxiety attacks in the middle of the night. "That's the spirit," said my little angel, patting me on the back. Her smile quickly changed to a scowl, however, when Alex arrived on the scene.

Looking back at it, the whole experience now seems funny in the extreme. What was I thinking? I realize now that Alex could have been Roberto or Jesus or Pablo, but Alex it was because he just happened to be at the right place at the right time. Alex was the taxi driver who drove me to the Azotea every morning for my riding lesson. After a couple of days, he offered to drive me to visit the towns around Antigua. As travelling outside Antigua had its dangers, I thought it was a good idea. A poor Guatemalan with no hint of a future and a North-American woman in mid-life crisis. You can guess what happened.

To be perfectly honest, Alex was no great shakes. When I look back now, I wonder how I could have had anything to do with him. Had he lived in Canada, I'm sure that I wouldn't have looked at him twice. For one thing, he was short, shorter than me. He had a nice face, but it looked like someone had used a

bowl to cut his hair. Come to think of it, they probably had. He didn't have a penny to his name. I now suspect that he was a boy toy for the American he worked for. He'd told me that he lived at an American's place in exchange for maintaining the house...and for OTHER SERVICES which he provided. The man had even bought him a taxi. Hmm. Suspicious, I say, but then again nothing about Guatemala surprises me anymore. In fact, nothing about human beings surprises me anymore.

So, everyday Alex would drive me to the Azotea and pick me up after my riding lesson. We visited towns around Antigua, mostly markets. We went up to the cross on the mountain overlooking Antigua. I still don't know who put the cross there or why. I asked Alex, but he just shrugged and gave me a look that said, "Who cares anyways?" As you may have guessed, Alex wasn't very educated. I frankly didn't care.

Admittedly, it must have seemed odd to the rest of the sane world why I would be interested in someone like Alex. It's the oddest thing, but something happens to me when I go to Guatemala. I drop all pretenses and just BREATHE. Back home, I wouldn't dream of going to a park with the express intention of talking to a complete stranger. But one day, after a day of walking around Antigua briskly and purposefully, I decided that my feet hurt and that, in any case, no one CARED who I was or where the hell I was going. Guatemalans are remarkably forgiving when it comes to gringo behavior. If they don't understand your behavior, they just shake their heads and think it's got something to do with the way things are in our culture. This "oh whatever" attitude is very liberating. That, and the fact that so many people go around

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with guns hanging out of their back pockets makes Guatemalans mind their own damn business.

Also, when it takes all of your effort to juggle the past tense in your head while maintaining the conversation, you don't need to talk about anything too TOO deep. The inability to communicate is, I find, a great equalizer. So I found myself accepted and on equal terms with Alex.

My friends gasped when I told them Alex's age. By the way, he was 27. Of course, my friend Dalia didn't gasp, she just squeezed my arm and said "good for you". In Guatemala, no one seemed to give it a second thought. After all, the Latino attitude towards sex is very, how should I put it, relaxed? "What has age got to do with it?" they say. It's all about enjoying the moment. Hmmm. What the poor gringas don't realize is that after the moment, there is another moment, and another and another...all of which they enjoy with different women. But more on that anon, when I talk of my experience with a MARRIED Latino. Oh ho! Now there's a real eye opener.

To get back to the story...Some time during the second week, I took Alex up on his offer to go to Nirvana. Sounded good to me when he said it. To my dismay, Nirvana turned out to be a Macadamia plantation. I did enjoy the visit, especially when I got to meet the eccentric ex-pat who had invented the wheel in Macadamia production. I'm not kidding; the man had rigged up old school bus tires to a machine which sorted the big nuts from the little ones. Of course, the dirty old American man asked every female visitor if she wanted to see his nuts. Ha ha ha...sigh. Not to mention that he was

inordinately proud of his “throne”. Well, when you live so far from civilization, a toilet in Nirvana is as close to heaven as you can get, and I guess he knew it because he charged everyone who wanted to visit it.

Nirvana was the start of things between Alex and me. He said later that seeing me react to the free macadamia facial massage had made him look at me as a WOMAN. I don’t know what he thought I was before that moment, and I’d really rather not know. Anyways, by the time we got back to Antigua, it was dark and somehow Alex’s lips slipped off my cheek and landed on my mouth. We did a little frantic kissing. Alex was not terribly gentle. He bit my lip so hard that I cried out in pain. “You don’t like it?” he asked me, perplexed. Luckily it was mosquito season, and I used this excuse the next day to explain my hugely swollen lip.

