

***HER APPARITIONS  
& OTHER HUMAN LONGINGS***

***[Book 1 of the Other Human Longing Series]***

***Story by***

***L. Farrah Furtado***

## *Chapter 1*

### ***Padded Cages***

#### **St. Grace's Mental Hospital, Saigon, Vietnam 1982**

*While walking hesitantly past the iron bars, Laurence glanced inside the ironed-barred crib and saw the semi-conscious body of a young American woman. He quickly recognized her and winced at the sight of her bruised and battered body, with its contorted arms and legs and sunken eyes, like two black marbles. Laurence had finally found who he was looking for, after arriving that morning and scouring the hospital for her presence.*

*Laurence was a photographer, who was currently working in Thailand. Although he had been raised in Midwest America, his European roots had given his skin a rich olive hue; his strong nose was wide and flat, and his thick, heavy dark hair was complimented by a neatly-trimmed, lustrous beard.*

*While Laurence was forty-two years in age, his strong, youthful body was as powerful*

*physically as his nature was passionate and kind. Today, freshly bathed and dressed in a crisp white shirt and tailored linen khaki suit, his eyes glistened as he gripped his fedora hat.*

*He peered through the iron bars of the hospital bed. The woman's eyes were staring up at him without any hint of recognition, but he felt that even when they had been apart, he had remained beside her night and day. He observed her every expression and movement in the adult-sized crib, amazed by the perseverance of the human soul. Those wild and hungry eyes transfixed him, seeming to carry the essence of the world's unhappiness. He couldn't think of a single action he could do to help her at present, but he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had to carry her through this.*

The sick woman's hair was entangled and matted, mirroring the state of the brain beneath it. Her glances darted from left to right without really focusing on anything, giving her the air of a panicked, dying wild creature. She was unaware that her parents and Laurence were even there to help her. Indeed, when she had first caught sight of those once-familiar faces, something inside her had snapped and all hell had broken loose, requiring her to be restrained and trussed up like a rampaging beast. She felt disoriented, maddened, and terrified, perhaps as anyone would, just after they had been hog-tied and placed in an iron-barred crib.

Everything in this place seemed as if it were a nightmare brought to life. The apathetic Vietnamese nurse, with two very white, rodent-like front teeth, was small and

coarse-featured, and contemptuous of Americans. She always wore latex gloves when she tended to the young woman. The institutional concrete walls were dirty, the same dingy hue as the sick woman, who emanated long years of accumulated internal filth. To her visitors, being there was like witnessing an exorcism, but an emancipation that was years overdue.

“This will help to silence the crazy talk,” the nurse said as she injected the sick woman with a syringe of morphine. Her mother gasped as though a jagged blade had been wrenched inside her own gut, moving upward and piercing her very heart. Her face buried in her hands, she whispered to Laurence, “I can’t believe that’s my daughter. I can’t deal with this. Why us?”

“These things are a part of life. No one is free from them,” Laurence replied gently. “I just can’t believe that we found her.”

Her father stood still and silent, his face expressionless.

After the patient became calm she begged for a cigarette. The nurse helped her out of the crib and supported her as she walked to the exit. Her parents and Laurence were left alone, standing alongside the row of cribs in the ward.

The sick woman leaned on the arm of the nurse, floating through the concrete halls into the chill air under an outdoor awning.

*A cigarette, ahh, a bit of salvation...*

The gray, cloudy sky had just unleashed a light rain, yet this could not cool the oven-hot air that seared her skin. She struck the match a couple of times before it lit and

took a long, deep drag on the cigarette. She poked the nurse's arm and with a sudden urgency implored, "Hey, please, don't tell anyone my name..."

Abruptly, her expression changed and she locked eyes with the nurse and muttered, "Now that you finally caught me, you're going to tell them, aren't you?"

She reached out her arms toward Mahatma Gandhi as he materialized in the room to give her a kiss on the forehead, and he stayed by her side, only visible to her.

"I assure you, nobody knows what you know. Your secret is safe. I won't tell nobody," said the nurse with a closed-lipped smile, stepping back to avoid the smoke.

