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# The Talent Thief

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THE TALENT THIEF

by

Kathryn E. Nesheim

A Dissertation Submitted in  
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ABSTRACT

THE TALENT THIEF

by

Kathryn E. Nesheim

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014  
Under the Supervision of George Makana Clark

*The Talent Thief* narrates an amateur con artist's philanthropic efforts in Windhoek, Namibia, and her psychological struggle with the guilt of a past crime. Guided by a literalistic interpretation of the Biblical "Parable of the Talents," Callie Donne works to redeem herself and restore her mother's reputation with a high-profile charity fundraising event. The novel's plot echoes elements of the United States' involvement in the economic and political development of the African continent. In its themes and settings, it also offers a point of contact between the Lutheran tradition and postcolonial cultural scholarship for contemporary American readers.

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**Confidence Schemes:  
*The Talent Thief* and the trickery in charity,  
United-States guilt, and San folktales**

**Why I wrote *The Talent Thief***

When I started this novel, it expressed a series of unshakable feelings sparked by a semester abroad in Namibia when I was an undergraduate. During the first years of drafting it was a therapeutic exercise. As I studied southern African literature and postcolonial cultural theory, however, I found deeper imperatives for the project. First, that Namibia's cultures deserve far more attention on the global scene. Although English-language readers now enjoy a greater variety of published literature and media from southern Africa than any generation before us, it is still impossible for a Namibian to make a living as a writer, even when writing in English, and there are no literary publishing houses in the country. I am not yet equipped to make either of these things possible, but my novel can highlight some noteworthy aspects of the region, such as the liveliness of its Christian churches and the playfulness of the San oral storytelling tradition. Perhaps more importantly for my audience—fellow Americans, many of whom may share some kind of Christian upbringing—my novel offers a glimpse into the problematic workings of United States citizens' feelings of guilt in relation to countries like Namibia; that is, if we think at all about our relationship to places like Namibia.

Trying to write a novel around a gut feeling is, of course, one of the most difficult ways of going at the project, and I believe it also carries a level of moral responsibility that an argumentative or picaresque plot isn't necessarily held to. Flannery O'Connor once insisted that novelists enjoy the privilege of "find[ing] a symbol for a feeling," but

that the privilege carries the obligation to “lodge” the symbol in such a way that readers will know “whether the feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral” (156). In *The Talent Thief*, Callie Donne’s deceptive and disastrous foray into charity fundraising allowed me to re-live, through fiction, a chapter of my own life when I faced many immoral aspects of U.S. political and economic dealings with the global South. Four months of study in southern Africa convinced me that some of the material, cultural, and security privileges of life in the United States are gained through policies toward and transactions with the global South that ought to make United States citizens uncomfortable. This was my feeling; and while hundreds of writers have explored white guilt, many more eloquently than I can, I have not read a novel by a Westerner that satisfied O’Connor’s imperative to “lodge” the white-guilt feeling in a structure that demonstrates its fickle nature, and which insists that this feeling can be as poisonous as the self-centered actions that cause it.

More specifically, I needed to show the dangers of white guilt for affluent Americans (like my protagonist or myself) when visiting “developing” countries. Too often it becomes a vehicle for further self-deception because, by nature, we protect our delicate egos by eliminating this feeling through the simplest, easiest means at hand. Rather than undergo the difficult project of amending our destructive behaviors, unmoderated guilt urges us to conceal the problem by relying on the same patterns of thought and action that caused it. For Callie, the guilt from stealing a large sum of offering money catalyzes a scheme to “make good” in order to legitimate the theft. Her primary goal is to convince herself, her mother, and her home community that her theft

was in service of a higher purpose. My novel follows her downward spiral, and the long con that brings her criminal actions into relief.

### **Postcolonial cultural scholarship meets Lutheran traditions**

As a white United States citizen who has visited Namibia and studied its cultures, I am positioned well to explore the important theme of guilt among United States citizens visiting the global South. As a practicing Lutheran who has studied the religious history of the area and its San folklore tradition, I'm also able to suggest one of the ways that regions like Namibia can complicate that guilt productively. For one thing, my Lutheran heritage has been a point of connection: the majority of Namibians are Christian, and at least half of all Namibians self-identify as Lutheran. It is one of many African countries experiencing an explosion in its Christian population. African Studies scholar Susan VanZanten writes that church growth in postcolonial Africa is more dynamic than it was during the generations when its practices were imposed by Europeans. The number of Christians on the continent has "increased tenfold to 360 million," and VanZanten predicts that the number will reach 600 million by 2050 (336).

I would argue that this Lutheran connection has allowed access to parts of Namibian culture that would be less obvious to other Western postcolonial scholars. While many of the Namibians I spoke with during my visits described their life experiences through the lens of a Christian teleology, it has been unusual to read literary scholarship about southern Africa which takes Christian experience as its theme or vehicle. The post-religious culture of academe often seems disinterested in religion as a critical perspective. Even postcolonial cultural studies, which focuses on the global



South, has been slow to recognize the importance of religion, except to highlight its dogma or its divisive tendencies. Likewise, many Christian communities in the U.S. distrust the progressive theories of liberal academe, yet the partnerships, charities, or evangelistic missions that they sustain in the South deserve a more critical foundation. For these and other reasons, these two discourse communities deserve to engage one another in sustained dialogue.

Academe has much to gain every time postcolonial cultural criticism expands to consider unfamiliar global dynamics. This field is, in oversimplified terms, an attempt to read cultural artifacts differently, in resistance to the privileged Western-trained perspective. Although not a discipline in itself, its scholars work within fields of non-white and/or non-Western cultural studies. To borrow from the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, these scholars “participate in the significant and overdue recognition that ‘minority’ cultures are actually ‘majority’ cultures and that hegemonized Western (Euro-American) studies have been unduly over-privileged for political reasons” (para 5). Although postcolonial critics are themselves a diverse group, most of their scholarship projects a secular-humanist perspective for which Salman Rushdie makes a fitting spokesman. For Rushdie, “no systems are more worthy of [anti-dogmatic] deconstruction than politics and religion. Because politics and religion, both in theory and in practice are . . . manifestations of our dreaming selves” (Droogan 213).

In scholarship concerning southern Africa, postcolonial scholars have deconstructed the problematic hegemony of Christian missionaries in converting the native communities to their own sets of spiritual practices and moral tenants. For example, Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* argues that European colonizers

imagined a “destiny” for the colonized of forever being almost, but not quite, white (12). This meant that colonial subjects in mission schools were constrained to a life requiring constant education for an assimilation that would never be actualized. This mindset is exemplified in the way that whites and non-whites addressed or referred to one another in colonial states, as “boy” and “child” on one side, and “master” or “*baas*” on the other (Fabian 5, 367).

Postcolonial critics have also provided valuable insights into the hazards of current Christian-influenced practices in the region. In southern Africa, one particular target is the inadequacies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was modeled upon the vision of Christian leaders, most notably Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was established primarily according to New Testament principles of forgiveness without seeking reparations or revenge. Although most public responses to the TRC from the West have been commendatory, these scholars have provided insights into its shortfalls. Many describe that the policy of extending complete amnesty to perpetrators of state-sanctioned crimes as a defeatist mentality, an unwillingness to engage the deeper animosities between ethnic groups. Another significant concern in postcolonial criticism about southern Africa is the culture of shame-silence surrounding the AIDs pandemic, which many trace back to a Christian taboo against discussing sexuality or having sex with multiple partners. In Namibia, a prominent example is the effect of these taboos among Ovambo people. Although traditional Ovambo culture encouraged frank, explicit conversations between women about sexual experiences or problems, when these communities adopted Christianity they began to see such discussions as impolite (Kapolo

93). Members of this ethnic group, like many in Namibia, now struggle with the effects of an AIDs pandemic that goes largely unmarked until it is too late.

Furthermore, postcolonial cultural criticism has championed the practice of “writing back,” highlighting texts, films, and other artifacts that complicate or erase problematic stereotypes and, in Alexandra Lewis’ words, “open fertile ground for future elaboration and discussion” (160). Early postcolonial scholars eagerly engaged the delicious humor and inventiveness of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) and the social-critical value of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), helping to spark greater interest in African literature for its own sake. Since then, scholars have drawn our attention to important works like Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* as a representation of the condition of female colonial subjects in the former state of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*, which depicts the divisive legacy of colonization upon lovers and families, even in a time of political independence.

In spite of all we’ve learned, we in Western academe are poor in critical insight regarding the contemporary religious cultures of the global South. Thankfully, scholars are now beginning to address this gap. Philip Jenkins notes that “While Christian faith ebbs in the North and West (which may explain scholars’ tendencies to overlook it), it continues to rise in the South and East” (2). We are only beginning to understand the full richness of their literary traditions. For example, William Francis Purcell notes that the Zambian novel *The Tongue of the Dumb* ascribes a plurality of Christian-based semiotics to the ordinary events of daily life, arguing that Christianity can and must develop new and divergent religious practices according to the cultures in which it is rooted (420).

Regarding Jesuit writer Uwem Akpan's more recent and well-known story-collection, *Say You're One of Them*, Stephen M. Szolosi traces a number of overtly-theological themes, demonstrating Akpan's belief in Christian imagery as a ready vehicle for expressing outrage against injustice and to plead the cases of the suffering (443).