But Alex was not the only one stirring things up. One day after class, Rebecca told me about how tough it was for young girls in Guatemala. She told me about how she raised money to help girls go to school. “Isn’t school free?” I asked her in wide-eyed innocence.

Rebecca scoffed, “Sure, if you can pay for the books and the shoes and the uniform. It costs a family about \$250 US per year for each child...and most poor families have several kids. The average wage is about \$5 a day. You do the calculations.”

I did. It was amazing there were any kids in the school at all. “So I guess a lot of kids just don’t go.”

“Exactly. And a lot of these kids are girls, especially the eldest, because someone needs to take care of the other kids when

the mother goes out to work. It's even worse now because a lot of women work as cleaning women or in the *maquitas* (sweatshops) where they work ten hours a day for six days a week and they can't bring their babies like they used to when they worked in the fields. The frustrating thing is that the future of Guatemala is in the hands of women, but their hands are tied. As for the men," she said disdainfully, "all the men do is drink their salaries and beat their wives when they try to get a job. Well, not all men, but A LOT. So, education is the solution." The rising tone of her voice was a measure of her indignation. "Did you know that Guatemala has one of the lowest literacy rates in Latin America? Did you know that in Quiché, only 16% of girls get to grade 5? The numbers are disgraceful. This has to change. That's why I'm trying to keep the girls in school."

Now while I consider myself a kind person, I am definitely NOT terribly maternal. I've yet to feel the urge to coochicoo a baby in a stroller. So, although I admired Vanesa's dedication to this cause of helping children, I felt it was her cause, not mine.

So it was hard to explain why I felt an urge to make this situation right or at least better in some way. I fought the urge, believe me. And when Vanesa told me that her dream was to start a daycare in her home town of Santa Maria, I told myself to go home and take two aspirins. "No...no...no. You're NOT getting involved," I told myself. It didn't help. I was stuck on the idea.

I guess I'll never figure out why I just couldn't let the idea go. But as someone later told me, maybe I got involved because,

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like Everest, it was THERE, in my face. In typical North American style, I thought it was something I could FIX. Of course, now I recognize that although well-intentioned, my attitude was really quite arrogant, and maybe that's why the universe ran so much interference in the course of the events that followed.

So when I took the plane home two days later, my savior schema had overcome my fear of involvement schema, and I knew that I would help Vanesa with the daycare. I was also convinced that I would see Alex again, even though all that I had to remind me of him was a sore lip, a bad picture of him at the Macadamia plantation, and a promise to write. Now every time I see that picture, I laugh. With his funny hair and the hem of his jeans spilling over his running shoes, he looks like an orphan. Never mind, to me the project was the WAY and he was The ONE.

Now you might be asking yourself if I had any regrets when two months later, my husband accidentally found Alex's picture AND the letter he'd written to me. The letter was in Spanish, but my husband was smart enough to know that the letter was not about Guatemalan flora and fauna. Oh go ahead, say it. What the hell were you thinking, girl????

In fact, I wasn't thinking. I was imagining that I would be freed; I would be transformed, etc. etc. etc. In retrospect, it was just an excuse. It could have happened with anyone. That's a terrible thing to say, and it was a terrible thing to do to my husband. I admit it. What can I say? I lost my mind, but thank God I did because I was slowly suffocating, had been

suffocating for the past fifteen years ever since I'd had an affair with a theology teacher by the name of Steven.

My reaction was swift. "I want out," I told my husband. The words came out faster before my brain had the time to process them. "I want a divorce."

My husband ignored me. He told me that IT would pass. When he saw that IT didn't, he told me, "You know what the problem is? You've changed," as if change was the worst evil to hit humankind since the bubonic plague. "Yes, I've changed," I answered, "and you haven't. That's the problem."

I've always thought that it's a wonder that anyone stays married at all, considering how much each of us travels in a lifetime. Even the greatest efforts to remain on the same track sometimes aren't enough, simply because life often takes us in different directions. I suppose that's what happened to my husband and me. But I must admit that we didn't simply drift apart. In a way, we both knew it was happening, but were too afraid to open up the discussion. By the time we did, it was too late. But I'm convinced now that talking wouldn't have solved anything. It just would have made the inevitable happen earlier.

