

AS YE SOW

Craig Faustus Buck

NOW

Ulya felt like her eardrums were imploding. Her stomach churned from the pungent smell of gun smoke. She'd never fired a pistol before, so she was shocked that she'd actually hit him. His body collapsed in what seemed like slow motion. Then she blacked out.

THEN

Owen Fester was sitting in his cubicle, rewriting a love letter from a Namibian seamstress to a Nebraskan dry cleaner, when he heard a commotion. He looked up to see the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five, with wide-set emerald eyes and ink-black short-cropped hair. She was screaming in Russian and kicking at the shins of a tall, thick, fortyish man who was trying to subdue her. He held her in a bear hug, her back against his chest and her butt jammed against the beer belly that spilled over his belt.

Larch Holland rushed out of his office to handle the situation.

"You call this bitch on wheels a loving bride?" the man shouted.

"Now let's just all calm down," said Larch.

"Let go!" said the woman, lapsing into English. "You are big ox."

"I'll let you go, all right," said the man, and dropped her on the floor. Then, to Larch, "I want my money back!"

The woman pulled herself up, quiet but angry, brushing dirt from the floor off her flowered sundress. Owen thought she filled that dress like one of those perfect figures that graced the vintage dress patterns his mother used to collect. An artist's rendering of the ideal female form.

"All right," said Larch. "Why don't we all step into my office and talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about," said the man. "She don't want me. I don't want her. You're going to give me my money back or I'll have my lawyers burn this mail-order outrage to the ground. Just make the check out to Oskar Sandvik. Oskar with a 'k.'"

"Okay, Mr. Sandvik, just relax. You'll get your money." Then, to the woman, "And you'll work here until you've paid him back."

She snorted like a bull.

Ulya deciphered the foreign letters on the matchbook like a four-year-old sounding out her first written words. "Wild Oats Tavern," she read.

Owen laughed. "Oaks, not Oats," he said. "Never could figure out why they call it that. Ain't nothing but pine and dry rot in this dungheap. You couldn't hang a cat from them rafters without bringing the roof down."

"My English not so good," said Ulya.

A frown bloomed on Owen's face as he fingered the small gold cross around his neck. "Don't be so hard on yourself," he said. "You're more than smart enough. Don't need much reading or writing anymore, considering that voice recognition we got now."

"That software is crap. Does not vork for me," she said. "Always spellink wrong."

Ulya stuck her finger into a recycled tuna can filled with bar mix and fished around until she found a mini-pretzel. She waved it under her nose to make sure there was no fishy smell.

"Could be your Ruskie accent," said Owen. "Anyways, the worse your spelling, the more you get the saps believing you're really in Russia or Africa or Thailand or wherever their dick is pointed. If I can teach you one damn lesson, it's that love is blind, deaf and dumb. You get that hook in good and deep, you can spell sucker with a double Q, won't make no nevermind to the fish."

"How you put hook deep?" asked Ulya. "You get salesman of month three times in row. You must to teach me how to be good hooker."

Owen laughed again. She wondered what the joke was. She hoped she hadn't said something that made her look stupid. She sensed a shrewd mind beneath his aw-shucks country-boy facade and she found that attractive. She also liked his look. Tall and lean, amber eyes to complement wavy blond hair down to his shoulders, cute little freckle by his nose.

If Owen had been the man she'd found at the end of her journey from Eastern Ukraine, she'd have thought she'd hit the jackpot. He made her feel like a person, not a piece of meat, like most men she'd come across. Of course, life with any American would be better than the daily violence and corruption of her homeland. Except, maybe, Oskar Sandvik.

"Love is strange, girl," said Owen. "And you've got to be strange to make it work for you. I just happen to have a certain knack for romance. Kinda like Brad Paisley."

"Who?" She stuck her fingernail between her gapped front teeth to dislodge a big grain of pretzel salt.

"Never mind," said Owen. He picked up the bar mix can and shot half of it into his mouth.

"Come on, love boy. What ees your secret? She realized she was flirting. This seemed odd, considering that, even with his top sales bonuses, Owen wasn't going to make much money working at LoveGlobal.com. The only real money was the profit, which belonged to owner Larch Holland.

"She-it," said Owen, shaking his head. "Ain't no big secret. Just timing is all."