The young woman's gaze became focused on a white concrete fountain in the garden with a statue of a woman in it, which she was convinced was a supernatural being. Entranced, she stared at the endless stream of clear water pouring through the hands of the goddess into the tiny, ornate pool. That statue resonated its own mood; apart from a tranquil solitude, it was weighed down with a weariness from witnessing the multitudinous degrees of insanity it had observed in silence each day, since the dawn of humanity.

"The Revolutionaries orchestrated my admittance to this mental institution. I must run away from here," the sick woman realized.

The Revolutionaries from the desert wanted her for the powerful, secret knowledge she possessed, for she was the one person in the world who possessed this great wisdom. *She could read their thoughts, and although they could read hers as well, they knew she was invaluable. They wanted her for her ability to transmit information*

*to everyone that the frontline of her country had a secret plan that was the embodiment of evil. It was not the kind of evil that one knows for certain, but a shrouded kind of evil, that only revealed glimpses of itself in snippets of news reports.*

She remembered a man in a news report who had let slip certain clues before he killed seven children and others, with absolutely no remorse. *Ah, I remember that damn one. I hate myself for that one. I knew he was gonna do it and that man couldn't hear my thoughts clearly enough to stop. I must try harder.*

And she did try harder, if only in her thoughts; disjointed thoughts, which would likely trouble and alarm most other people if they had them.

The sick woman got her own room and bed the next day. Her medical chart recorded only the clinical details of her overall bedraggled appearance: her waif-like 94 pounds – give or take the small amount of carbohydrates she ate during the day – the fact she was 5'6, with short, curly, dyed-black hair, and the fact that she had light-yellow eyes. Those eyes – her Italian-American father and Portuguese mother didn't even know where she got them. They changed color depending on her mood and what she wore. And now, she didn't look like either one of her parents or any healthy human being, with deep cuts and bruises all over her face, chest and neck, and her body covered in silver sulfadiazine and loosely wrapped with bandages. It was a medicine normally used for severe burns, but the doctor had said it would help her deep wounds heal faster.

The woman sat cross-legged on the hospital bed, white barrenness surrounding her except for a few specks of blood on the floor from this morning, when the nurse had

refused to give her a good pen and her usual stack of writing paper. Because of that she had purposely chewed off too much of her toenail, enjoying the pain of making herself bleed, which had both numbed her and given her something to do.

*Could it be possible to die from this unending hopelessness?*

She thought for a while about this, and briefly about suicide – but she could never kill herself, because of her ebbing and flowing faith in a God, who tried so hard to make everything good and purposeful. Things like smoking cigarettes helped to ease the pain and guilt felt so deeply in her heart for so many years. It also helped to distract her from thinking negative thoughts about her old friend Fatima.

Today she wanted to write about Fatima, who she remembered being such a special person, someone who had been so different from everyone else. Nibbling on the pen cap for a long while, she thought about how Fatima often inspired her and made her heart glow with an appreciation for life. That girl she had once known had been so optimistic and gregarious, living life for spontaneity, and relishing in anything with that exciting hint of danger. Fatima had been such a pretty girl, with long, curly red hair and green eyes. She remembered that being with Fatima had felt like walking around with a unicorn on a leash. Everyone stared at Fatima when she walked by, not just guys, but girls too. And at parties, she would be dancing and doing her thing – putting on a new record, pulling on a joint or fixing a drink for a lover – and always, always she would be smiling, swaying her body with the flow of the music, moving in her own enchanted world. She would dance all night with girls or guys, kissing them all over or

spontaneously hugging them to make them feel special. Sometimes she would flash her breasts, not caring what anyone thought. Fatima had oozed spontaneity and confidence.

*What in Christ's name would Fatima do in a place like this? If I were Fatima, how would I escape from here?*

The sick woman had loved Fatima in an almost odd way, in the way that drab and ordinary people idolized the rich and famous.

*Fatima was like a puppy angel, just floating around, making other people feel happy.*

Like everyone, Fatima had had a purpose in life, the sick woman believed, yet sometimes she wasn't so sure about that. As she thought that her friend could be more like a stray, confused puppy and not an angel, savior puppy at all began to pound in her mind, she ripped up her notes about Fatima.

*What was true meaning and purpose, anyway?*

This question confused her a lot. Like that woman in the hospital, Fatima had also fervently wanted to know all of life's mysteries and truths with an immediate hunger for answers, and without any patience for introspection or contemplation.