Let me tell you a story. When I was about 35, I met Steven. My husband and I were living in Ontario and we had a seven-year-old. Steven had two boys a few years younger than my daughter. I remember perfectly well the first time I saw Steven. It was at a supper organized by the preschool where our children went. He was swing-dancing with his wife Wilhelmina (yes, I know. It was quite the name. Her parents

were Dutch). At least Steven was swing dancing. She was just being swung around. She was no dancer.

I found Steven handsome and I wondered what had possessed him when he had married portly, down- in -the-mouth Wilhelmina. I couldn't help but think that such a name was the stuff of porn stories called Wicked Willy (that was what her friends called her) does Willy, or Wanton Wilhelmina Whacks. In any case, her name was yet another of God's little jokes for she bore absolutely no resemblance to a star of any type. Poor Wilhelmina. Her parents must have hated her to give her a name like that. Of course, she was born out East. Maybe they have a strange sense of humor in the Maritimes, or maybe they had the bends at the time.

Steven was far too handsome for his own good. You see, he was a theology teacher, and theology teachers are supposed to be short, paunchy and bald, right? Wrong. Steven was tall, fit and very well endowed...with a good head of hair. What DO you think I mean? Shame on you. Besides, I'd had no opportunity to check out any other endowments...yet.

So here we were both of us, still relatively young, just skipping along life's happy highway. Everything was just hunky- dory. We were both married with children. He was teaching Sunday or Monday school while I was making the lovely church ladies sweat in my aerobics classes held in the basement of the church. Nothing happened when Steven took my morning classes at the church, or even later when he decided to take my night classes. Then one day, watching the couples dancing in the social dance class after my class, Steven told me how he had always wanted to take ballroom

dancing, but that Wilhelmina wasn't interested. "Oooo, I always wanted to take classes too," I said, cooing like a silly schoolgirl. Stupid, stupid me.

Well, dear reader, once again you've jumped ahead a few chapters. What do you think happens when a handsome man and woman find their hips locked together in a sexy Latin move, doing the same sexy step over and over again? It was like foreplay against the washroom wall. Not that I ever did that...of course.

Right. Well, believe it or not, I really didn't expect anything would happen between us. I'd told my husband about the class, but the minute I mentioned a theology teacher, he thought the same as me...that he was short, paunchy and bald. I should have questioned my own motives, however, when Steven and I decided to take a level 2 class in Montreal, and I didn't tell my husband. Actually, as I later found out, Steven hadn't told his wife either. I never actually LIED; I just omitted to tell my husband. Is that so wrong? I ask you. Okay, so it was, so sue me. And yes, I will admit, this DOES sound a little bit like Clinton saying he never had sex with Monica. Anyways, I didn't correct my husband's assumption that I was out teaching. We kept going to Montreal every Thursday night after that, even when the course ended. It was summer, and we'd go to a terrace on Prince Arthur, drink a pint of beer and laugh and talk about all sorts of things. And maybe, it was wrong, but oh my God, what fun. To this day, I still haven't found anyone I could talk to as easily as Steven. I saw nothing terribly wrong with this picture, since I was still telling myself that we were just friends. Nor did I wonder why I just couldn't wait for Thursday to arrive.

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Readers, remember to warn your daughters about those friendly good night left to right kisses. Sometimes, you get the side wrong and your lips miss and get stuck in the middle. I'm sure it's happened to you. Of course, if it happened with dirty old Uncle Bob the family drunk, your lips surely retreated and ran for cover fast. If it happened with a handsome man, however, your lips probably felt like they had developed a mind of their own, gravitating towards the other pole like magnets. When that happens, things just move right along... if you know what I mean.

This is what happened to us one night in the car when I dropped Steven off. When the kiss was over, we backed off from each other, stared at each other in total wonder, and went right back to kissing, but this time with greater passion.

Okay, you're right. Even if such behavior could be excused on the grounds of fate or temporary insanity, we could and should have turned and walked away at this point. But I couldn't walk away. The kiss had turned my whole life upside down.

From that moment on, I was lost. As the days passed, I became more and more obsessed with Steven. I knew that I thought about him far too much and in ways that told me I wanted him as more than as a friend. Before the kiss, I'd been safe. When the fantasy became real, I knew that I was in BIG trouble. I had never felt this for anyone, including my husband. This was Passion. So what was a girl to do?

A multitude of thoughts are probably going on in your head right now. Maybe you are wondering what was the worst part

of all this... the fact that we were married, the fact that we had children or the fact that Steven was a man of God? If you have never strayed, it may seem immoral to you. Frankly, we were too far gone to care.