Owen glanced at the neon-ringed Budweiser clock.

"We best get going," he said, shooting his last Jack Daniels and stacking the glass to complete his six-shooter pyramid. "Five minutes until lunch ends. Larch has no toleration for latecomers."

The Colorado sun beat down on Owen and Ulya as if God was trying to fry them with a magnifying glass. The industrial space that contained LoveGlobal.com was just six doors down, but by the time they walked through the entrance, Ulya's underarms felt like shucked clams.

The long, narrow building had a line of twenty-nine windows down each wall, all of them blocked by cheap air conditioners purchased from the Pikes Peak Motel when it was closed due to an uncontainable outbreak of brain-eating black mold. The fifty-eight ACs made an uncontainable racket, but they were needed to keep the computers from overheating. The comfort of the workers was an unintended consequence, as was the perpetual gloom from the loss of natural light.

Ulya and Owen walked down the length of the building between two seemingly endless rows of cubicles. They caught slivers of conversation in a variety of accents, mostly Eastern European and African, coming from scores of multiracial women, all staring at screens and wearing telephone headsets.

"...wish I could smell your hair, feel your... refused to issue my exit visa without... dream of you every night... had to cash in plane ticket for Mama's operation... smother you in rose petals... you would do that for me?... never thought love could feel so...."

The men answered Emails and interacted with the lovelorn or lovestruck in chat rooms.

Photos of children and pets festooned the cubicle walls, along with plastic statuettes of Jesus on the cross, seeing as how Colorado Springs was the center of the Evangelical universe, home to the national headquarters of more than a hundred and forty churches. Completing the décor were two Stars of David and one copy of the Holy Koran.

"How long is usual for to string along... how you say... marks?" asked Ulya.

"I'll spend two, three months, to reel most of them in. I think my longest took around fourteen. Romance is a tricky scam. You pull the trigger too quick, they get spooked off. Love goes poof. No honey, no money."

"Da. But how you know when to pull trigger?"

"Me, I get this feeling in my testicular area. It's almost a sex thing. Like when you put your hand on a gal's leg in a bar and she don't push it off. She don't need to say anything and you know you're good to go. That's when you take your shot."

"Hey!" They turned to see Larch barreling toward them, hands flailing, red mullet bouncing high, bulging muscles molding the thin cotton of his Manitou Brewing tank-top. "Time is an infinite entity, Owen. Lunch is not!" His voice thundered like an unmuffled Harley.

A shiver ran up Ulya's spine. There was something unreadable about Larch that made her anxious, as is she were torn between fascination and fear. It wasn't only because the day he'd interviewed her for the job, his eyes may as well have been tethered to her breasts. She hadn't minded that so much because she knew the allure gave her power over him. It may take sleeping with him for her to harness it, but that might be fun. There was a certain appeal to his finely

chiseled body, from rock climbing she'd heard. They were, after all, at the foot of the Southern Rockies.

"You asked me to school her in the business," said Owen. "We were working over lunch."

"Don't bullshit a man who takes steroids, Fester. It can get ugly. And you," he turned to Ulya, "I want to see you in private." He pointed toward his office, the only one in the building.

Ulya saw Owen's jaw clamp, like he was locking a cage to contain a rabid pit bull. Then he slipped into his cubicle and started pounding at his keyboard so hard she thought it might crack.

As she followed Larch, she heard Owen dictate to the voice recognition software.

"Darling Robert, That photo you sent me made me tingle in places I'm too embarrassed to name."

Since that first day, her opinion of Larch had remained in limbo. As befit the creator of a multi-million dollar matchmaking site, Larch had an ego. He could be harsh and he could be temperamental. She'd seen him dump a wheatgrass smoothie on his assistant's head because she'd neglected to add bee pollen.

Yet he'd been there for Ulya when she'd needed him. She'd been working the phone with a horny Iowa dairy farmer, telling him how she'd love to see his barn someday, watch him milk the cows, maybe pour a pail of the fresh milk over his naked body and slowly lick it off. By the time she'd finished describing what her tongue's sultry journey would do to him, the farmer was musing on the cost of a ticket from Kiev to Ames. She told him she loved him, but a flight to America was too exorbitant; he was not a rich man. As he started to argue that their being together was all that mattered, her smarmy Bangladeshi supervisor Mishkat leaned in to murmur in her ear.