Many writers in the South are bold in writing from a religious perspective, and are likely somewhat surprised that we in the West are reluctant to give these themes more critical consideration. For example, a survey of major Caribbean writers will demonstrate that spiritual belief is a focal point of daily life. Many find hope in suffering through various religious traditions under the blanket term "Vodou," all of which borrow from West African and European traditions. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's spiraling journey into madness is alternately interrupted fueled by a growing obsession with *obeah*. The family of Oscar de Leon in Junot Diaz' *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suffers generations of misfortune under a remnant of their ancestors' enslavement, *fukú americanus*, "the Curse and Doom of the New World" (1). In a more positive form, the blended Vodou-Catholic tradition often sustains the protagonists of Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat. Still others, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier, write in a magical-realist genre that offers deeper attention to the spiritual complexity of human experience.

What makes the Lutheran traditions of Namibia, among so many faith-based cultures, such a good bridge toward understanding these perspectives? American scholarship, though currently distrustful of Protestant traditions, is not too long divorced from them. Countries like Namibia thus provide the opportunity to study a faith tradition of the global South in a recognizable form. The Lutheran tradition there shares many of

its tenets, hymns and liturgical setting with its Western counterpart, but is steeped in its own languages, cultures, and perspectives. One poignant example of this from my own semester in Namibia occurred on a rural homestead on a Sunday morning, when the families from five farms gathered for prayer and scripture readings. The congregants considered themselves Lutheran and their prayers (as translated to me) followed a familiar structure. Yet this worship time was blended with a community meeting, and the prayers and readings were interspersed with declarations of concern about certain maladies that may or may not have been linked to witchcraft. I was told that the women saw the Sunday morning worship-gathering as a “safe” place to discuss these concerns. Since various iterations of witchcraft belief can be seen across the globe (including a number of communities in our own country), the peoples of Namibia may be well-equipped to provide foundational insights into how these beliefs influence people’s daily lives.

Comparative Literature scholar Kathryn Hume commented in *American Dream, American Nightmare* that many contemporary American novelists assume the United States has no spiritual dimension. Protestantism, though once a defining force of mainstream United States culture, is now peripheral. Its decline has been explored in such novels as John Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and *Rabbit* series, John Hassler’s *Staggerford* and, more recently, Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*. In fact, a number of communities in Africa now view the United States as spiritually impoverished, and within the last thirty years have begun programs of evangelistic outreach across the Atlantic (Bedaiko 129). Current Christian writers and scholars, such as author Marilynne

Robinson or critic Susan VanZanten, speak to an increasingly secular American audience through lenses of traditions that many of their fellow writers have cast aside as outdated.

It is well worth our effort to work past the painful divorce of Christian culture from academe toward a return to dialogue. Whereas postcolonial critics would do well to explore the religious traditions of the global South with greater seriousness, there is also much that Christians of the U.S. today can learn from postcolonial criticism. One of the most obvious lessons to be learned comes from the primary texts themselves as they “write back” with warnings against harmful practices of well-intentioned Western Christians. The stereotype of the “dark continent” as a land of abandoned spaces in need of Western liberals, conservationists, and charity efforts has been especially pervasive. Too often the discourse of U.S.-Christian groups about the global South preempt the important work of cross-cultural dialogue with easy narratives about an American abundance and promise to be reproduced abroad. Visiting Africa on a mission trip becomes an opportunity to “develop a greater appreciation” for material comforts or to be jarred out of complacency about the religious and political freedoms we enjoy. Alternately, it is an opportunity to practice benevolence, as my American con-artist Callie attempts to do. American texts about Africa are often skewed by these premises. This near-sightedness is parodied beautifully in Binyavanga Wainaina’s brief essay “How to Write About Africa.” His series of sardonic proposals recommends that “African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger-than-life—but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause” (para 10). In other mock-advice, he tells American writers they can paint their African characters however they like, since Africans are “900 million people who are too

busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book” (para 3). For too many U.S. citizens, “Africa” is a *tabula rasa* upon which to print whatever artistic vision one most wishes to put forward, while avoiding the difficult work of sustained dialogue, research, and reflection. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, representations of the colonial other will all too often leave those who are supposedly being represented “as mute as ever” (90).

Aid initiatives, such as those of the U.S. government, have likewise been viewed with skepticism. As economist Ronald Mendoza notes in his study of ineffective charitable initiatives by industrialized countries, quite frequently the economic benefit offered by these gifts is offset by trade policies that lead to equal or greater economic hardship. In particular, subsidies placed on African exports such as cotton and sugar have cost global-South producers millions of dollars in profits every year (36). In such cases, what is fair or just seems to be whitewashed by seeming acts of benevolence. On a personal level, many charitable foundations here in the U.S. are guilty of using whitewashing rhetoric to persuade new donors and participants. In “The Limits of Charity,” Christian columnist David Hilfiker recounts a pep-talk by a speaker at a “Walk for the Homeless” event who “exhorted the walkers to ‘go out and do your part to end homelessness.’” He observed that, of course, “walking five kilometers on a beautiful Saturday morning is not ‘doing your part to end homelessness’” (10). As sociologist Janet Poppendieck declares in her book *Sweet Charity*, such acts serve as a “sort of ‘moral safety valve’” that allows us to feel more comfortable with the fact that so many of our neighbors lack living-wage jobs (5).

The above are only a few examples of ways that greater dialogue between Christian and scholarly communities may continue to reveal important insights into the dynamics of relations between the global West and South, and particularly between the U.S. and southern Africa. Almost invariably, discussions of trans-national hegemonies like these lead to feelings of anger and guilt regarding the egocentric actions of the powerful parties. The next section explores the problematic nature of this guilt, and how the psychology of denial sometimes presses guilt-ridden persons—such as Callie Donne—toward future self-centered actions designed to alleviate that guilt as quickly and superficially as possible.

### **United-States guilt and the psychology of denial**

All too often, we Americans like to frame the world in terms of dollars and cents, and it seems our feelings of guilt play out according to this structure. As postcolonial scholars like Georgina Horrell demonstrate, Western literature frequently defines relationships in terms of debtors and creditors, and literature about interracial interactions in the global South is no exception. Horrell notes that “the debtor-creditor relationship and its accompanying lust for cruelty is, in Nietzsche’s theory, the basis of all other social relations, moral values, and cultural production. Put another way, the concept that ‘somebody’ is guilty, that somebody ‘owes me’ and must be [. . .] made ‘to pay’ is a foundational notion in society and discourse” (20). In Callie’s case, the debt she owes is to impoverished persons in southern Africa: both the principal and its interest. This section explores Callie’s sense of indebtedness toward the people of southern Africa, and



how her quest to exonerate herself and her family is compromised by her unwillingness to acknowledge her seizure of the original sum of money as an act of theft.

In *The Talent Thief* I wanted to highlight some of the dangers of this self-centered perspective of the Christian tradition in the U.S. toward the African continent. Callie's "Charity Fair" project is inspired by her own disturbing interpretation of a pair of Biblical parables attributed to Jesus Christ, generally referred to as the "Parable of the Talents" and the "Parable of the Unjust Steward." In the former, Jesus invents a story about a rich man with three stewards to whom he entrusts three sums of money, giving each of them one year to invest his capital (called *talents* according to ancient Greek currency) and then return with interest on the principal. The first two succeed at their task. The third, however, distrusts his employer's reputation in the community and decides to hide the money in a hole in the ground. When he unearths it at the year's end and presents it to his employer, the rich man immediately fires him, and in the following year he entrusts the usurped *talent* to one of the employees who invested it toward financial gain. (*Oxford Study Bible*, Matthew 25:14-30)

When as a teenager Callie stole the offering money from her mother's desk at First German Lutheran, her impulse came from a belief that she would be a better steward and that God was calling her to take the *talent* from a servant (her mother) who failed. Accordingly, Callie feels responsible to do as the favored employees of the parable did and find a way to return the principal to God with interest. She invents her agenda according to the common American-Protestant premise that the most proper gift to God is benevolent action toward the less fortunate. Since the charity money was originally slated to benefit starving people in Mozambique, Callie chooses to invest the money in nearby

Namibia. The stakes are high: successfully increasing the value of her *talent* would validate her decision to steal the money, at the expense of both her congregation's benevolent goal and her mother's job as church bookkeeper. Failing to do so will disabuse this high-minded self-concept. According to Callie's personal theology, it means that she must face the possibility that she, like her mother, is the failed steward, who will be cast out as worthless. (*Oxford Study Bible*, Luke 16:1-23)

Callie relies upon her interpretation of the second parable for her strategy in winning God's favor and restoring her own and her mother's reputations in the community. In the "Parable of the Unjust Steward," once again a rich man trusts his steward to take care of the books. When the steward fails at his job the rich man once again decides to fire him. However, the steward decides that, if he is about to be unemployed, he will need friends in the community to support him. While he still holds the rich man's account books he visits a pair of the borrowers listed inside it and tells them that a large part of their debt has just been forgiven. In this parable, the rich man is so impressed with this shrewd and innovative thinking that he decides to keep the steward on the payroll. Callie hedges her bets on this interpretation of the character of God as a rich man in need of clever persons to handle his earthly assets. Since she has, for more than five years, essentially buried the offering money in a hole in the ground, she now believes that finding God's favor again will require a similar act of fiscal cunning.