We knew that nothing could come of our relationship, or at least my head knew this. My heart was another story. But Steven was not just a regular guy, he was more Catholic than the Pope, and he couldn't let God down, even if he might end up hurting himself and the people he loved. Nor could I leave my marriage and my daughter. So I loved Steven secretly and in constant frustration, until I became so obsessed I literally got close to losing my marbles. I tried to keep up the good girl façade. I made love to my husband, crying silently against his shoulder because he wasn't Steven and because I knew that what I was doing was wrong. I thought about Steven in the morning when I woke up, and he was the last thought in my mind when I fell asleep.

This state of affairs lasted a year or more. We stopped seeing each other for a few weeks at Christmas, but I was hooked, not only on Steven but on the excitement. He had become an addiction. No one knew about our relationship, although I'm sure a lot of people suspected it. We made love in Steven's house on the couch, because I didn't want Wilhelmina's wedding picture in my face when we made love. We made love in the park, in the car, anywhere we could find...and we found a lot of places. We even got away on weekends every so often, on the pretense of visiting friends.

We were convinced that neither Wilhelmina nor my husband knew what was going on. You have to understand that my

husband was, and still is, a very nice person, and I really didn't intend to hurt him. I've learned since that when the truth does come out, deceit just makes things worse. But I didn't know that then, or at least, I didn't want to admit it.

I told Steven one day, "wouldn't it be a twist of fate if your wife was also having an affair and you didn't know it?" We'd both laughed. It was an outrageous thought. Wilhelmina seemed so entirely devoid of passion. Yet, according to Steven, she was sexually quite easy to please. "Okay, that's just too much information," I had told him.

I was incredibly jealous of Steven. I knew Steven still made love to Wilhelmina, as I was making love to my husband, but it irritated me that he still might actually LIKE doing it. As for other women, I kept watching Steven to see if he was looking at other women. I was furious one day when he commented that a young Latino dancer was really sexy. My obsession actually became a little dangerous. One night, when he went out to a dinner without me, I actually went into his house and popped all the balloons left hanging after his son's birthday party. But that was after his wife left him...Oops, I've let the cat out of the bag.

Yes, incredibly enough, Steven's wife DID leave him, so the joke was on him...on us, actually, because the guilt Steven felt eventually killed our relationship. How ironic that when we were both finally free, we couldn't be together. Here is the weirdest twist in the story, however. Wilhelmina left him for another WOMAN.

La Mariposa

Are you back on your chair? Let me tell you, it knocked both of US flat on our unfaithful little asses too. Yet, once I got over the shock, I was secretly thrilled. At least now she was out of the way.

Years later when I could examine things dispassionately, I would understand Steven's reaction, but at the time I was totally bewildered. Instead of turning to me, Steven seemed to turn away from me. What I didn't know was that the more you chase after love, the more it runs away from you. The more I clung, the harder he resisted. The more he resisted, the more I clung. If I had only stopped running for a moment, I might have seen this, but I was in a panic. The result was that I constantly felt like the victim of the prankster who, with an invisible string, keeps pulling away a \$100 bill. The little prick. I didn't know who the little prick was, but he was surely related to Little Bastard. I realized that I had only myself to blame, and that Little Bastard actually had had nothing to do with it.

What seems glamorous from afar usually loses its shine when you see it close up. In a new relationship, you see only the best. Once familiarity sets in, you begin to see only the worst. Socks rolled up in a ball under the bed are cute... for about a day. So when Steven moved into his own apartment, I was happy...until I suddenly remembered that Steven had KIDS. Oh my God, where had they suddenly come from? And Wilhelmina had not just LEFT, she had left BEHIND the kids because, as she explained, boys are better off with their father. Somehow, kids had never entered into my vision of what life would be like with Steven.

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The worst part was that Steven didn't seem to want my help with anything, even with the kids. Frustrated, I started to do something that I had never done before. I began to nag. I chased, I suspected, and I nagged. Our final, last-ever argument was about chocolate chip cookies, if you can believe it. Steven suggested that maybe we should start doing everyday sorts of things, so he suggested we make chocolate chip cookies. He liked them hard. I liked them soft, so I put extra water into his batter without asking. Steven had a fit. I realized later, when it was too late, that it wasn't about the cookies at all. It was about Steven needing to prove to himself that he could survive on his own because deep down, he was confused, hurt, and very, very scared.