"I like the sound of your tongue action," said Mishkat. "Come see me after work and you can practice what you preach. That's how day girls stay off the night shift."

He'd made her feel helpless, like her high school English teacher back in Ukraine who'd dusted her palm with chalk dust and threatened to flunk her if she didn't rub him the right way. At least that nightmare had allowed her to pass out of his class. Mishkat's humiliations had continued to mount every day, like Chinese water torture, with no relief in sight. Then, one day, a Nigerian coworker found her crying in the ladies room. The girl told Larch, who was of the opinion that unhappy workers were less seductive, costing him paying customers. It was Mishkat who wound up on the night shift.

Larch closed the office door behind Ulya and motioned her to a chair in front of his desk. The minute he'd first laid eyes on her, he'd been smitten. Fleshy breasts, long slender legs with a thigh gap you could slip the stock of a shotgun through.

"What's your name again? Anastasia?" he said, knowing full well both her name and her nickname. It was his usual opening power play to remind people who the boss was.

"Ulyana," she said. "By most people I am Ulya."

She had one of those dusky Eastern European voices that made him sweat.

"Ulya. I like that. Short and sexy. So how do you like working here so far, Ulya?"

"I like."

"Owen been giving you some good tips?"

"There is much to learn. He is good teacher."

"Just don't forget who's the rooster in this barnyard. Your future won't look so bright if you go poking your beak in the dirt, sharing seeds with co-workers. They've got the seeds of destruction. I've got the seeds of growth."

She took this for a sexual innuendo and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. He laughed and she took that to mean he was just kidding, though she wasn't sure he was.

"I'm the man who signs the checks around here. That makes me the alpha wolf."

"You said you was rooster."

He grinned. "I'm just teasing you. You play your cards right, you could go places. You got the looks and the brains to advance your career around here."

"Business all on Internet and telephone," she said. "What for I need looks?"

His grin twisted southward. "I meant that as a compliment."

"I am just hard vorker who vant no trouble."

"Trouble can be fun sometimes." His smile tried for sexy but settled for smarmy.

She held his gaze with a blank expression.

He laughed. "Go back to work, Ulya. We can revisit this discussion over a brew sometime."

As she left, he bent down to watch the light through her thigh gap.

Ulya returned to her cubicle next to Owen's.

"What'd he want?" asked Owen.

"I think, maybe, to sex with me," she said.

"He said that?"

"My English not so good."

"Son of a bitch."

Owen looked at her and she had a vision of steam coming off his eyes. It hadn't occurred to her that he might feel jealous. She didn't think they were that close. She was both thrilled and uneasy, as if she were victorious in a game she wasn't sure she wanted to play.

She realized he'd asked her a question she hadn't heard through her musings. "What?" she said.

"Bowling," he said. "They got that in Russia?"

The Peak Bowl lanes were half full by the time Owen and Ulya walked in after work. She'd been unimpressed by the cinderblock exterior, but was awed by the colorful strings of lights that lined the lanes, and the bright mural that filled the entire wall beside the first lane, depicting Fountain Creek running through the fall-colored aspens toward Pikes Peak.

This was the first time they'd been on anything approaching a date, and Ulya was nervous. Owen seemed in his element, as he strutted to the counter and retrieved shoes for her. He's brought his own shoes, purple saddle-shoe-style, along with his own purple ball adorned with some sort of smoky white swirls.

Owen picked out a red ball for her and then stood behind her, with one hand on her waist and the other under her ball, to show her, in slow motion, how to move. She could feel his body heat where his chest met her back, and she thought she could feel his heartbeat, but she wasn't sure. As he murmured instructions, his breath warmed her ear. It felt like a slow dance.

She was disappointed in her score on their first game, though she did manage to avoid the gutters most of the time. Owen crowed that she was a natural and she thought he was sweet to try to lift her spirits.

Before their second game, Owen flagged down a waitress and ordered a cheeseburger. Ulya ordered an open-faced burger called "The Slopper," with green chili and cheese, holding the onions, thinking *in case this date goes anywhere*. Owen considered her for a moment, then told the waitress to hold his onions as well. Ulya felt a little thrill.