*The Talent Thief* insists that there are dangers to this kind of self-centered charity practice. Callie's primary goal for the event is to redeem her teenaged theft; the results within the Windhoek community are secondary. Unfortunately for her, the people whom she tries to impress can sense, whether consciously or not, the fundamental dishonesty of

her project. The most profound skeptic of her project is Selma !Naruseb, coordinator of the Tura Center, whose response is modeled after a pastor at a central-Milwaukee Lutheran church who refused to accept donations from strangers. Although this pastor's congregation had limited financial resources, bustled with outreach ministries, and could certainly use every dollar put forward, the church leadership resolved only to accept donations from people and organizations with whom they built a relationship. This pastor's concern was that too many groups "throw money" at churches like his, and that any sort of interaction or benevolence would be cursory at best until the givers and recipients "at least come to break bread together" (Wheeler). His concern was for the well-being of the donors, whom he felt deserved to know the people of his congregation on a personal level, rather than give out of guilt or obligation. Similarly, Selma's initial refusal to submit the Tura Center to the raffle is because they lack any relationship to her. Her later refusals come out of distrust for Callie's methods.

The concern that this Milwaukee pastor and my Namibian community leader share is for the problematic, cursory ways that many people respond to white guilt. For reasons I can only guess at, it seems that white U.S. citizens are more able to forget the effects of our past and present injustices against non-whites than is a Caucasian person in southern Africa. Perhaps this is because the legacy of Apartheid is still fresh; any of the dozens of horrifying narratives in Antje Krog's *Country of my Skull* demonstrate an age of state-sanctioned cruelty that many living citizens remember clearly. It is far more common for literature by white southern Africans to wrestle with these themes. By bringing an American protagonist to Namibia and narrating her downward spiral of advertising tricks and confidence schemes, I wanted to highlight the ways that we, too,

have been implicated in similar racial oppression, both at home and in many places abroad.

Similar culpability can be extended to the United States as a whole, to our government and to many U.S.-based companies in connection to the current economic and political state of many countries in the global South. Graham Greene's novels offer many noteworthy examples. For one, *The Comedians* highlights ways that the political machinations of the United States helped the tyrant François Duvalier maintain power in Haiti. When the do-gooder American Smiths come with their own small enterprise in benevolence and economic opportunity, they seem ignorant altogether of this disastrous power dynamic. In the words of Anthony Burgess (as quoted by Stephen Connely Benz), "Americanism is bad in that it is fundamentally hypocritical. Talk of the 'free world' often means an obsession with American security, American trade, the augmentation of an American-led community dedicated to more and more feverish material consumption; it does not necessarily mean the spread of democratic rights" (122). Twelve years ago, my own experience as a study-abroad student at the Center for Global Education in Windhoek began this way. Many of us entered the program believing the evils and poverties we witnessed had as little to do with us as did the animals we photographed on our safari. But we soon learned otherwise.

Certain aspects of our own historical advantage are directly and indirectly linked to some of the challenges and disadvantages that Namibians face. Most significantly, for decades the United States government took a hypocritical position toward the injustices of Apartheid. Allan D. Cooper's *US Economic Power and Political Influence in Namibia, 1700-1982*, reported that, from the day the Treaty of Versailles gave South Africa power

over Namibia until the end of his study in 1982, the United States government frequently condemned the Apartheid policies of South Africa for numerous human rights violations. However, during those decades, it also consistently implemented policies that bolstered the Apartheid government's control over the region (18-9). The United Nations was likewise quick to issue declarations against Apartheid, declaring South Africa's control over the region illegal in 1970, but then waded through almost two decades of bureaucratic indecision until its mandate of independent, democratic elections in 1989. Meanwhile, as Cooper again observes, many U.S.- and European-based companies exploited the Namibian labor force and the country's abundance of mineral, fuel, and fishing resources (61). In my novel, Callie's theft of the offering money, along with her subsequent charity rhetoric coupled with scam-artist practices, mirrors this hypocrisy.

White guilt, as defined by race-relations scholar Shelby Steele, involves being confronted with our "capacity to abide evil for [our] own benefit and in defiance of [our] own sacred principles" (498). A similar feeling often results from any critical study of dishonest dealings of the U.S. with countries and communities in the global South. For the purposes of this critical introduction I will refer to the psychological effects of these harmful actions as "United-States guilt." White guilt and United-States guilt are similar in that both stem from an awareness of unfair advantage and privilege over others due to a largely arbitrary demographic difference. Because the psychological effect is similar, I will use Steele's insights about white guilt as a critical lens for Callie's charity raffle and for United-States guilt more generally. Steele notes that the reason guilt-driven acts of reparation often fail is that the primary intention of the actor is to find relief from the guilt, and the effects of his or her actions are secondary to this relief. He writes, "the fear

for the self that is buried in all guilt is a pressure toward selfishness. It can lead us to put our own need for innocence above our concern for the problem that made us feel guilty in the first place” (501). Callie designs the Helene Donne Charity Fair to provide enough fanfare that word of its success might reach her community back home and smooth over the years of resentment caused by her initial theft of the offering money from her mother’s desk. She names it after her mother, hoping that the big event will restore her good name. It is, as Steele explains, the “look of redemption” that Callie is interested in, rather than “the much harder and more mundane work of uplifting and development” (Steele 498). Callie is, after all, happy to let the spoils of her efforts fall to whichever nonprofit organization wins the raffle.

Callie’s paralysis and eventual downfall occur, in part, because guilt is so strongly discordant with a human being’s natural sense of self-image, and therefore invites cursory solutions. Psychologist Cordelia Fine writes in *A Mind of Its Own* that denial is a self-protective impulse of our psyches, which need to believe in our own inherent rightness and morality. In her chapter on “The Immoral Brain,” Fine argues that our minds are hard-wired to record any and all actions as consistent with our own moral codes, so that our memories feature delusions of nobility even as we recall moments when we have harmed others for our own benefit. As Callie has, for over five years, struggled against the memory of acquiring the money from her mother’s desk in the church office, her own psychological defense mechanisms teach her to view the act as fundamentally moral. Although she cannot disperse the guilt altogether, she strives to re-write the memory in more righteous terms.

Because her approach is so ill-conceived, the failure of her Charity Fair is certain almost from the beginning. Callie's response to her guilt disallows any substantial engagement with the people to whom she would like to donate. That is to say, Callie is caught in a double-bind: she cannot engage Selma !Naruseb in her charity-raffle until she has demonstrated her trustworthiness during personal interactions with Selma's family. However, her actions at the Tura Center and Selma's home are augmented by her desperation. Callie desires access to these Windhoek nonprofits insofar as they give her access to the suffering and dependency of southern African people, since these are the conditions she needs in order to enact her self-redemptive works of charity. This mirrors the failed attempts Steele describes in the United States to make reparations for slavery and segregation through programs such as Affirmative Action, which "contribute to [oppression] by shaping policies regarding blacks in ways that may deliver the look of innocence to society and its institutions but that do very little to actually uplift blacks" (498). Similarly, Cooper argues that U.S. policy toward Namibia during Apartheid failed due to the lack of African or African-American input into any of the policy decisions (139). Merely seeking the "look of redemption" through this kind of program may in some cases be more damaging than a lack of action, since it allows guilt to diffuse, and grants a sense for having atoned for actions one is likely to repeat in the future.

Such guilt often leads to paralysis and poor judgment. Another form of counter-productive guilt-relief that is prominent in literature of southern Africa is the impulse toward self-sacrifice, frequently among female characters. For example, in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, South African farmer Mary Turner is psychologically wracked by the guilt of having mistreated and whipped the black workers on her farm,

eventually concluding that when one of the workers comes forward to kill her, it is simply the bush taking revenge. Joy Wang writes that the novel is an illustration of “the degenerative effects of white postcolonial guilt. Mary’s experience transforms her from stubborn manifestations of generic racism to the vague feeling that something in her being is fundamentally awry” (44). Perhaps more famously, Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace* subjects herself to rape and her farmstead to arson at the hands of three violent black South African neighbors, commenting afterward, “What if . . . what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too” (158). Callie attempts a similarly masochistic escape from the reality that she and her guilt have created, trying to consign herself to the local jail. She seeks release from facing the pain she has caused, including the two significant thefts from her mother.

In this light, the two-timing confidence man Pate/Jakk plays a vital role in Callie’s journey of self-realization. His shady dealings with the Global Studies students also allow Callie’s classmate, Leona, to escape a controlling romantic relationship. The final section of this introduction explores the role of Pate/Jakk, as modeled after the Trickster figure in the San storytelling tradition, as a catalyst for productive change in the lives of the novel’s American characters.

### **The San Trickster**

In shaping the plot of the novel, it was essential that Callie’s egocentric charity scheme be disrupted by a force within a Namibian culture, something or someone as organic to the area as possible. Too often Western literature about Africa is largely governed by Western cultural forces and impulses. Too often we believe that no African



invention could be equal to what we might dream up here in what we call the “developed” world. This is also a vestige of colonial times, and the attitudes of the missionaries, settlers, and armies who made their way to the “dark continent.” Several generations ago, the missionaries who made their homes in southern Africa believed that “though all men are equal in the sight of God, a very long time must pass before this equality can be expressed in social and personal relationships” (315). Even among the cultures of Namibia, the nomadic San rank as the most economically disadvantaged, politically disenfranchised, and socially stigmatized. In the outside world, the traditions of the “Bushman” groups, if we study them at all, are often tinged in our eyes with primitivism at best (in the case of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*), and are at worst seen as an inferior literary tradition, a sign of present-day barbarianism.