## Chapter 2

One hundred years ago, there would not have been a place for a mentally ill woman in that hospital. In another era, people would have just accepted her the way she was. The community would perhaps have thought that she was different and had strange views of the world, and she would most likely have been known as the eccentric of the town. But they would have loved her as she was.

It was, however, no use speculating and wondering about ages long vanished at this point. Her she was, enamored in the present, and it would seem fate had brought this girl to the hospital. Or, perhaps, it had been a series of accidents that had brought her there.

Laurence gave her a pen and a small notebook to write in. With a single thought, that of Fatima's grandfather, in mind the sick woman penned out a vague historical timeline and began to write about the details of his life, as if Fatima's grandfather's memoir was somehow an extended part of herself. From her bedside, she wrote:

*I will tell it to you exactly the way I heard it was about Fatima's grandfather ...*  
*And by the way, Fatima's parents would kill me if they knew that I was talking about him. Her grandfather was born into a wealthy family in a city somewhere in Europe. He immigrated to America when he was eighteen years old, and attended an Ivy League*

*university where he earned his degree in engineering, with honors.*

*When he completed his degree he was invited to join the Royal Air Force right at the start of World War II, sometime between Hitler's successful annexation of Czechoslovakia, Austria and Denmark. Or when Hitler took over Poland. Or was it when Stalin made that deal and divided Russia? Nevertheless, very soon her grandfather started flying those planes on a daily basis. In next to no time, he became a distinguished member of the Royal Air Force, quickly moving up the ranks. The West was given earlier warnings of a madman in Germany, but they waited, and after six months of building up weapons and strengthening frontlines, Britain and France declared war on Germany, two days after Hitler invaded Poland. War started, full throttle. The German blitzkrieg overwhelmed England with forty days of bombing. The Brits thought Germany would come up through France. However, they were wrong; they came up through Holland. With ease, Germany secured Belgium, Holland and France. Meanwhile, the mass murder of Jewish people at Auschwitz began.*

*We read all about that history stuff in junior high school. "Why didn't anybody do anything to stop Hitler sooner?" This was the question that was asked at least once when we had a World War II history lesson. The teachers could never give us straight answers. We couldn't relate the disparity in our minds to the reality of what is. During history lessons, I kept quiet. I knew that Fatima's grandfather had been there and that his help came too late.*

*What drive and duty to his country Fatima's grandfather must have had, to*

*become an air marshal and oversee where those planes flew and where those bombs would be dropped. I've always wondered how he did it. There is no other explanation for a life like that, except for it being forced onto him; or rather, a life he inherited from his ancestors. Maybe he was born to fight and his life was marked even before he was born. Her father was also born to fight- like me. I have an obligation to serve- somehow, I guess.*

The sick woman continued writing throughout the afternoon, without a pause.

*Here, my life is already imprinted with my uniform and nametag. The Sun rising into Aquarius and Moon in Pisces says it is so. Perhaps being naïve is better than being alive and conscious of every screw-up in this world. Growing up is unbearable and feels like Chinese water torture to me. I don't know and I bet you a million bucks no one else knows either, but we could all agree that it's ingeniously torturous and possibly boring. The redundancy is monotonous, to do what we are told and to remain fearful.*

*It's been all played out before in history, current events and in nature. Like being interconnected to the cyclical nature of the planets, Sun and Moon. Kind of like how a volcanic eruption in Asia could cause massive flooding in the American Midwest. But don't mind my nutty ideas, because I don't know what I'm talking about. Besides, I'm just a kid trying to figure things out.*

She realized that she had drifted off into a parallel world, a world trying to force its unwelcome heaviness into her present. She pushed it out of her mind and returned to the documenting of Fatima's grandfather's story.