As she studied the beer choices, she heard someone shout her name over the cacophony of the alley. She looked up to see Larch, striding toward them, ball in hand. She noted that he had no trouble remembering her name when he was horning in on a competitor.

Owen reacted to Larch as if he'd just seen the blazing lights of a police car in his rearview mirror.

From the march in his step, it was clear that Larch had been drinking. "You don't mind if I join you, do you Owen? I'm sure Ulya won't mind."

Ulya watched Owen's fuse light up as he searched for words. "Well I don't know...."

"Of course you do," said Larch as if that settled the matter.

Ulya sensed a pissing contest coming on and knew that, no matter who won, Owen could wind up losing his job. She didn't want that on her conscience.

She leaped into the silence. "We'd love you to join us, wouldn't we, Owen?"

He kept his mouth shut, but his anger flashed like a neon sign.

"You two keep the lane," he said, tossing his ball into his bag. "I'm not feeling too good. You can get home okay, right?"

She nodded, living only a few blocks away in a rented house with three other LoveGlobal girls.

"No worries," said Larch. "I'll see her home."

Owen glared at Larch. For an awkward moment, Ulya feared Owen would dive over the ball return to strangle Larch. But, instead, Owen took a deep breath and trudged out in his purple bowling shoes, leaving her alone with the drunken boss.

Larch dismissed the waitress with, "I'll eat whatever he ordered."

Ulya looked around in awe. Everything was flawless. No stains on the antique rugs. No bald spots on the upholstery. No scratches on the polished wood. All original art on the walls, mostly abstract, in handcrafted frames. Larch's living room could easily accommodate her entire house. An enormous glass wall afforded a view of a turquoise pool in a tastefully lit and manicured yard that seemed endless. She'd never even dreamed that such a beautiful home was possible. Every detail was perfect.

Larch poured them each some sort of whiskey, with a name she'd never seen and couldn't pronounce. Then he led her outside to look at the stars. Even washed by the full moon, Colorado Springs boasted a skyful. Pike's Peak loomed before them, its snowcap reflecting the moon like a frosted lightbulb. Ulya shivered from the chill, even in her parka. Larch put his arm around her, pulling her close. She was surprised by a jolt of arousal.

"I'm sorry for today," he said.

"For what?"

"For being an ass after lunch. People think because I built a big business, because I'm the big boss, because I live in a big house, that I'm somehow a big man. I'm just a guy. And when I meet a woman like you, I get flustered. I say stupid things. I fall back on habits I should have outgrown in high school."

She slid her arm beneath his jacket, around his waist, and pulled him tight. His body felt both hard and soft. She imagined what it would feel like against hers.

"There is nothing for to be sorry," she said. "All men are teenage boys underneath. Some just hide it more better."

He chuckled at this.

"I've been attracted to you since I first saw you, you know," he said.

"Yes, I know." She also knew he was fishing for a reciprocal compliment, but she thought this would make her look weak. And he seemed like the type who liked controlling women.

"It's just gotten worse the more I've gotten to know you," he said. "I'm not sure what to do about it. It's awkward enough being your boss, but it's downright weird trying to work out a relationship when you're in the relationship business."

"Mail-order bride is far from relationship business."

She expected him to push back, to get offended, at least to become defensive. But he surprised her.

"I'm not proud of what we do. Roping men in by their loneliness, to get their money. But it's not all bad. These men lead loveless lives. We give them hope. We sell them a fantasy and every once in a while it sticks. Maybe only for a few months, but that's better than nothing, right?"

"I do not know."

She looked up and recognized Orion's belt.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" he asked.

She turned to him.

"You have been good to me." She shrugged. "Except maybe this afternoon, you naughty boy." She gave him a faux frown and waggled her finger.

"I'll be a good boy, I promise." He looked at her longingly and she saw the lonely man in him. She felt a stab of pity and pulled him into a kiss. She wondered if she would have done this without the whiskey. She decided she didn't care. She just wished he was a better kisser.

He led her up to his bedroom. It had a glass wall, too. She felt like they were making love under the stars. As it turned out, he wasn't much of a lover. And his body felt too rock-hard when

it pounded against her. On the other hand, she'd never felt such soft sheets. She could easily overlook a few minor irritations to move into his world.