*The Talent Thief* is largely a book about its American protagonist, but in giving it a Namibian setting I obligated myself to find its climax and resolution in the contact zone between the two cultures. I also wanted to achieve something similar to the epiphany one experiences in reading Dave Eggers’ *What is the What*: I wanted to show my fellow U.S. citizens the eerie parallels between the evils abroad and those we find in our own neighborhoods. Specifically, to find a resolution for Callie’s downward spiral, I needed nothing short of the ingenious, ever-changing San Trickster to reinforce the fraudulent nature of her actions, and to break through the structures of denial that defined her charity scheme. Of course, Pate/Jakk is not a “pure” African character untainted by Western culture, but then, such a person does not exist; if he did, I would hardly be qualified to represent him. What he does represent is an important trope in Namibian culture, dressed in the gray uniform of the ubiquitous Namibian security guard. Many San stories have

been influenced or re-shaped through contact with Western cultures, but this malleability seems consistent with his history as a shape-shifter; conversely, his adoption by Christianized San groups as “*Jessu Kriste*,” the ostensible “Christ”-figure, coincides with his historic role as a creator and healer.

Known in various San folkloric traditions as Pate, Jakkals, /Kaggen, N=ari tsam, or //Gǎuwa, the Trickster is a shape-shifting, self-serving creature who manipulates humans and animals alike (“The Bushman Trickster” 16). His chief concerns are his own hunger and sexual appetite. The San Trickster will lie, steal, disguise himself, play dead, and even cut off pieces of his own body to gain food or sex. In one story, he will talk a married lioness into sleeping with him; in another, he will disguise himself as the carcass of an antelope so that an attractive young (human) woman will see him as food and carry him home on her back, giving him the opportunity to slip his penis where it desires to go.

I’ll admit to using and manipulating the San Trickster toward my own narrative ends in this novel, but his character welcomes the re-invention, just as he has for generations. Some San groups in the nineteenth century, upon conversion by European missionaries, declared //Gǎuwa to be their own version of the Christ-figure, their own *Jessu Kriste* (23-4). In other regions, Trickster-figures became the heroes of stories in which a white employer was duped by his workers. Many groups today exchange stories about the days when the Afrikaaner people were pioneers in the region, imposing their cultural and economic structures as they fenced off farms for themselves. Before long, San people were obliged to make a living as wage workers on these farms. But in the world of their narratives, the Trickster figure would lampoon the *baas* (“master”), subverting his power even as the San people were becoming financially and politically

dependent upon Afrikaners like him (“The Bushman Trickster” 18, 23). In stories set in European-styled cities, the Trickster has dressed himself in a suit and posed as a wristwatch salesman in order to con a rich white man out of his money. The character welcomes opportunities to don a new skin and work his schemes against a fresh, unsuspecting mark. In some stories he even becomes Caucasian, representing the way that many San saw people of this ethnic group: “a white man, about six feet tall with a dark beard, who might look extremely handsome one moment when you looked at him, or he at you, and repulsive at another” (16). His character has few limits, and few defining features, apart from his wiliness and insatiable appetite for meat and sex. Pate/Jakk demonstrates the Trickster’s nature by seducing Leona and stealing Callie’s Charity Fairy funds.

The unifying trait of nearly all southern African Trickster-figures, according to mythology and folklore scholar Yuri Berezkin, is this ability to “oscillate between extremes, being good and bad, smart and stupid, making problems for himself and for others and resolving them” (126). The tellers of these tales code these actions as immoral, or alternately as amoral. Among groups in Namibia the latter is often true. The Trickster will steal food or manipulate women into sleeping with him, and these stories are received as lighthearted entertainment, just as Americans enjoy watching a cartoon coyote chase a cartoon roadrunner off a cliff, or Elizabethan theater-goers laughed as Shakespeare’s clowns spun out lines of bawdy insults.

Importantly, the Trickster is for the San as much a force for good and for life as he is a cheat and a scoundrel. Guenther notes that “for all [his] moral failings—cruelty, lechery, gluttony, stupidity, vulgarity—he may also exemplify the opposite traits.” At

times, the Trickster will rescue young women from ogres, mete punishment out upon violators of social covenants, and even act as an exemplar of the moral code. In some stories, he is a healer of the sick and a source of rain in times of drought (18-9). While his nature may seem dualistic to Western listeners, the Trickster is consistent within the paradigm of his culture, which does not recognize dichotomies such as chaos versus order or good versus evil (15). He is simultaneously “the inventor of all beings and things and rules and categories,” and also the one who “transforms, distorts, and inverts what he has created and decreed” (*Tricksters and Trancers* 101). We might recognize characters of similarly ambiguous morality in some European folklore as well, including the Norse god Loki or the Teutonic god Odin (“The Bushman Trickster” 13).

In *The Talent Thief*, the self-centered scheming of Pate/Jakk works to frustrate the ill-advised plans of two of the American characters. This element of the plot is based upon his ability within San folklore to bring positive change even as he exploits his targets.

In a sub-plot, Jakk is the much-needed disrupter of a controlling relationship between Leona and Michael. In seducing Leona, Jakk forces a pause into their relationship at a key moment, granting Leona the critical distance she needs in order to decide she will not marry him. This love triangle is modeled after a popular strain of Nharo (San) folk talks featuring Jakkals, Lion, and Lioness. In one of these stories, Lion and Lioness are married until Jakkals convinces Lioness to sleep with him. When Lion returns to challenge the intruder, Jakkals tricks him into acting the fool, and in the end sustains Lioness’ affections by proving himself the cleverer of the two (*Bushman Folktales* 149-

51). In many folktales the Trickster proves an able seducer of women; in one story he tricks his own mother into sleeping with him (*Tricksters and Trancers* 107).

In the Jakk-Leona-Michael love triangle I wanted to offer a San-styled version of this common theme as a counter-balance to the overwhelming pattern of love triangles as a symbol of colonial oppression and white dominance among postcolonial writers. As Beth Kramer has noted in the novels of Chinua Achebe and Graham Greene, the love triangle has become an important vehicle for capturing “both the power structures of colonization and the threat of revolution to these structures” (127). Very often, two of the lovers are white males and the object of their affection is a female colonial subject. By mutually oppressing the female “colonized lover,” the male “colonizer-lovers” bolster their own strength. But in *The Talent Thief*, the San lover—a member of the lowest social rung of Namibian society—exerts dominance over an American counterpart to win—albeit temporarily—the affections of the woman they both desire. In this situation, the disruptive love-triangle proves beneficial for Leona as well, who gains a moment of clarity through which to separate herself permanently from Michael.

More dramatically, Pate/Jakk disrupts Callie’s charity scheme with his own version of a long-con, convincing her to purchase a piece of discounted government land and then stealing the money from her as she approaches the government building for the transaction. In taking the money from her, Pate forces Callie into a state of humility and toward a confrontation with her mother. In this condition, a reader might imagine that Callie finally has the opportunity she subconsciously and indirectly has sought throughout the book: a window of opportunity for reconciliation, albeit far more painful and embarrassing than she had hoped. In stealing the money that Callie has acquired for

purchasing the land, Pate also disrupts an activity that Callie sees as benevolent. His actions force her to recognize that her “charity work” parallels the actions of the young boy whom she has just assaulted; she has stolen the money, just as this boy and his friends allowed Pate and Justus to steal it from her.

If Callie’s actions reenact, in a small way, some of the more unsavory actions of U.S.-based organizations within Namibia, then Pate represents the subversive forces within the country that have, in current and past power struggles, worked to undermine those actions, as well as the many unfulfilled desires of black southern Africans to see these unjust hegemonies upended. Much like the San Trickster who dons a suit to peddle watches to rich white fools, Pate uses his mastery of disguise to dupe his target and steal her cash. And while Callie’s debt-based theology does not hold up to the larger themes of the novel, her prediction that a greater spiritual force will deprive her of *talent* proves accurate. In this way, *The Talent Thief* demonstrates the problematic workings of American guilt within the psyches of many who turn to charity as a way to atone for social wrongdoings.

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## **The Talent Thief**

## Chapter one

Callie Donne is, as far as she knows, the only person in Namibia with carrot-orange hair and nearly translucent skin, and the only student in the Global Studies program who woke before ten this morning. For the dark cloud settling over the woman's eyes when she enters the jewelry store and extends her right hand, she might as well be a shoplifter.

“Hi, my name is Callie. I wonder if you can help me.”

The store is her eleventh touch of the day, and the most impressive, a room of white walls and black tile, its several display cases glowing under LED bulbs. The woman offers a plastic smile with the standard “how may I help you?” She's black, and looks about the age of Callie's mother. She wears a gray wool dress bisected down the front by a single ruffled stripe, and enormous solitaires shimmer at her ears.

Callie's finger traces the corner of the two thousand Namibian dollars she has tucked in a money pouch under her shirt. She read once in a sales book that money begets money; no one sponsors a charity that looks broke. She feels better with the thickness of the bills riding against the skin of her stomach, but regrets the outfit. Her loose cotton skirt and polo look unprofessional. Even on a Saturday the female shoppers of Windhoek look smart in A-line pencil skirts or pant suits draped perfectly. In view of their intricately-plaited scalps her plastic hair-clip seems childish.