*Sometime during those years of war, there was a lush forest shelter of trees, replete with moist, low-lying ferns and people-high bushes, and succulent pine trees surrounded by hop, basil and fig marigold. The hawthorn bore abundant, rose-like blossoms that lent a fragrance of tangerines. That sweet smell could cure any disease. It was a flawless blend, like the sweet fragrance of an angel's bouquet of flowers.*

*There was a hidden path in the forest that was littered with life. Several yellow-scaled snakes with long black lines down their backs would wrestle in the bushes, barely holding up their tiny heads as their red-wild eyes wobbled from side to side. They spoke with their tongues, which were long, rubbery and slinky, patiently waiting in the long grass to pounce and feast on the giant pouched rats in the area.*

*Past the long grass, the path opened up to a community of newly fabricated tin sheds in a large, perfect circle protected by barbed-wire fences. Each tin shed was identical; they didn't have windows and all had a projecting metal bracket projecting from the roof, which was used as some sort of pulley wheel. It was in this hidden forest that Fatima's grandfather had witnessed the creation of the first nuclear atomic bomb. Then he received his orders to fly his plane and drop one of these bombs over Hiroshima, and another a few days later in Nagasaki.*

*These are the credits that could deem a man's life successful. He had talked about this to Fatima and her older brother Azel in an objective manner, showing no emotion or remorse. Azel was like Fatima, ashamed of their inherited past. By contrast, her grandfather had held a great amour propre and pride that had carried him through his*

*life, and which he retained up until his death at a hundred and one.*

*Fatima's father, too, had carried on with this family tradition of military men. Her father was in the American Marines, working offshore from the yellow desert. Creating a better life for the locals was the notion he espoused, but pride was not at all what Fatima felt about her family's past. Instead, the remorse and guilt sickened her and seeped into and polluted her personal life and daily routine.*

*Today, life was no different from how it had been during the time of Fatima's grandfather, except that now there were more venues for sharing information. Now, everything is all rubbed into our faces, leaving almost nothing up to the imagination. Today, we cannot help but view the enemy as **the other**. It is set up this way. Or, others say, we are wired psychologically to view other cultures and nationalities as different from us. The news reports write about and discuss the revolutionaries as a Chinese person might write about the Ivory Coast or East Timor; with detachment and a lack of sentiment that I suppose is meant to be impartial.*

Exhausted, she put the pen and notebook under the mattress and crawled into bed to sleep, thinking about four years earlier, in Fatima's hometown in Indiana.

*Every other night, Banda's soul haunts me. She is invisible to outsiders and her name came to me from outside myself. She is a dark-skinned, cherub-like girl who floats in the air when she speaks to me while I lie awake in bed. She remains eternally twelve years old, the age she was when my father killed her in the desert. Above my head*

*Banda whispers, "Fatima, every month thousands of us are left for dead. I greet many of them here, waiting for the light to begin. My brothers and sisters have all died as a result of the occupation. Independence is not the result, only abductions, militias, sectarian violence, revenge killings, assassinations, car bombs, American military strikes, death squads by extremists, armed robberies, executions, secret prisons, torture, rape and mysterious weapons. He doesn't see that you and me are one and the same. Just like you, they have their families and significant others they adore."*

*She says to me in a faint, scratchy whisper: "Make your father see what you see, or he will remain, along with your grandfather. Your grandfather is a part which makes up the Other; thunderous, unfathomable evil."*

*Banda has ordered me to stop the occupation. I want to, but I know that even the thought of that possibility is crazy. I wish I could run deep into a forest somewhere, anywhere, and end the war by sacrificing myself. Or sometimes I wonder if it would be best to leave everything behind, like the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have left their country since the occupation began. I wonder how many will actually return. Where will they go? What will they do with themselves? The locals must be so angered by us, and at God.*

*Fatima's road to self-loathing began here, alone in Indiana, with her unremarkable life.*

*I'm tired of hearing all about the lies and corruption. I want to live my life for me; I need to be free in my own mind, with tastes of my own, a style of my own, my own*

*definitions, with peace in my heart and without people tinkering with my brain cells without my knowledge. Is it time for me to leave my home and go somewhere far, far away? I need to be in a place that only allows room for me to think of other things, big things or even menial things, like, "What cocktail should I have by the astir aqua sea today?" My own apathy makes my stomach turn, and I feel like a good-for-nothing human being.*

*As each day passes, I grow more and more indifferent towards life. Apathy is my newly acquired survival skill. They say I should feel grateful - very grateful - for what I have. But it is not enough. I cannot stop the guilt dripping from me, oozing through my pores. If I say to myself I am not an orphaned and deformed child; therefore, I was born lucky, and you were born lucky, too... Lucky ... Now you and I can just sit back and enjoy the ride, do nothing, say nothing and just write in our gratitude journals. Our help is needed, but it is already too late.*

