



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'Israel acts to press settlers to leave Gaza', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 16/08/05.

Tags: [intimacy](#), [disenchantment](#), [death](#)

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She lusted after the scent of incense. Not the ones that were labelled 'Zen' or 'Lavender Bliss'. No, not the fake ones that were sold in trendy home decor stores, or disappointingly, in the holistic health stores. Not the sandalwood ones from China either; the yellow powdered sticks reminded her of the crowded columbarium niche in her hometown. She got her incense from a brightly lit grocery store in Little India; the label was written in a language she couldn't comprehend. It read 'agarbatti', 'incense sticks' in Hindi.

She burnt one just before a guest arrived, to conceal the smell of chemically infused tobacco; when she needed to reply to emails from her suitors, to let the scent coyly bring forth the poet in her; when she was about to immerse into the obscure worlds of any odd books she could find in used bookstores or garage sales. Mostly, however, she reached for that box of agarbatti as soon as she stepped into her room. The sweet and slightly smoky aroma was her haven from a morale-deflating day of work, a disappointingly ordinary arthouse movie or a bad date.

Bad dates. She wondered how many more of those she could be lured into. To occupy her mind with them felt banal. When quasi-cool was the über-hip, bad dates had become the soy lattes in a metropolitan city. Night after night her ease was being perceived as arrogance, her repartee as rude sarcasm, her playful and sensual allure as indiscriminating sexuality. She was not courting the ultimate, the eternal love. She was merely seeking the ample walks, the playful dances, the impish laughter and the breathtaking poetic gestures. The lustrous romantic moments that let her escape from her habitual analytical mind, even if ephemerally.

She had hopes for him, for a light-hearted, butterflies-filled summer adventure. His written words to her were subtly passionate and expressively tender. From his trip to an exotic country he brought back to her the most impeccably tasteful gift. He lifted her up in the air when they hugged for the first time. His attention on himself was a bit too keen to her taste but she was, regardless, charmed by his childlike demeanour.

That night, timidly yet sensuously, they met in her bed.

The next morning, being the attentive hostess, she provided him with a new toothbrush. As they were about to leave her apartment for brunch, he asked, 'So, is the toothbrush going to be for the next boy?'

The surrounding air froze. She could feel the rage brewing inside as the sound of those astonishing words faded away. She wanted to grab the shoe she was about to slide into and slam it at his face. How dare he? If he wanted so desperately to discover the possibility of sexual exclusivity, he was certainly articulate enough to inquire with more tact. If he was threatened by her liberated sexuality, decorum demanded him to keep such insecurities to himself. If he was trying to be jocular in the face of the morning-after awkwardness, the humour he delivered was graceless.

She was hardly the confrontational type, though. She smiled and quipped tepidly as if she had taken no heed of his maladroitness. When they parted, aloofly she extended her arms. He tried to lift her up, twice, and both times her feet stayed on the ground. In her remote state she vaguely noticed the lead and rejected the idea that something was lost.

That afternoon, she accompanied a friend to visit the cemetery. She held in her hands the Chinese incense she had been avoiding, her fingers covered with the distinctive yellow dust. As she stood in the distance and observed her friend grieving in solitude, she reflected on her own immortality. Her spirit would live on and her passion would hopefully pass on to souls she touched, but death was death was death. In lucidity, she saw her own limitations, and perhaps his. The quest to unveil the gentle, kind soul he hid behind layers of smoke wasn't hers.

That night, she wrapped herself with the Turkish shawl he had given her and watched the gentle swirls of her agarbatti evanesce into still air. She whirled across the room. She let the red, lustrous silk glide off her nude shoulders. She no longer gave a fuck about how their story would end.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Jade S.*