“And your name is?”

The woman leans on one hand atop a case of engagement rings, and says her name is Mirjam. Any sheepishness Callie felt about asking for money here in Africa is gone now, as is the hurried stammer of her initial touches. The store is like any jeweler

back in Chicago; this shopping mall, apart from the faint scent of onions as she rode the escalator, feels like home. Seven hundred Namibian dollars doesn't seem like too much to ask. What she thinks but does not say is that the wealth of Namibia needs re-distributing.

Mirjam does not offer the segue, so she starts cold: "I hoped you could help me provide visibility and financial support to your local Windhoek non-profits." She slides a brochure and a sealed envelope across the case. When Mirjam starts at the corner of the envelope Callie stops her. She says the paper inside the envelope reveals the prize awaiting her, three months from now, at the Helene Donne Charity Fair. Any envelopes opened prior to arrival will be disqualified. Callie fights back a smile as, in the glow of the display case, the white envelope almost becomes translucent, revealing the bold letters:

**Trip to New York City!**

Mirjam must have seen them, too, because her hands are quick to tuck the materials into her bag. She asks what the fee is to become a sponsor.

Callie starts explaining that the Charity Fair will bring hope to dozens of local organizations, and when the woman frowns she wonders if she's said this part already. She starts tripping over the hard consonants in *conservation* and *kids* as she rattles off the list. Orphanages, grassroots educational programs. Food pantries.

"But. How much. Does. It. *Cost.*"

In the end it is another envelope-drop with a non-committal agreement to read the brochure, and no money. Regardless of the teaser inside the envelope, Mirjam will likely throw it in the trash over her lunch break. If she's intrigued, she might leave it on her

desk among brochures from other non-profits until it is forgotten, then rediscovered, then thrown away.

Leaving, she wonders whether this sponsorship drive is another in a long line of miscalculations. The brochure that pleased her as it inched forward out of the printer now looks corny, and on the taxi ride here she noticed a handful of spelling errors and a graphic that landed off-center. The handwriting on each of the personal messages looks like a doctor's scrawl.

Next door in the mall is an ice cream parlor, and a small group of teenagers crowd one of its outside tables, some seated and some hovering, the girls in tight clothes and the boys finding reasons to touch them. Their flirtations add to the white noise, a mix of languages she hasn't learned to differentiate between. Inside, the parlor buzzes with a happy traffic that she knows not to disrupt. She chooses a shoe store instead, a tiny space with shelves built only against the walls and no customers apart from her and two women who crouch over a line of heels they've laid out and try not to stare at her. The sales representative approaches, eyes wide with the hope of commission, and Callie balks.

She gets nowhere with the electronics store or the internet café, and when she exits the latter a security guard approaches her as though they've met before. He spreads one palm vertically over the side of her arm, slightly damp, and gestures with the other toward the diamond store. He escorts her to the back, to the manager's office, his fingers just brushing her elbow.

The exuberance of an ostensible first success soon gives way to panic. The blood rush of this secretive escort and the ammonia smell of the room go to her head, but when she moves to sit in the chair the guard clears his throat. "You are please to remain

standing.” His arms jerk a little, as if he has decided against touching her again. It is hard to guess how old he might be. His tone is almost fatherly, as though he has been sent to assess her character, but his face is young, and the skin on the ridges of his cheekbones glow under the museum lighting of the jewelry store. She is unsure how to respond to his small-talk other than to nod now and again. The room is tidy, its desk empty except for two stacked metal cases with slim drawers. Through the wall comes the din of conversation in another language.

“You can be giving it back now,” he says. “And this will not be too bad.”

This is her fourth day on study-abroad in Namibia, and she might have spent it by the pool with her classmates. Instead, she began her day in a fabric store near the tourist end of Independence Avenue, with its rows upon rows of fabric and a wall flanked with shelves of ribbon and thread in intricate gradations of color. At the counter she asked for the manager, and it did not go horribly; she struggled with the ordinary task of speaking and breathing intermittently, but she got all the words out and then offered an envelope from her file folder, tapping it a few times against the table to keep the contents in their correct position. The manager—Angela—wore a velvety red lounge-suit and no makeup, and by the clench of her arms over her chest she likely had no intention of appearing at her storefront that morning. She said no, and when Callie pressed her for an answer she stepped behind the counter and gave the expected emotionally-based response, the “I’m sorry” and “we just don’t have the money right now.”

The streets of downtown Windhoek seemed mundane, another permutation of the worlds she knew already. The storefronts were glass panels with metal-framed doors and the sidewalks were brick or cement. The traffic orchestrated the scene, its ruckus growing

as the taxi-hawks worked the crowd. She passed half-timbered, white-plastered buildings, a sit-down restaurant called the Grand Canyon, a Canadian outfitting store, a blood transfusion center. The only challenge to the un-exotic scene was the procession of Herero women, sauntering the avenue in their colonial cotton gowns and cattle-horn hats. Near the tourist shops are a few pieces of art marked “tribal” and a statue of San hunters in their loincloths.

She had her first glimmer of success at the Namibian National Bank. No manager was available, but the teller chatted at length about the value of foreign investors in difficult times like these. On the tails of this enthusiasm she endured two more outright refusals and four non-decisions; all accomplishments. Just walking through another door feels like a win. She’d planned on visiting at least forty businesses today, but after the first eight she settled on a more reasonable fifteen. She smoothed the stutter after her first line and condensed the section about the carnival games into a quick phrase, letting emphasis ride on the networking and camaraderie among businesses and non-profits. She left the envelope and brochure with the service-counter clerk at the grocery store and another pair at a low-end toy store. They won’t amount to anything, but she felt better leaving the materials there than hanging onto them.

Now the guard looks at her with a half-smile.

“I didn’t take anything.”

It’s a long time before Mirjam arrives with a paper fast-food boat in her hand. Inside it, smeared in gravy, are the five yellow-and-orange diamonds that nearly cowed Callie, each radiating from a gold chain on a delicate stem. She’d nearly botched the

whole spiel for staring at them, a fool college student in Goodwill-bought clothes and tourist sandals.

Mirjam allows them to wait several minutes as she unscrews the metal container and pulls a few slim tools from the drawers on her desk, cleaning the chain and then the tiny crevices of each pendant, then disappearing to deposit the necklace in a deeper room. When she returns it seems she is almost in tears. “Who is your friend?”

Callie balks at the question, her mouth dry. “I came here with the Helene Donne Charity Fund. About investing in the future of your country.” She is eager to say more, that she didn’t do it, but the glare from Mirjam stops her mouth.

The guard beside her makes no secret of his wonder, as though she were an old childhood friend he has just recognized; as though he expects that after this is over they will walk off together and she will reveal her secrets. It’s the sort of gawking that would give her chills, except that in this moment she feels desperate for a friend. She almost forgets Mirjam until the woman’s hands come at her from behind, moving differently than airport security, her fingers probing the bulges of fabric at Callie’s pockets, the elastic of her underwear, her socks, all the way down, then up, then down again, careful with the hem of her shirt only when an initial sweep nearly exposes Callie’s bra. She pulls the money-pouch from Callie’s neck and hands it to the guard for examination.

Mirjam unzips the pouch and fans the money. “What’s this?”

Callie says she’s collecting money for the charity fund. It is not quite lying.

The guard apologizes as he returns the pouch, and Callie is tempted to crumble into his shoulder and cry. He says something to the owner in another language. She



wonders if this is the same guard who shuffled past her earlier as she tried to explain the Charity Fair.

“Who is your friend?” she asks again. It seems Callie has been assigned the role of the stunt dummy, the innocent-looking idiot member of a lifting team.

“No one.”

Mirjam’s hands return to the same places at her pockets and sides, signaling that she is distracted. She asks to see her attaché case, pulling out each juvenile-looking item and placing it on her desk: the wrapper from the curried mince-pie she ate at lunch. A green plastic file stuffed with brochures and envelopes she’d printed off and sealed back at the house. If ever she looked professional, her façade is down now. The gray dress removes the slimmer, pointed items to one side—an eyebrow pencil, four pens and a straw. A twist tie. All possible lock-picks. The guard speaks again, gesturing a few times at the far corner of the store. Her face darkens and she interrupts him, pausing every so often to nod emphatically at Callie. The conversation intensifies until Mirjam stops again and, in the silence, Callie hiccups.

The woman looks at her as if this were a new piece of evidence. “Let me see your ID.” She copies down the information from her passport in slow block letters. As Callie tries to stifle the next outburst the guard touches her arm. “To say it in English, I have told the owner about a different woman, with a floppy coat just so,” he gestures over the crook of his arm, “looking to be in a hurry. It is a trick thieves will use. They think you will not go after this item if they have dropped it into the refuse bin, and then another comes for it after. But when it is a diamond necklace, of course we dig for it.” The guard

offers a moment afterward, watching her, as if it is important to have her consent to what he has just said. He fidgets with a fingernail, the pink of his palm facing her.

“She can go. You may let her,” says the gray dress.

The guard nearly jumps at the suggestion, and as Callie relaxes the hiccups return, louder. She remembers another woman in the room with a voice like a fairy—high-pitched, childish. She’d made conversation with Mirjam for almost ten minutes when Callie first walked in, and again Callie had almost chickened out at having someone else nearby. The woman sat two stools down from her, seemingly preoccupied with window-shopping.