Larch dropped her off a little after eleven that night. He waited for her to open her door before driving off. She stepped inside feeling slightly giddy. As soon as she closed the door, someone knocked on it. She looked through the spyhole to see Owen.

They sat at her kitchen table drinking tea, speaking in low voices so as not to wake her roommates.

"I was worried sick about you," he said. "It got so late, I thought something might have happened to you on your way home."

"Larch showed me his house," she said. "We had drink."

"Drink?" The word was laced with suspicion.

"What I do is not your business."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was worried is all."

She put her hand gently on his face. "I am sorry, also," she said. "I know you just try to do good to me."

He took her hand and kissed it.

"That's all I want to do," he said, then after a moment's consideration, he added, "maybe forever."

Then he leaned over and kissed her. She parted her lips to admit his tongue and realized, after a long evening, how refreshing it was to be with a man who knew how to kiss.

BETWEEN THEN AND NOW

A year or so later, Larch asked Ulya to marry him. She left her job and moved into his house the next day. By that time, Owen had worked his way up through the LoveGlobal ranks to become Larch's right-hand. There was no one better suited to be best man, Owen was forced to watch Ulya marry Larch from only three feet away. He forced a smile and had to struggle to contain the contents of his stomach.

The wedding had been over the top, even for the historic Broadmoor Hotel, but Larch wanted nothing but the finest for his "czarina." She eased into a life of leisure as if she'd been born to it. She drove a new Mercedes, made weekly shopping trips to Denver boutiques with girlfriends from the country club, was asked to join the board of the Colorado Springs Philharmonic, and persuaded Larch to rent her a studio in Manitou so she could take up painting. It was there that she'd rendezvous with Owen.

It didn't take long for the honeymoon to end. Following the wedding, Larch gave Owen more and more management responsibilities, so that Larch could spend more time at home. Ulya resented his increasing demands on her time and attention. Her thrice-weekly Manitou meetings with Owen quickly dwindled to thrice-monthly. On paper—at least paper money--Ulya had everything she'd ever dreamed of, but she was feeling increasingly lonely, miserable.

The longer she lived with Larch, the more she resented him, and that quickly morphed into loathing. She couldn't complain to any of her country club friends because they wouldn't empathize. They all complained about their husbands, but none of them really meant it. Her only true confidante was Owen. He understood because he loved her, and hated Larch as much as she did, for keeping them apart.

Then, one afternoon, she was spooning naked in Owen's arms, relaxed in the cooling embers of their afternoon's sexual play, when he said, "You'll never guess who ordered up a bride today."

When she didn't reply, he said, "Your ex. Oskar Sandvik."

Her initial surprise took a moment to wear off, but then the larval stage of a plan began to weave its cocoon in Ulya's mind.

Sandvik hated Colorado Springs. It was too metropolitan for him, which is like saying tofu burgers were too meaty. But by comparison, the population of his town in Minnesota could be expressed in three digits. No house was less than a half-mile from the next. Downtown had a general store with an attached gas station that doubled as a restaurant on Sundays, after church, when they fired up the barbecue for hot dogs, assuming it was dry enough and warmer than thirty-eight.

Nonetheless, it had been several years since Sandvik's last wife experiment, and he'd slowly come around to believe that his failure with Ulya might possibly have been due to long distance communications over the Internet. So he was ready to give it another try, but only face to face. So he'd decided to return to the scene of his last fiasco, LoveGlobal's headquarters.

He landed at the airport girded for battle, determined to procure the perfect bride at a decent cost, prepared to reject any loss leaders they tried to toss his way. What he wasn't prepared for was Ulya.

She was waiting for him by the curb outside the terminal, looking gorgeous beside a new, lunar blue Mercedes, wearing a matching blue outfit that revealed her toned midriff. She could have been a model in a Mercedes ad.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"I want to make apology." Her emerald eyes caught the light like gemstones.

She opened the rear door and motioned him in like a limo driver, saying, "Please. You let me give you lift." And he felt one emotionally.

He threw his carry-on bag on the seat and climbed in after it. As she drove, his eyes were riveted to her profile. He didn't remember her being so exquisite. Clearly, she'd taken care of herself. Not to mention the improvement in her English.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Motel 6," he said.

"You are in hurry?" she asked. "It would please me to spend a little time alone with you. Maybe to make up for a small piece of the pain I have caused? Would you like some tea? My place is on the way."