You are probably wondering what was happening at my house during this time? Well, things weren't going well there either. My husband knew that something was wrong. He had his suspicions, but he wasn't quite sure what was going on. I knew that he didn't deserve my infidelity, and I had my daughter to consider, not to mention very traditional parents who would be devastated to find out that I was leaving him. Then one day, I couldn't stand it anymore. I felt that I had betrayed everyone, and I could no longer live the lie. So, I found an apartment close to my daughter's school, and I moved out. I will never forget how my husband looked as he wordlessly watched the moving truck back out of the driveway. He was the very picture of misery, poor soul.

As for my family, it was months before my parents would cross the threshold and enter my apartment. At the time, I felt that they had totally abandoned me when I needed them most. Now, I understand that you don't just divorce a man,

you divorce two entire families. My parents told me that I was crazy; they claimed that I had broken the link in the family chain. I suggested that they disown me and adopt my husband if that was the way it was. My mother-in-law, a normally soft spoken woman, apparently let loose a string of unladylike invective when my friend Christine saw her once day at the grocery store. Christine, bless her little heart, never told me exactly what she said, nor do I want to know. Had I known how everyone would react, I would have left the country with no forwarding address instead of moving to a nearby apartment. What I understood even less was how my parents could possibly have claimed that they were acting out of love and concern for me. If this is love, I thought, I would appreciate if they could love me a whole lot less.

But like they say, deceit is a very weak foundation on which to base a new relationship. So one day, Steven told me that things weren't going to work. "I just can't get over the guilt of what I've done," he told me.

"How about me?" I cried, his words ringing in my ears. It seemed such bitter irony, and yet maybe I deserved this. I had done something bad, bad, bad. But I would have preferred if God had struck me down with lightning right then and there. Everything had crumbled and I let out a wail that must have sounded like the dying cry of a wildebeest. Then I left and walked home in the pouring rain. Two months later, not caring about anything anymore, I went back to live with my husband. He very generously said, "We both made mistakes. Let's just move on." And for fifteen years, we never spoke about what happened and everybody was happy, everyone except me, that is. Since then I've learned that guilt

is no better a foundation than deceit, and sooner or later, if unexamined, it makes the whole building come tumbling down. That's why, dear reader, fifteen years later, when the floodgates were torn open by Guatemala, the building was too weak to take the rush of water. Our marriage simply toppled over.

But back to Guatemala. The cat out of the bag about Alex, things obviously went from bad to worse at home. I was already sleeping in a separate room while we "thought things over". The truth was that I'd already arrived at my decision. In my mind, we'd let things go too far for us to be able to go back to where we were before. My husband wanted me to stay, yet he kept telling me that he'd lost all trust in me. Besides which, the daycare idea was growing insistently in my head, and I knew there was something that I had to do about it. I just didn't know what. So, much to my husband's dismay, I booked another trip to Guatemala.

I was accompanied by a fellow teacher this time. Her name was Sylvianne, and she was a theatre teacher. One day when I was talking to her, she happened to mention that she wanted to go to Costa Rica to learn Spanish. I told Sylvianne that I was going to Guatemala and suggested that she take courses there instead.

I had told Sylvianne about what was going on with my marriage. I also told her about Alex. I had arranged to have Alex pick me up at the airport. It's funny how time AND romantic hogwash can play tricks on you. The Alex that came to get me at the airport didn't quite measure up to the Alex in my mind. I was imagining how Alex would react to seeing me

again. When he waved to me at the exit, I noticed with a sinking heart that he looked just like all the other short Guatemalans holding up signs with the name of a passenger or a shuttle service. Except that the others looked more eager to see me. With my blond hair and designer luggage, I was holding up my own invisible sign that said “Hello boys, Rubia con Dinero coming through”. In retrospect, I realize that Alex looked more bored than happy to see me, but I convinced myself that his lack of enthusiasm was due to Sylvianne’s presence. Dumb indeed I was, or at least naïve. Sigh. Sylvianne was very good about it all. She must have wondered what in God’s name I saw in the young disheveled Guatemalan who came to greet us at the airport.

Sylvianne was staying with Doña Margarita for the entire three weeks. I was staying at a nearby hotel just for the weekend. Seeing that my marriage was now totally messed up anyways, I had decided to throw all caution to the wind and start up something with Alex. That’s why I’d booked a room at the hotel. Doña Margarita was a fervent Catholic, and I didn’t want to upset her good-girl image of me.