“I have explained it was not you, but this other woman.” He leans against a wall and rubs his eyes, seeming almost as wearied by Mirjam’s outrage as she feels, and then opens the door.

He is slim but well-built, and Callie decides he can’t be older than twenty-five. She looks down at him, but this is true with anyone under six feet. “Can I invite you—“ she stops herself, thinking it may be a bad idea, but knows no other way to finish the sentence. His eyes narrow, as if she has offended him. “Can I invite you for a beer? To thank you?”

The guard jerks his head down with a guffaw, then rubs his face again. “Anytime,” he says. When Callie offers no suggestions he says he likes a place in the mall across from the National Museum. After another loud hiccup she lets herself laugh a bit.

On the way home Callie lets herself wander in and out of a few more stores, just to watch. She likes to think there’s something in a person’s posture that says *I am in*

*charge*, something that would allow her to address the correct person straight away instead of allowing a middle man to brush her off. She is new to the game, though she's certain the right juju is in her blood. People back home say that Teddy, her biological father, was the sort you'd trust as soon as he entered the room. He could sell life insurance to a toddler. Mom says once he took to internet sales it was as though he'd floated away into the ether. That there was no keeping him in Chicago. That the only way to know anything about him was to follow the trail of breadcrumbs, so to speak. And now, four days after the hurricane winds and giant waves overtook New Orleans—the assumed but never confirmed location of his new home—the news reports that arrive to her web browser are of no help at all.

There is time yet to write Mom. For now, she opens a new message and uses the email address she memorized seven years ago but has never used.

To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Saturday, September 3, 2005 4:12 PM  
Subject From your daughter, Callie. Are you okay?

I bet you're surprised to hear from me.

I actually know you sort of well, but that's complicated. I'll just say that Mom and I see your work all the time. We recognized your signature "Countess of Bedford" font and your signature "metaphizica" design years ago, back when I still had braces. Don't worry, your secret is safe with us. You could say we've been fascinated by you. Mom she says you came up with those things back when you were in design school.

You always impressed me. You never let anything get in your way, not even the spam filters and firewalls. Believe me, we tried. I remember how we got Microsoft Forefront right when it came out. No offense to you or your profession but we were sick of ads and also it was making Mom a little crazy. Even with the firewall it wasn't even a month before Mom got an email you sent out, asking for donations to help the tornado victims in Arkansas. Once Mom gave up on blocking you I knew you'd always be in our lives. Mom warned me it would be that way with you.

Anyway, you can't write to us at the old address because Mom and Chris live in a different neighborhood, but if you even hit "reply" and write one word and send it, I can let everyone know you made it out alive.

Sincerely, Callie

P.S., I like that you always choose endangered species in your sidebar ads. Mom says she thinks you draw them all yourself. I just wish you had passed some of your artistic talent on to me. I can't even draw a good triangle.

\*

Callie hates to leave the house, and also the television and internet, with news from Louisiana and Mississippi. Whenever things are comfortable it seems something equally horrifying must come to balance it out, as if the universe is reminding her of how much she still owes. According to the frequent emails from Mom there is no news yet about Teddy, but there are several thousand missing persons waiting in lines for busses or holed up in shelters on the high ground. It was difficult at first to watch the footage, the frightened people stranded on housetops and the over-crowded boats floating between

them. After a while Callie realized that she wasn't entirely sure what Teddy would look like, and from that moment the reports were as much a fascination as they were a tragedy, a sort of Where's-Waldo project of searching the stadium crowds for a face matching the photos of the man from her baby years.

There is time for a cigarette before she leaves for the bar, which will almost certainly be less relaxing than the quiet hum of the insects and the sublime contrasts of this yard, with its cactuses and thorny shrubs interspersed with white daisies. The ivy on the white walls framed by palm trees. Bushes with single-branched limbs and tiny, rounded leaves topped with single pink flowers. Slug-like succulents with chubby leaves folded tight upon themselves like a peony blossom, variegated in green, yellow and mauve. Trees bare of leaves but loaded with hundreds of seed pods like long lean brown beans. It is far easier to live here than in the dormitories she'd imagined when she enrolled. She'd expected a hot, crowded cement building, perhaps, but the house is cool and sunny. She'd expected cafeteria food, but a cook arrives each day at six a.m. to prepare three fresh meals for the day and sing along with the radio. Another woman comes on Saturdays to clean the place. When Callie is honest with herself, it is a relief.

As she walks downtown the sun is setting and already the heat is mellowing along with the daylight. She is lucky in this; the TV reporters comment on the humid warmth in New Orleans that clings to the asphalt and buildings long after dark. Is Teddy on a street somewhere, waiting along the shade-side of a building with the others? It would be noon there. Even in September it would be almost unbearable.

The bar at the Baobab Mall is far more elegant than the tourist dive that Callie and her friends found in the backpacker hostel down the street from their house. It is two

levels connected by two glass elevators and a spiral staircase, each with a distinct atmosphere. The upper floor is a four-sided balcony opening into a wide space with a single glowing chandelier, with a long line of stools at a bar that spans its entire perimeter; the lower is covered in small white tables and bustles with its serving staff. Callie chooses the upper level, and is almost relieved to see that the only open chairs are on the far end, obscured by the other guests. All afternoon, while trying to work on a revised sponsor letter, she'd been distracted by the problem of how to ask about that little white lie, but now that she's here, she'd rather drink alone. The prices are also much higher than at the Kudu Hostel bar; making the conversions in her head, the costs are comparable to home. She checks her math, wondering how this would be affordable in a region where wages are so much lower. She orders a Castle and has nearly twenty minutes to herself before the guard pulls out the stool beside her. "You are perhaps hiding from me." There is a brightness to his tone, as if he takes this as coquetry, a hide-and-seek ploy he finds charming. She'd thought of skipping out on him, but decided not to risk the bad karma.

"Do I—" she needs a minute to get her bearings. There is a more graceful way to start their conversation. "Tell me your name again."

He says to call him Pate, and while they wait for the bartender they have reason to look away from each other, stealing side glances. She realizes now that she is nervous, at least in part, because she expects this to be another in the line of misguided attempts at romance. She invited him here because she guessed he'd want this, a date, a reciprocation of goodwill for having rescued her from a potential visit to Namibian jail. "It's all on me, remember," she says. This offer now strikes her as more expensive than she'd planned.

“Sorry, sorry?”

“I will buy the drinks, and if you want food, then—what you want.” Now that he has changed from his gray-green security uniform to a button-down shirt, it is harder than she’d expected to make conversation. He also hasn’t smiled at her yet.

“It is okay,” he says. From his tone she doesn’t know what he means by this—whether he has accepted her offer or not. After they’ve place their orders, he clears his throat. “I have been quite nervous since Saturday. I’m glad to meet again.”

They are seated far apart, like strangers, and he looks ready to lean in. She and her female classmates are learning to expect brusque declarations of affection among the Namibian men they meet.

“I have been hoping since yesterday that you can tell me I was not wrong, at the diamond shop.” His jaw is set as he says this, and after a moment she realizes what he’s after. He is wide-eyed, almost pious.

Callie blushes a bit and tells him not to worry. She had nothing to do with the robbery. She tries to make a joke about idiot sidekicks tripping over their own feet, but she is buzzing too much and it comes out badly. Pate stares into his beer bottle, and she notices the awkward shape of his head, which is almost pointed at the back. “I didn’t. I’m not.” She doesn’t have her wits about her. “I had nothing to do with the necklace.”

“Now I can believe.” He sighs a few times. “I am just relieved to hear it. I can lose my job.”

She inhales so quickly that she sputters a bit on her own saliva. “You said you chased someone with that necklace.”

“Then you—” Pate clenches his bottle. “I am just wanting to know.”

“I swear it wasn’t me.” She considers him, wondering how long etiquette requires her to sit here. But then he breaks into a smile. “Well,” she says after a moment, studying him more openly. His expression is now like the one at the store, as if he is happy to be in her presence, regardless of what she may or may not have done with those diamonds. “Shit. Well, thanks. But you didn’t have to lie for me. The truth would have come out, with that lady. Or whatever.”

Pate looks at his beer.

“Maybe that lady did take it. Like you said.” She is getting a different read on him than what she’d noticed in the back office during the interrogation. He isn’t like the majority of men here in Windhoek. He’s paler, for one thing, and by the angle of his eyes and the almost-amber tone of his skin she thinks he might be of mixed ethnicity. There are quite a few Chinese workers in Windhoek. Pate says “I hope you’re not regretting that.”

Her head is spinning. Ordering drinks at a bar is new for her. In the States it had been enough to take their revelry into someone’s dorm room. She hasn’t ordered enough food to counterbalance the two beers, and at such a nice bar she is embarrassed. As they talk, she finds herself carrying the weight of the conversation, not because he is reserved, but when he asks a question she dithers like a schoolgirl on the telephone. He is using the present situation to his advantage, mining her for as much information as possible, but it irritates her. She likes Namibia just fine, yes. Everyone makes her feel welcome, yes. Her hair was always this color. She enjoys the meat, yes, the meat in Namibia is the best she has ever tried.



