



## Deadly Innocence

Kim Farleigh

Kamal said: “Oh, Baby, you know you can’t do that.”

Chi, tilting her head, dropped her shoulders and smiled. Every time Kamal said: “Oh, Baby, you know you can’t do that,” Chi tilted her head, dropped her shoulders and smiled.

“I’d like to start an animal rehabilitation centre here,” Chi said.

“Oh, baby,” Kamal said, “you know you can’t do that.”

So Chi tilted her head, dropped her shoulders and smiled.

“Imagine how an animal rehabilitation centre here could change people’s attitudes towards animals,” Chi said.

“Oh, baby,” Kamal replied, “you know that won’t happen.”

So Chi tilted her head, dropped her shoulders and smiled.

A tent sat on the footpath outside. A family’s silhouettes moved inside the illuminated tent at night. Two chanting, blind men in rags passed the family, holding hands, led by a sighted third.

The blind men’s eyes, facing the sun, possessed a surprising liveliness that showed up the deadness in Chi’s eyes.

Her back faced the family. Her hair, thin frame, and porcelain skin created a doll look of innocent sweetness. The contrast between her black hair and her white skin, with her ivory corneas, sharpened the blackness in her irises.

“The carpets I bought yesterday,” she said, “are so beautiful.”

The blind men’s chanting disappeared.

“How much did they cost?” Tim asked.

“Three thousand dollars,” she replied.

The footpath mother stirred the contents of a pot that sat over a coal-fired burner. The mother’s clothes hadn’t changed from the day before when Tim and I had arrived. The same frazzled-edge shawl covered her shoulders. The beaming eyes of a half-naked, three-year-old boy beside her, observing the pot, contrasted with the lifelessness in Chi’s irises.

“How do you know,” I asked, “that the carpets will get to The States?”

Chi’s slither-of-a-film smile plummeted from her face. Shocked calculation appeared. Her black irises hardened with ruthless consideration.

Oblivious, I thought, that she’s as innocent as she tries to look.

“Kamal’s family can follow it up,” she said.

Her voice aged from infantile sweetness to adulthood. She had spoken as if thinking aloud.

“What if the carpet shop has disappeared?” I proposed.

“Kamal can go there tomorrow and pick them up.”

“Oh, Baby,” Kamal whined, from an adjoining room.

“Kamal!” she screamed.

Vehement disbelief ignited in her eyes.

“But---”

“Kamal!”

“Okay, Baby, I will.”

Kamal had come home from New York to set up a software company, time short.

Chi’s voice returned to sweetness.

“The Taj Mahal is going to be so beautiful,” she said, her smile like light on ice.

Chi, Tim and I were going there the following day.

The tent mother waved away a canine, fur-covered ribcage that moved on emaciated stick legs.

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Stars abounded above our hotel’s courtyard in Agra. The heavenly past exuded a reassuring promise of a gorgeous future. Silence sat like a veil of peace. The light on a wall above the table darkened the shadows. Chi faced away from the shadows. Artificial light illuminated her face.

She had exhibited adulthood until I said: “I like reading obituaries.”

“You read about dead people?!” she gasped.

“Dead—physically,” I replied.

“That’s sad, reading about people who’ve just died.”

“It’d be sadder if we didn’t remember their achievements.”

“Still, how can you do it, knowing that their family and friends are suffering, it’s--”

“It’s important to understand the past.”

“The past has had no effect on my life.”

“Your mother worked in the US embassy in Saigon during the war, didn’t she?” I asked. “When you were a kid?”

“Yes; and?”

“Nothing.”

“Why did you ask?”

“Curiosity. The Vietnam War was my first ever media event.”

“I don’t remember much about it. We immigrated to The States before it finished. I was only seven years old.”

“I thought that there might have been hope for her,” Tim said, later, “but the obituaries, pun intended, killed that off.”

“Imagine the syrupy head-patting she must have got,” I said, “in the US embassy.”

“The past has had no effect on my life,” Tim replied.

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Sapphire radiance touched beige earth’s horizon haze. A two-headed creature appeared ahead. Tim and I leant forward. Our heads almost touched.

“It’s a bear!” Tim gasped.

Obscenity slammed into the padding protecting our moral cores.

Chi's eyes reflected nothing.

"Arghhh," I groaned.

A stick-carrying man was controlling a chained bear. The black-and-white beads in Chi's face remained inscrutable.

Green saliva hung from the bear's mouth. A chain ringed its neck.

"Geeewd," Tim hissed.