Alex dropped me off at the hotel first, and I asked him how long he was working that day. He told me that he had to work until eight, but that he would come over to see me then. I rested for an hour then got dressed for the evening. I ordered a pizza and lit some candles around the room, hoping to give the room an air of romance.

I can’t help but laugh whenever I think of that evening. At the time, however, I didn’t find it in the least bit funny.

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I only realized how idiotic the whole episode had been after I got back, when I told Dalia what had happened. I told her everything that had happened, even to the smallest, and I mean SMALLEST detail.

"So what happened?" she asked me excitedly when I came back from my trip.

I sighed. "Things did not quite go as I expected."

"What do you mean?" she asked

I looked around to make sure no one was within hearing distance. "It was an interesting evening."

"How so?"

I was laughing so hard, I would hardly get the words out. "Well, to start with, he was small."

"WHAT?" Dalia loves anything out of the ordinary. "How small?"

"SMALL," I told her. I indicated just how small by forming a two inch gap between my thumb and index finger. "I kid you not."

"Oh no," she said shaking her head. "That's just TOO funny."

"Well that was just the start. Picture this. Alex comes in. We eat the pizza together, we talk a bit. It was all OK, but he didn't exactly seem thrilled about it all, and then I give him the t-shirt I bought for him, you know the Roots one I bought? He looked so bored that I asked him if he was happy

to see me. That's when he started kissing me...which led to the small surprise...which led to the soccer game...

"What soccer game?" Dalia asked.

"The soccer game that everyone and their uncle was watching in Antigua. You know what a national obsession THAT is."

Dalia nodded.

"Well, Alex turns the TV on, and I actually had to ask him to turn it down. Can you imagine? And meanwhile, he is taking off his clothes. So I take off mine and then I see his mini thing, and I almost burst out laughing. But I say to myself, what the hell, I might as well go through with this. I've already gotten in trouble for it anyways.

"So, what was it like?"

"You won't believe it. Sex is just so much trouble sometimes. Lately I'd rather eat a good supper...less effort and generally more satisfying. I felt like asking him, 'Is it in yet?' And THEN guess what? In the middle of things, his cell phone goes off and he actually ANSWERS it. Of course, he pulled out first then went back to work when the call was over. The best thing I can say about it was that at least the whole business didn't last long."

Dalia was doubled over with laughter. "That is just TOO TOO funny. I can just picture the TV on and the phone ringing and the SMALL PENIS," she blurted out, loudly enough for the whole restaurant to hear. When we saw the pursed lips of the

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couple next to us, we both started laughing. Actually, the woman had the pursed lips. The man, on the other hand, looked intrigued...that is, until his wife gave him a smoldering look that sent his head into the soup bowl.

So that was my first romance...It all ended the next day when Alex told me that if I wanted him to go out with me on New Year's Eve I would have to compensate him for the time he lost. After all, it WAS one of the biggest nights of the year for a taxi driver. WHOOSH. My fantasy of a romantic New Year's Eve went down the toilet. It seems stupid now, but at the time, I was devastated. Thank the universe for Sylvianne who, in her gentle way, made see how foolish I had been to expect anything more from a poor uneducated taxi driver who lived from tourism and blond tourists like me. I say this because, unbeknownst to me, it was a known fact that older women went to Antigua to get a young Latin lover. I was so embarrassed when I found out. How could I blame Alex for assuming I just wanted a night of uncomplicated sex? Poor soul. In fact, once my ego got over the rejection, I realized that Alex could easily have pulled the wool over my eyes, big time, but he hadn't. He'd simply told me the truth, that it was about sex and money. Thank you, Alex. Thank you, Sylvianne. Thank you the angels that watch over me and prevented me once again from falling into a manhole while I had my head up in the clouds.

For this I 'd ended a thirty-year marriage? The whole thing seemed ludicrous, but I'd made my bed and felt that now I had to lie in it. I'd gone to Guatemala to be with Alex and ended up alone in the town square on New Year's Eve, watching the fireworks or rather, dodging the fireworks.

La Mariposa

Guatemalans aren't terribly safety conscious and they have set more than one unhappy tourist on fire. *So here you are*, I said to myself as I watched the fireworks wiz past me. *One husband and one taxi driver down*, and as fate would have it, many more men to go in the next five years.