He says he is very sorry to hear about the hurricane in the United States. When he asks if she knew anyone who was affected by it she says yes, and then stumbles to find some smaller, more anecdotal story to tell him in place of the one that, in this compromised state, might set her to crying. Because he's taking such an interest she attempts to take stock of him, to form an opinion, but even with a day's rest after the interrogation in the back office she's unable to focus. She'd like to know what he sees in her. It is another episode in a pleasant but bewildering new development here in Namibia: men find her attractive. They've approached her at the grocery and leaned toward her in shared taxis. So also with this security guard. In the store he'd been shorter than her, but on the bar stool the difference is erased. He seems tall, in fact. She might be slouching. His eyes, covered by thick upper lids, seem to draw back slightly, pulling her toward him.

She can't guess why. Looking around the room, every woman is more slender than she is, and all of them adhere to a dress code to which she was, once again, oblivious. But Pate's eyes seldom stray from her now, and he has more questions. He wants to know about the Dallas Cowboys and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. She is sure she is not, by any standard she has heard of, pretty. She has never felt like anything other than an overly tall, blaze-haired woman with too-large thighs. And, roughly once a month, a fresh outbreak of acne announces itself in sharp contrast to her skin. She is, perhaps, a novelty to him. An American, attractive insofar as she is a U.S. citizen and therefore has a desirable position in the world. He wastes little time transitioning back to personal questions, asking about the university she attends back home, which part of town she is now staying in, and how long she will be there.

In front of them is the sausage sampler she has ordered, but she isn't sure if he has eaten any. It hardly matters. What's done is done, he has helped her out of the mess and now they are drinking together. It will be an encounter to tell her friends about when she gets home.

"I think you are quite fortunate," he tells her, letting his fingers curl open. Callie watches his hands, letting her own drop to the bar top, close enough for him to reach if he wants to. He stares openly, but she can't read his eyes, and she'd like him to do something, to offer some indication of how he's looking at her.

"It's almost like you see straight through me."

"What does this mean?"

"Do you have somewhere you need to be?"

"It is fine, Callie. I am here. It is fine." He slaps the surface of the table a few times.

This is the first time he's said her name. "You don't trust me," she says, climbing down from her bar stool. She stands at his elbow, spreading her arms and smiling through a corner of her mouth. "You should check. See if I have anything on me—weapons? Diamonds?"

His eyes trace the top half of her body and then he squeezes her shoulder. "If you are having this, it is not a problem for me."

She leans against her bar stool. "You don't think I could." The words tumble out of her mouth with a giggle. It is a pleasant way of using language, not in the hard-edged industrious way, but tangentially. She might be flirting.

“I think you can do anything,” he says, but he is distracted by something flashing across the television screen; soccer scores, perhaps. She has time to settle back onto the stool before he looks at her again. She feels like a fish that, after taking the bait, has been left dangling on the line.

Perhaps what makes him such an able security guard is this unflinching calm, the way he throws out questions and then listens mutely.

“You *have* to know I’m innocent,” she says. “From back there. The other day. I bet you know it already and you didn’t have to ask me those questions.” She lets her shoulders waggle. If he tried to kiss her right now she’d let it happen.

He pauses a bit too long before replying, leaning back and tucking both hands behind his head. “Yes, I knew it.”

“The way you do that. What are you doing?”

He is looking straight at her, but in the dim light she can’t tell whether the small smile on his face is sympathetic or frightening.

“You’re doing it right now.”

“Explain to me, please,” he says.

“Okay, it’s just a little bit maddening. You’re like a statue, you know? Like a . . . a stone person in a museum.”

His hand moves to rub the top of his head, then his cheeks. “It is just my way.”

“You’re fucking good at it.”

He clears his throat and she feels embarrassed for cursing. “And what about this thing you were doing at the shops?”

“I told you.”

He pauses before rephrasing the question. “You had this briefcase, and I heard you speak.”

“Why was I? Fundraising. I’m trying to raise money for a Charity Fair this coming December.

“What is the charity?”

“Non-profits, grassroots. Dozens of organizations, it will be.” She wishes she had a few names to throw out. “It isn’t easy. Maybe if I weren’t a foreigner, people would treat me differently. Sometimes it seems people don’t trust me.”

The animation in his face during their first meeting is gone altogether.

“They don’t trust me. You don’t. I can tell.”

“It is something you are doing, then. Must be.”

“Why the *fuck*—“ she pauses at the word, liberated now that she can swear comfortably in front of him, “does everyone ask me if I have accreditation for the Donne Fund. Like I’m fucking Rumpelstiltskin going after their firstborn child. I’m just asking for seven hundred Namibian.”

His mouth moves into a frown, as if this is the wrong answer. It seems her intelligence has dropped in his estimation. “If you are just one person, it is too much to be doing this. But you can be trying with another. With a group of people. Alone, it cannot be.”

Callie snorts. “The last thing you should tell me is that I can’t do something.”

“It is better for you.”

“If you tell me I can’t do something, I have to do that thing. It’s compulsive.”

When he doesn’t respond she adjusts her silk scarf, spreading it over the exposed skin at

her neck. She pivots on her stool to face the bar. It has only been two beers, but she is drunk and she knows it.

On the television she realizes it is a rugby game, not soccer. “I don’t even know the rules to rugby,” she says.

He accepts the side-bar and gives her an overview of the rules. She isn’t listening, but the topic works to thaw him into a more human form.

During the commercials she makes a bet with him about another couple at a nearby table. “You see that woman over there? I bet you another round that in the next hour, she’s going to leave. And I’ll bet that the guy she’s sitting next to will leave separately. Or—or he’ll stay behind.” Based on the woman’s recent inability to sit still and a nervous reach for her purse, Callie figures the odds of being right are 70-30, though this hardly matters.

He accepts.

There is something about Pate she needs to figure out. When they discussed the incident at the diamond store, there was something odd in his voice, a shift in inflection. A tremor.

The subject of sports has reversed the tide of the conversation favorably, and Pate chatters at length about pick-up soccer games—*football matches*— he plays on the weekends.

When she pulls out her wallet to pay the tab, she remembers something she meant to ask him. “Do you remember back at the diamond store, how the lady asked for my passport?” He nods. “Do you remember if she ever gave it back to me?”

The question prompts him to recount the events of the interrogation—how they'd searched her bags, patted her down, asked her questions. She comments that it's a strange way to meet someone new.

As soon as the woman begins fidgeting with her purse again, Callie excuses herself to the bathroom, and makes sure she's out of view when the woman leaves. Less than a minute later the man walks out in the same direction. "You win," she says.

"I do not think so. I am now buying for you." He doesn't look up from his beer as he says this. Between them on the bar top is the empty plate, and it is likely that Callie has eaten all of the sausage herself. She wonders if there was something indelicate about this, some kind of turn-off. And then she sees that the problem is simpler than she realized. "Pate," she says, squeezing his hand, "it is *nice* to be here with you. I am enjoying myself. I got angry, but I'm having a good time."

He squeezes back, slightly, before she lets go. He says he's also enjoying the visit.

*Visit.*

"A date, isn't it?" she asks him, tilting her head until he looks at her. "Isn't it a date?"

"Can be," he says, and it seems finally he's looking back at her. "Very much it can be."

\*

## Chapter two

Callie has missed class, at least two classes. She isn't sure what the consequences of this will be, given the non-traditional structure of the program. When there is a "see me" note in her mailbox from Professor Renée Erickson, this seems like the natural topic of conversation. Professor Erickson is the American half of the teaching team. She is also the one to appear at the front of the classroom on Tuesday morning, even though it is the other professor's session. They expected to see Professor Iris Shokatovola, the charismatic Herero woman with a Ph.D. from the University of Cape Town. Judging by her t-shirt and jeans, it seems Professor Erickson did not expect to be here, either. She says her colleague has been delayed, and then looks at her own shoulder for a long moment before beginning: "Respect," she says. "Is at the heart of any meaningful cultural encounter you will ever have." It's a warning of sorts, something about the difference between tourists and the people who actually care enough to study what's really going on. Ironic, given the circumstances. Every morning they sit for two hours of lecture, watching this or that powerpoint presentation, and then another two of discussion after a break. Meanwhile, there is a news camera somewhere in the American South that will have panned over Teddy's face, confirming the good news that she already suspects but which she would like to see for herself. And then there are the business hours here in Windhoek, which slide away from her while Professor Erickson chews them out for being tourists.

Their desks are arranged in a circle around the perimeter of the room, and to Professor Erickson's left are the three smilers, Jackie, Seth and Leona, who seem to have missed the insult implicit in these statements. The rest of them slouch a bit farther. It is

one of those teacher moments that she will likely not recover from, building a wall between herself and the class. Her arms hang awkwardly at her sides, as if she lacks a way to fold them. Her hair, usually smoothed and shined with hairspray, hangs in a loose braid. Callie searches her memory of the first two weeks of classes for some indication of what the problem might be.

“I hope very much,” says Professor Erickson, her voice milder, “I hope very much you’ll be able to enjoy Namibia to its fullest extent.” She is backpedaling, as if she has noticed how the tension in her words has permeated the room, but Leona looks like she still takes this seriously. Leona is Callie’s short-haired, blunt-nosed friend, who tortures herself with two hours at a chat window every day, trying to convince her boyfriend that there are no hyenas roaming the streets of Windhoek.