Fracas hope smeared the bear-man's face as he stared at our bus's windows, hoping to get paid for bear entertainment. When the inexpressive slithers of Chi's eyes met the hopeful beads glinting in the man's face, she turned and faced the road.

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Pushing, shoving, screaming men battled outside the bus for our attention. Chi's eyes revealed neither feeling, thought, nor curiosity. Those men couldn't glamorise her self-perception.

We parked before a crimson wall. Trinkets, cheap jewellery, cooked corn, and clothes covered portable tables that the screaming sellers shoved beside us as we headed towards a palace's entry. If pointless screaming fails, try it again; so they did; we walked even faster towards the entry.

Going inside resembled receiving an unexpected gift, the refreshing silence like a charming novelty. The puppies we saw rolling around on the ground inside the entry had round, brown eyes and round, black snouts. Their finger tails flailed.

Crimson-coloured buildings, with towers and slanting roofs, bordered the courtyard where the puppies were playing.

Women in flashing saris made impressionistic brushstrokes against crimson.

The puppies sniffed and leapt about. Their mother's snout, on the other side of the courtyard, sat upon her front legs. Her contentment contrasted with the desperation that had flooded from the sellers' craving corneas.

Head-tilted Chi, facing the puppies, gasped: "Ahhh..."

"I'm going to stay here," she said, "with the puppies."

The lines protruding from the corners of her small mouth resembled cat's whiskers.

Maybe this reflected my perception of her predatory sweetness?

The columns of a walkway Tim and I walked towards fanned out to support a roof that sat above a vast clay slab. A candle-flame-shaped window revealed a misty blending of earth and sky. The tranquillity reflected time's immense, languid pulse.

"You can fit fifty on it," Tim said, observing the slab.

"All experts," I replied, "in the Karma Sutra."

I felt envy and sadness for the loss of a calming tolerance that had once enlightened the world. That enlightenment must have seemed that it would last forever.

Coloured marble decorated the columns. A woman's blue and yellow sari highlighted her smooth stomach. Voices heightened the palace's serenity by emphasising the vastness of the background quietude.

Chi remained with the puppies. Her distant figure failed to illicit in me admiration. She made me realise how much I admired people generally, and how little I acknowledged this. The palace enhanced my perception of time; she contracted it.

"Puppies," I said, "usurp history in the Chiian School of Personal Glory."

She stayed with them all day. On the bus afterwards, Tim joked: “We thought you were going to bring one with you.”

Dreaminess lacquered her face. She lifted up her T-shirt. A puppy was curled up on her stomach. For Tim’s benefit, I said: “Oh, how sweet!”

She was sitting in front of us. Tim’s eyes shone with malicious joy. We adored madness—provided it didn’t affect us directly.

Chi struggled to control the puppy’s attempts to escape. It couldn’t see its master’s “good intentions.” It rolled around on Chi’s stomach, sometimes yelping. She grabbed its snout to stop the yelping. Her loveless sweetness included cruelty towards animals.

In the hotel courtyard, under a blue celestial iris, the puppy writhed on Chi’s lap.

“The mother was too skinny to produce milk,” she claimed.

“Why was the mother in such good condition then?” I asked.

“Tourists have been feeding it,” she replied.

“Oh.”

The puppy’s mother, fed by palace workers, may have been a reincarnation of the original Maharaja, Chi oblivious of local philosophies.

She tried feeding the healthy puppy hot milk, claiming it was “starving.”

She shoved the puppy’s snout into boiling liquid, causing it to yelp. Its shrilling, high-pitched yelps came from nature’s candid heart.

Tim’s azure gems glowed with condescending amazement. Chi hadn’t been expecting canine resistance. Her imagination had made the puppy a pliable cog that enhanced her self-ennobling sweetness, she only aware of one thing—herself—and only naively so.

“What do you intend to do with it?” Tim asked.

Great question, I thought.

“Kamal’s family will look after it,” she replied. “They’ll adore it.”

Silence reigned under pitiless blue.

Tim and I went to the Taj Mahal. Chi stayed behind to rearrange her ticket back to Delhi, and “to nurse the puppy.”

In a rickshaw, Tim said: “It’ll represent nothing more to Kamal’s family than an extra mouth to feed; they’ll get rid of it the moment her back’s turned and right about now,” he grinned, “it’s probably pissing on her.”

“It’s inevitable,” I said, “that something will.”

The appreciation underpinning Tim’s laughter turned his chortling into thunderous hilarity.