Did I regret anything? No, dear reader, I regret to inform you that I didn't and still don't. I may have gone a little crazy, but for the first time in a long time, I felt ALIVE. And though these pages may seem to be rather saturated with men, men weren't really the issue. Men were just what happened to me once I decided to open myself up...if you pardon the pun. It that was the definition of what my husband and my family called a "crisis" then so be it.

Of course, while this tingling sensation of life coursing through my veins was exhilarating, it was also very SCARY. I told myself "Whoa Nelly." I couldn't just up and leave. Logically and legally, I knew that it wasn't a good idea to just up and go. But the truth was that I was terrified of leaving my husband and the secure life behind. It's hard to hold steady to your beliefs when everyone around you is telling you that you're nuts.. So I sat cross-legged for hours before my resin Buddha, got cross eyed looking through my third eye, knocked repeatedly on the door of enlightenment, but apparently no one was home. Had God and/or the universe forsaken me? Where was the SIGN?

The sign came not from heaven, but from a woman who carelessly sideswiped me as I was driving through the IGA parking lot. I'd just told my husband that I wanted a divorce and had realized, for the first time in my life, that I had to

think about MONEY. Now, if you're like the majority of women these days who work a full day, take care of the kids and pay half a mortgage, you'll probably be thinking that I'm some sort of space cadet. Well, maybe I am, but the attitude had spared me a lot of worrying. The truth is that I had very little knowledge about money. In fact, I didn't even know how much money we had and how it was invested. Yes, I should have known, but you see my husband had always taken care of all that. Don't get me wrong, I had never been a woman to sit around and live off my husband, quite the contrary. It's just that I had never wanted to explain the way I earned and spent my money, so I paid some bills and he paid others, and so kept his nose out of my affairs...with the result that I had nothing in my bank account while my husband invested. I thought I should explain this in case you want to put down the book in contempt. Hey, I even kept my maiden name before it was the law. Yeah, I know I know I know. I should still have been more money savvy, but I wasn't. So sue me.

Anyways, suddenly as I was driving through the parking lot, reality suddenly hit me. Was I crazy? What was I doing? I would end up penniless, working as a bag girl at the IGA until a heart attack made me pitch forward ignominiously into a non-name five cent recyclable bag. I would lose my money, my looks and my car. My CAR, I thought in a panic. I had to take very good care of my car. Cars were expensive. Maybe I wouldn't even have the money to buy another one. Then what would I do? Was there a bus that would get me to work? Just as I was mentally calculating the time it would take me to get to work by bus, it happened. WHAM. A woman backed out a parking spot and hit me.

As I heard the horrible sound of metal on metal and the subsequent ting-a-ling of parts landing on the pavement, my heart fell to my feet with a thud. It's at this moment that I started calling God by his pet name. "You Little Bastard, I said out loud. I was so mad; I think I actually raised my fist to the sky. "Yes, YOU, God. I am talking to YOU," I sputtered, looking upwards towards the celestial throne which God supposedly called home. Was this some kind of cruel joke? Still, the irony of the moment was not lost on me even then. I sighed. As signs go, this was definitely NOT a good one.

I got out of my car fully expecting to see a gaping hole along the side of my car. In the meantime, the driver of the other car had gotten out and was clucking "I'm so sorry. Are you alright? I didn't see you..." I ignored her and looked at the damage. What the hell? There was none. The hubcap was off, but otherwise there was hardly a scratch. I guess the noise had been caused by the hubcap falling off and scraping the bottom of the car.

Now, maybe you'll say that this happened out of my own inattention, that it had nothing to do with signs at all. Who knows? All I know is that as I sat there in the car after, all I wanted to do was laugh. To me, the message was clear. The Little Bastard, who by now, I had concluded was not Buddhist, but Jamaican, was saying, "Don't worry. Be happy." And then De Maupassant chimed in, saying "Life is never as good or as bad as it seems." My car survived, and I didn't self-combust as I feared I might. But in the coming years, I would have lots more opportunities to think about De Maupassant's words and shake my fist at Little Bastard.



How many men does it take to find the meaning of life? Hot flashes light a blazing fire under Mariposa as she sets out on a two-fold quest to understand both Guatemalan NGOs and Latin males. Magical men, married men, manic men... Mariposa rides the relationship roller coaster both at home and abroad until a tragic incident makes her realize that, to get the right answer, you first need to ask the right question.

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