Fatima had tested out the other way to live as well: giving to everyone that needed help and loving each person she met unconditionally, making eye contact with strangers and smiling at everyone. She had believed that that was the best way to live. She had helped countless people who lived in her town - friends, family and strangers, spending her time with those who lived on the margins of society, who desperately needed help. She had volunteered with the homeless and women and children who had escaped violent homes, and had organized mentor programs and small non-profit community programs in a feverish but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to feel good. Volunteer work

always made her feel okay about her family secrets, for knowing that all kinds of people suffered from deep emotional pain much worse than hers made her feel more able to cope with her own private agonies.

She had sent applications with impressive reference letters to different UN joint programs abroad just in case she did not get accepted to Columbia University, which she had applied to in the spring after graduation. However, something else had also caught her eye - a colorful poster at her high school had sunk its hooks deep into her mind and planted tendrils of obsession which bloomed and blossomed. An orphanage overseas needed English teachers and caretakers, and she could not stop thinking about how she was the perfect person to do this – it was almost as if God had sent this opportunity directly to her. So, the following day she mailed her application to the orphanage, because she had not had a single moment since seeing the poster in which she had not been thinking about helping the orphaned children of Cambodia.

Every year Fatima had won major awards for her humanitarian efforts at her high school and within the community. These awards had proved to her that there was something really special and rare in a human being who helps others less fortunate. However, in more recent years she had begun to feel that her efforts didn't matter. In truth, her heart didn't think that she was ultimately making a difference.

“We live in a muffled bog of tears,” she said to her invisible visitor, Banda. “We can try hard and dream, but life is heartbreaking, cruel and violent. I can't do anything to change the world. I can't stop the Revolutionists or my daddy's mission. So why even

bother trying?”

With a half smile, the ghost disappeared.

### Chapter 3

While walking home from school one day, Fatima thought about her situation. She had applied to the best university in the country, and hadn't even bothered with scholarships because she felt that that should be reserved for students with no money, not her. Besides, her mother had promised to pay for everything when she finally got accepted. Despite the relative comfort and security of her life and future, she had begun to feel a sense of claustrophobia, of being trapped and too attached to too many organizations, administrators, teachers, friends and family. If she didn't get accepted to Columbia, she wanted to escape from this place where she was stuck like a rat in a trap, and move to Cambodia to help the orphans there. However, it seemed like a very bad time to leave this country now, she recognized, no matter how she looked at it and how badly she felt about everything.

Her mother had seemed distant and detached from her, but at this time the sense of this had grown stronger than Fatima could ever recall. She had not been able to get through to her, no matter how hard she had tried, and the situation was getting much

worse. She was high on most days, and seemed to care more about her pills than her and her brother Azel. They did feel bad at first, when mother got into that terrible car accident and had to be operated on. She couldn't walk for six months and had to shut down her home-based cleaning business. Now, she could finally walk but couldn't do her job and still used the painkillers. Fatima didn't recognize her mother anymore. She had a hard time keeping up with errands, daily household responsibilities, and hadn't left the house in weeks. She didn't even answer the phone anymore. She begged Fatima to do it and never to say that she was home.

The telephone would ring once a day at exactly 8:30am.

"Oh, those are my darling friends calling me again," mother would lie.

"That is the bank, mother, they are not your friends. They are going to ruin you if you don't talk to them. And for Christ's sake, you have to stop taking those pills. You don't need them anymore. You can do it if you try harder!"

She had wanted to scream at her, to release all the fury and frustration that had been building up its deadly steam within her.

"Ya, I know, Fat. But it's really not a big deal," mother said, grabbing her shoulders and pushing her down on the couch. "And don't you dare tell me what to do. You don't know what I have to put up with."

"You have to get on the phone with those people," Fatima yelled.

"It's not a problem. Everyone is in financial trouble. The country is in a recession," mother reasoned, while pouring herself a rum and coke.

Then, as she usually did, she passed out on the couch in front of the television, in her underwear and T-shirt.