Men carrying heavy loads around us revealed a grim resignation towards their dire lots that contrasted with our privileged amusement. The brown in their serious eyes was compacted by strain.

"Did you see her reaction to the bear?" I asked.

"No," Tim replied. "What was it?"

"She didn't give a damn," I said.

"Ha!" Tim guffawed. "So much for animal farms."

We charged down streets lined with rotting garbage. Animals and beggars fought for scraps that fell from consumers’ clay bowls at food stalls, the humid atmosphere redolent with frying fat.

A man in a soiled rag rolled down the road in religious appeasement; at traffic lights, a legless man on a skateboard held his hands up to disinterested drivers who looked straight ahead. Black fumes rose over moving vehicles; suddenly an

elephant was beside us. We passed corrugated-iron hovels. A woman in a red sari emerged from a hole in a grey slag heap, stench sudden, putrid, foul; cows sprawled on a traffic island; straining men carrying heavy loads. Men in white fabrics prostrate on dead grass; a cow entering a temple. Scooters, bikes, pedalled rickshaws passing; men carrying rolls of fabric on their shoulders. A two-seater rickshaw appeared beside us. A man with a wreath of flowers around his neck on a concrete slab was sitting beside Hindu statues. A crouching boy shat onto the roadside. A camel-drawn cart. Scooters and shops streaming by. Man after man on motorbikes.

The rickshaw finally stopped before high, clay walls.

An emaciated dog, with wary, submissive eyes, another ribcage on legs, tried beating a cow to rice that had fallen from a consumer's bowl. Fumes swirled in the steamy air. The cow outmuscled the dog. Horns snorted and honked. Motorbikes flashed by. The horn language between machines produced a cacophony of chatter. Mechanical animals prattled in a squalid pen.

Women in saris were queued before a window in the wall to buy entry tickets into the Taj Mahal. Line-up men stood beside the line-up saris. A crowd was facing a stall where rice was frying on hot plates. A woman with a baby perched on her hip raised her open right palm towards two tourists, her eyes fraught with yearning demand; an orange shawl covered her chest and shoulders, its edges frazzled, the baby's plump face surrounded by orange, woollen headwear, bangles on its wrists.

The police pushed the baby-carrier back onto the road. The bangles clattered. The baby-carrier screamed with sudden-white eyes. One of the tourists had taken her photograph. She was still demanding money despite the police pushing her away from the tourists who had turned their backs on her.

The beggar screamed like someone being separated from loved ones by an evil force.

We queued to buy tickets. Frying-fat stench churned my stomach. Smoke rose from road-side kitchens. Horns puncturing traffic's roaring resembled bleating geese. A man dropped a clay bowl. A beggar and a cow went for it. The beggar won.

Chi's puppy had avoided this—by chance.

Inside, bamboo and ferns sat beside a wall. The grass beside the path was gorgeous green. Silence and shadow, like the therapeutic impact of good news, had replaced the smelly disorder unfolding, like a Stravinsky symphony, on the other side of the walls.

Through another door and suddenly the space widened.

Marble steps reached the white silhouette of the Taj Mahal. Saris, flashing against the building's creamy marble, resembled tropical butterflies. Colourful gardens complimented the saris that glided between breast-topped cylindrical towers that sat at the four corners of the marble floor upon which the building's curves and lines rose in a balance so refined and unexpected that surprise, a sensuous shock, erupted inside my head. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

We scaled the marble stairs. The gravity of attraction alluring us towards the building's dome breasts was strong but gentle.

A curved-top door opened into the mausoleum's domed interior. Our guide shut the door and blew a whistle. An echoing note slowly smoothed out with euphonious perfection.

Our dome heads beautify ideas.

In the darkness, we could only perceive exquisite acoustics.

The guide shone a torch upon the precious-stone representations of India's flowers that the builders had inserted into the walls. Red and green sparkled iridescently, like jewels. I felt like a child before something magical that had previously been unimaginable, something absolute and unquestionable from the heart of pure aesthetics. Beauty makes things so arresting that they seem absolutely apart, completely unique, infinitely observable.

Something in early childhood gives us uplifting triumph and whatever this thing might be its intrinsic value—its capacity to fulfil—its social acceptability—is just a question of luck.

When the guide opened the doors, blade light, like a revelation, entered the chamber, revealing people wandering free outside.