He tried to assemble the words to respond, but his mind was flooded by the memory of the first time he'd seen her nude. It took all of his faculties to rein in the image in order to muster even an, "Okay."

Larch lounged by the pool, staring at his plaid board shorts. He flipped up the hem to read the tag. "Made in Bangladesh." He was musing about whether they were sewn by child slaves when he heard Ulya's car drive up.

Good, he thought. She can make me a ham and cheese.

Ulya parked the car and got out, wondering whether Sandvik would expect her to open his door. But he let himself out, staring in astonishment at the mansion before him.

"You live here?" he said.

"With my husband," she said. "But he's out of town."

She said it suggestively and saw Sandvik's radar go up. Had she overplayed her hand? He may live in the sticks, but he wasn't such a rube that he'd believe a woman who looked like Ulya, especially with their history, would be coming onto him.

She smiled. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. It was just a statement of fact. But I have thought a lot about you over the years. When we met, I was upset about the mail-order situation; I never really gave you a chance. I'm sorry for that. You're a kind man and I treated you badly. Can I offer you a drink?"

She led him into the house, surprised to be feeling a little remorseful.

Sandvik couldn't figure her out. But she looked so good he was happy to give her the benefit of the doubt. *What a pathetic hormonal male you are*, he thought, remembering the pheromones he'd used with his farm animals to promote breeding. But those thoughts did nothing to subdue his fantasies about the contours that sculpted her blue dress.

"A little schnapps would be nice," he said.

She gave him a smile that could have powered a small city. If she thought she could play him for a fool, he'd disappoint her. But before he refused to bite at her bait, he saw no harm in letting her dangle it. He was titillated, just watching her move.

Sandvik followed Ulya through her home as if touring a fairyland. Then she led him out to the pool and the pixies died at the sight of Larch, sunning on the deck. The two men locked eyes like two deer caught in each other's headlights.

"What the hell?" said Larch.

Owen stepped out of the bushes and raised the Colt semi-automatic his father brought home from Nam. He felt the disappointment of his father's spirit as he aimed at Larch.

"What the hell?" said Sandvik.

Ulya pulled her own gun from her handbag and pointed it at the farmer from Minnesota.

"Over there, Oskar," she said, motioning toward Larch.

Owen lined his sights up on his sort-of-friend and mentor, thinking of the day he'd handed Larch the wedding band to put on Ulya's finger, not to mention the times he'd stared at that band on the nightstand as they'd betrayed Ulya's wedding vows. He imagined his father looking down from heaven, watching his only son planning to kill a man for his wealth and his scheming wife. How had he ever let Ulya to talk him into sinking this low?

"What's this about?" said Larch.

"It's over," said Ulya.

"I love her," said Owen, more to himself than to Larch.

"And I love Owen," she said.

Owen watched Larch look from him to her, trying to make sense of it all. He watched Larch's face melt into an expression of profound sadness, and Owen's heart ached.

"You think the police won't figure this out?" said Larch.

"They'll believe me like men always do," said Ulya. "Sandvick came back for me and the two of you fought. It got out of control and you pulled a gun. He pulled one, too. It all happened so fast, I'm not sure who fired first. But before my eyes, you each shot the other."

Larch looked at Owen. "I trusted you," he said. "I treated you like a brother."

Owen's eyes watered as he lowered his gun, saying to Ulya, "I can't do this. I warned you I didn't think I could."

"Everything can be ours," she said, referring to Larch's fortune. "Just you and me. But we must do this now."

"Wake up, Owen," said Larch. "She's just using you. She hooked you, just like you taught her."

Owen ignored him. "I love you, Ulya. That's all I want. Why can't we just walk away?"

"Love is being there for me when I need you."

"I'm sorry."

"Then what for I need you now?"

She raised her gun toward Owen. Reflexively he raised his as well. He felt her bullet enter his chest. For an instant he stood still as a statue, waiting for the pain.

She got me spelling sucker with a double Q, he thought, as a red-hot crowbar tore at his insides. He heard a gurgling sound from his throat and felt his finger convulse on the trigger. The gun kicked as his legs gave out as he saw that she didn't blink when the blood from her forehead dripped into her eye. But he never felt the ground.

THE END