Fatima's mother became obsessed with security. Once her mother asked her to go out and buy two door locks. She didn't give Fatima enough money for the kind of doorknob that has a key lock inside, so she bought two padlocks instead. Mother installed one lock on the outside of her bedroom door and one on the inside. The power drill made some pretty ugly holes in the walls, but mother did not seem to care. She would often lose the keys and gave her children a lot of grief about helping her look for them. Once she locked herself inside her bedroom, and of course she misplaced the key in her room. Fatima could not even begin to imagine the torment she must have gone through in there, trying to get out. Then Fatima found her passed out below her window in the snow, in just a T-shirt. She had a concussion and had to spend a night in the hospital.

Azel once said to Fatima, "We have done it all to try and save her, but now we have to hope that something horrific happens so it can shake her bones anew." Azel was older than she was, so she took comfort in those words.

*God has disappeared; I can't find him anywhere. It's as though he never existed. Yes, I once believed it was a miracle when you helped us, when mother almost died. But lately, I have come to the realization that we made it through without you.*

Fatima would often lie awake in bed during that time, making wishes in the darkness

*I hope daddy returns home soon, so that we can finally live a normal life. Please come back to help us take care of mother. I can't handle her on my own any longer. Daddy is oblivious to the seriousness of the whole situation at home. I know he loves his country, even more than us. For my daddy, loyalty, sacrifice and duty to his country come first, before anything else. Daddy thinks he's in the desert to liberate the locals from their oppressors, but I fear for the other side as well, because of the ethnic cleansing in progress. People are being killed merely because of the information on their ID card. The ethnic cleansing has happened all over again. There is so much that is weighing on my shoulders. Perhaps if I try harder I can do something.*

Time passed so slowly, as she waited for her future to unfold in front of her. Where were all her acceptance letters to the Ivy League?

*All those perfect kids from perfect, filthy, wealthy families got accepted early. All are in study mode and at the starting line of the race to become lawyers or some other highly regarded professionals. Let's protect the pedophiles. Let's pardon the serial killers. Hurray! Crap. Our world is over. I am over. I'm scared my days of caring will be over in just a few weeks, when I get my answer from Columbia. I'm so close to letting it slip between my disgusting fingers. But I've given myself to doing the right thing and I will not give up.*

*Virgin Mary, do you hear me? I want to be a great humanitarian one day. Please answer my prayers and help me get accepted to Columbia, so I can learn how to be just like Mahatma Gandhi. I was a good Catholic, or so I thought... God, you fool! How dare*

*you let me go? I always did the right thing and tried so hard to help mother, and I have failed.*

To make matters worse, Banda would not stop terrorizing her. Once, she awoke after Banda crept into her bed, weeping, and showed her what looked like a movie. She showed Fatima images of corpses of desert children, lifeless and grotesquely twisted, with what was left of their faces frozen in expressions of agonizing pain and shock.

Banda yelled at her, “ I didn’t know I could still feel that kind of sorrow, even after living a life that has become a daily reality for so many. These are civilians under lethal attack. It’s a country fighting an occupation. In your news, you may hear about the situation there in your country, and the civil war breaking out here due to your occupation. But in the city, on the streets, in the little houses and at our kitchen tables, Fatima, it is a completely different reality than that of which you hear.”

This time shaking Fatima while she spoke, she continued, “God forbid, your father is taking part in the rapes that I recently heard about. You don’t hear about it Fatima, but an occupying army always rapes the people as well. After all, when you rape the country, why not do the same to the people? The naiveté of Westerners who can’t believe their heroes are committing such atrocities is ridiculous. My country is being pillaged. Most of the accused are men, the stupid lesser sex.”

Fatima sat up like a shot, there in her bed with her pink fleece pajamas, the ones decorated with silly white farm animals, and she cried and cried.

She was scared that she might lose her mind if she chose to be apathetic. There

and then, she made a resolution.

*I refuse to live a dull, sad life. I want adventure and love. Thus, I will choose to give more of my love away, especially with regard to giving pleasure to the men in my town. It will make me feel so good, and loved back, too. This will be my own intended purpose for now, since I wasn't given a clear task by God. I will give myself my own reason to be here. I am a woman, and that is something which is absolutely concrete. From this point on, I will focus all of my love by helping the men of my small town, offering myself until I am invisible.*