A girl in red velvet, eating chocolate, resembled a floating ruby or a precious-stone flower that had flown from the building's interior to wander free around this construct of perfect symmetry. Her curious eyes stared at us as she heard Tim saying: "Imagine Kamal saying: 'Oh, how sweet,' then throwing it out the window and saying: 'I've just wasted a day tracking down your carpets. And guess what? Yes—my clients were more interested in finding out if I'd developed a program that could help them identify where they get their clients from. Isn't that amazing?'"

Chi didn't know why we were laughing when she suddenly appeared before us. Neither did the floating ruby; but Chi was pleased; she had her ticket to Delhi. Her smile lacked amiability, her pretences to kindness exposed by that syrupy-facade grin.

"Where's the puppy?" Tim asked.

Another great question. Curiosity emerges from all emotions.

“They wouldn’t let me bring it in,” she replied, “so I left it in the garden outside the inner walls. It’ll be better off here because there are more tourists; someone’ll look after it.”

We nodded.

“Well,” she said, “I’m off to look around. See you back in Delhi. I’m going back tonight.”

She walked away. Tim’s azure opals shone with blissful scorn.

“I suspect,” he said, “she believes that stuff about tourists feeding it.”

“She believes anything,” I said, “that increases her celebrity, which means that she believes anything.”

Exotic sounds, resonating behind her black pupils, reverberated unconsciously back to Saigon.

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Taj marble became apricot incandescence under a circular slice of mango sun. The building’s perfection came from its creator giving testimony to mutual love. His wife’s sarcophagus lay within. His inspiration had redrawn the blueprint for beauty.

A woman in gold and emerald floated before that redrawing, her follicles reflecting mango light. She floated like a spectre of sensuous evanescence, the marble classicism behind her reflecting her grace, as if an embodiment of she who had inspired the building’s creation had come alive before our eyes, my memory’s tentacles capturing her permanently, a woman, symbolising desirability, who had pleasantly agitated an idea that had gripped male consciousness aeons before.

We re-entered the garden inside the outer walls. Vegetation covered the barrier that kept the beggars and the brash

entrepreneurs out. A creature with a hanging pink tongue was wriggling in a security guard's hands.

"It's the puppy!" Tim said. "She must have walked straight past it when she left!"

I hadn't even thought of that!

The guard left it on the street. Horns and engines accompanied chaotic desperation.

Fat stench floated in clouds. The dog's eyes blazed with terror, its tail down. The door slammed shut behind it. It dashed out onto the road. A rickshaw's racket smothered the fizzing of frying fat. The vehicle hit the puppy side on. The dog spun. Its head hit the ground, its eyes ending up facing away from its splayed-out legs.

I looked away from seeing open dead dog eyes facing away from puppy paws. Nothing stopped. The rushing continued. Tim hissed: "Jeesuzzz Kerrreist! Tourists will look after it."

"Self-absorbed America," I replied, "leaving again, oblivious of damage reeked."

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Silent darkness engulfed our hotel room. Silhouettes of previously familiar objects sat in background black. Our heads had once been empty chambers waiting for sight and sound.

"She's going to lead," I said, "animals into Kamal's living room, saying: 'Welcome, God's creatures, to Kamal's Ark.' And Kamal's going to say: 'Oh, Baby, you know you can't do this.' Then she's going to drop her shoulders, tilt her head and smile. And everything is going to be so sweet."

Tim's laughter made me smile. His curiosity had given him the means to separate desire from evidence. Because his laughter

cracked like Big-Bang titillation in the darkness, I asked: “Did an omniscient creature plan her existence?”

“Maybe a God,” he replied, “who loves eccentric randomness did it.”

“It makes sense to me: planned, eccentric randomness. How else can you explain her existence? Even given the psychological pressure to look innocent and sweet, you know you don’t pick up dogs and expect the people whose house you’re staying in to accept them. Nobody is intrinsically that stupid. A flippant, omniscient wag planned it. Randomness by itself just doesn’t have that level of creativity. It must be the work of a witty wag. It has to be! Tell me, for God’s sake, that people can’t be this stupid. Perleeseee! Before I go mad! Mad! Mad! Mad! Give me some faith, for Christ’s sake!”

The delight in Tim’s laughter was so pure, it seemed purified by the dome we had stood under earlier in the day. Tim had been lucky with the sounds that had entered his dome. Luckier than most.

## **KimFarleigh**

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Kim has worked for NGO's in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine and Macedonia. He takes risks to get the experience necessary for writing. He likes painting, art, bullfighting, photography and architecture, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. He has received 241 acceptances from over 100 different magazines.

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