When Professor Shokatovola rushes into the room, everyone looks to her for some kind of relief. She is oblivious to whatever has just been said. Professor Erickson moves to excuse herself. Professor Shokatovola begins while she is still short of breath, reading in half-sentences until she recovers. It is a story from a paperback, a story about Christmas, and it moves quickly from foreshadowing deep violence into thick description. A Namibian family gathered for the holiday, visited by the South African police. The father murdered. The house lit on fire. She lets the story settle on them, banishing once again any enthusiasm they may have felt for the balmy morning and the sun coming in through the windows. Professor Shokatovola addresses them directly, her head cocked a bit. “How much of this are you prepared to take, this semester?” she asks them, and holds up the large, soft-cover book. “Can you read this all if I assign to you the entire book? Will you do it?” She starts pulling books out of a backpack. “How about



these? This? *Kaffir Boy*?” She starts piling them on the table in front of her. “And then we have articles about the land allocation issue,” she says, pulling a thumb drive out of her pocket. “And drought. Domestic violence. Also, terrible hunger in the black urban communities.” She looks at them. “This is all what I must show you, to show you Namibia.”

The professor’s voice has a lilt, not an accent, from her Herero background, blended with the color of her British-English education. Her English is impeccable. “I will take you to visit places where people will show you things you want never to have seen. It is the truth of our country. I’m told that students who come to this program are often disillusioned. It is not what they thought, to be here. I will show you things that maybe will make you think badly of your own country.”

Someone in the room snorts.

“But this is the only way to show you about Namibia what is most beautiful. You can be in love with this place more than any other in the world.”

It might be possible, thinks Callie, to simply stay here. If the Charity Fair goes well, maybe she will stay on as a volunteer somewhere. She could collect video footage from the winning non-profits for the website, and send home little stories to Mom.

“Do your little bit of good where you are,” says Professor Shokatovola, quoting Archbishop Tutu. “It’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.’ You must try. Even when it seems you are doing nothing. Even when you realize you have been working for weeks or years and nothing happens. You have to try even after you know you have been wrong. You can still do good. We must remember what Tutu says and keep trying.”

\*

Renée Erickson dislikes being in her office before seven a.m. when it is still cold. In her four years here in Windhoek she's handled the dry heat well enough, but she can never seem to get warm until the sun is well established. From the student house next door she can hear angry voices from the early risers, already settled in near the television set and shouting at whichever American politician is currently giving a speech about the hurricane and flood relief efforts. This would be a different experience for them if not for what is happening back home. Their emotional energy is spent. She can normally expect a group to start the term with about two weeks of distracted but whole-hearted effort, but not this semester. A wiser instructor would know how to take advantage of this, turning anger into a teachable moment. She could draw a parallel between Apartheid here and class warfare back home in the United States. She could point out the differences in skin color between the people in the rescue helicopters and the arms waving out the windows of flooded houses. But it's never simple. She is reluctant to stick them with easy comparisons. It seems to her that the dividing lines were drawn differently in this case, and that the people crowded into the Superdome are there not because they are black but because they are poor. Because they lack vehicles, or because at a low-skilled job a person who doesn't show up on Monday—hurricane or no hurricane—might not have a job on Tuesday.

She truncated their very first orientation session in favor of a sharing-and-meditation time, to soothe the raw nerves of a house stationed for twelve hours and more around the television and laptops. These young people are strangers, they know nothing

about each other, and the bonds of trauma are forming quickly, according to physical proximity. On the television swirls the great white hurricane over the map of the gulf coast, hypnotizing them with its dark eye. The images that start to blur together, the gray-washed cityscapes from Biloxi seeming identical to those on the Mississippi delta.

The students arrived to the Global Studies program after watching the wrath of Hurricane Katrina on their television sets for two days, after seeing on the airport television the omnipresent images of people rowing boats through oil-slick water. They have kept vigil at the television every night, staring at eight p.m. when the English-language report comes on.

If there were more money, Renée thinks, they could hire someone to live in the house with the students, twenty-four-seven, to handle things like this. She is tired of being on call for personal crises. Their three-woman staff, being two parts preoccupied faculty and one part mornings-only secretary, could also use a hand with all the paperwork and phone calls and thank-you cards to various organizations they were partnering or who invited the students.

As always, the program is like an enormous weight she must balance. There's no reason to think this—it is fine, stable, five and a half years running. But while she is fond of her new colleague, it seems she has little teaching experience to speak of, and the bulk of the administrative work falls to her. The class this year seems promising, a relatively well-balanced assortment of activists, future social workers and Peace Corps volunteers, plus a spattering of other public-servant types. The students who signed up for a semester that will likely break their hearts. A few brushed up on their African current events before they came; others barely know how to find Namibia on a map.

She is startled when Callie knocks; she'd nearly forgotten about their appointment. Telling her that she will not be able to conduct her charity work on the Global Studies computers, or use their office supplies and printers, proceeds as painfully as she expected. Up close the girl is physically intimidating, and Renée works first to show polite interest in the project. She finds the membership part a bit confusing; it seems that this student wants to enroll local non-profits into a sort of lottery for money gathered from businesses in the community. It's a young person's project, with visions of fanfare, sparkling wine, and a large collection bucket passed around. From a student who has seen too many infomercials. "I'm not the one to convince, I'm afraid," Renée says after a while. She explains that there are strict rules about how Global Studies resources are used. Callie's eyes are wide and she offers small words of agreement, her nails digging into her palms. "It's pretty serious penalties," Renée continues. "First time is a fine and a warning, and then you could end up on academic probation."

Callie is entirely still in her chair, and only her eyes move, slowly, to meet Renée's. When she locks in it is Renée who breaks eye contact.

"Okay, that's all."

Callie clears her throat. "This could all be a lot simpler."

"The simple version is: first time, warning and fine. Second time, probation."

"Are you threatening me?"

It is worse than painful. Disastrous. "Ralph Anders in the central office of GSN, back at Gutenberg University. If you want to write to him—"

"But you're telling me I can't be in the program if I keep working on my charity."

“No GSN property—GSN rules stipulate that no property be used for outside projects, especially for business reasons. It’s the contract you signed before you came.”

“That’s not how you explained it the first time.”

There is also the point to make about attendance, but this would be a topic for a braver soul or a different day. Renée tells Callie to re-read her copy of the Global Studies contract and then dismisses her.

\*

On September eleventh the student house is morose, and to Callie, being here in Namibia seems like cheating. The television reporters can’t choose between the current hurricane and the anniversary of the terrorist attacks. Between these American disasters come the reminders of other troubles in the world: images of Saddam Hussein with an overgrown beard and bags under his eyes, refusing eye contact. The rioting in Paris, the crowds of Israeli pedestrians leaving the Gaza Strip. It seems that not only the United States is crumbling, but the world. One of the television cameras from New Orleans shows line after line of people, all injured or sick, laying out on stretchers, waiting to be rescued. The main event is the looters, strolling down the aisles of Wal-Marts with shopping carts full of clothing and food and electronics. Things to fulfill the basic needs, and then something to sell. The reporter is sympathetic. “In a time of emergency,” she argues, “people do what they must to survive.” Who wouldn’t do the same?

The demographics on the broadcasts are shifting. A few days ago it was a blend of people—black, white, and Hispanic, old and young—from those waiting beside their cars along packed highways to frantic people giving interviews and those waiting on rooftops.

Now it is different. It is a relief, finally, to have something concrete to aim their fury at. The reporters won't acknowledge it, but Callie and her classmates have spent the morning discussing the assassination of Steven Biko and to their eyes the disparity is startling. An angry mob has gathered near a nursing home, evicting the residents and demanding access to their food supplies.

“Developed country my ass,” someone says.

\*

By the start of her second week in Windhoek, Leona's only film material is the footage she's taken during an afternoon at Dan Viljoen Game Park, which amounts to several panoramas and a long shot of springbok in the distance. It is hard to explain her vision to Michael, who waits for her back home every evening on the other end of MSN Messenger. After class is finished and they've had lunch, her classmates visit friends or venture downtown for shopping, but this is the only window of opportunity they can find to keep connected while she's abroad, in the hour before he goes to work. Sometimes he has nightmares of her being stranded in the desert, or kidnapped by warlords into the Congo. So, in the early afternoons she stares at a chat window and thinks of ways to reassure him. Today he wants to know what they talk about in a class called “Religions of southern Africa.” Michael avoided all extra-curriculars while in college and has a hard time understanding why a four-month excursion to Africa counts as credit toward a degree. He wants to know whether she is being indoctrinated into some Voodoo cult. She writes that there's no Voodoo on this part of the continent. He asks her whether she is

taking her malaria pills, and she tells him there are no such mosquitoes in the area. “It’s safe here, mostly,” she writes. All the same, he feels better when she checks in with him.

She’d like to ask him about taking a long weekend up north in San territory, to do some scouting. She’d hire an interpreter and ask for stories. She lacks a concrete storyline or theme for her film; it is the landscape here that attracts her, and also the dream of meeting a member of the *original affluent society*, to use Marshall Sahlins’ term. She would like most to visit the San people, who can bore a tiny hole in the side of an ostrich egg, fill it with water, and survive on no other fluids than this for a whole month. Who gather berries and roast insects.

Michael has purchased his tickets. He says the four weeks will be all of his vacation for the rest of the year. “I may lose a few clients,” he writes.

She types that he won’t be sorry.

During the last twenty minutes of the conversation she types into the laptop while hurrying to change and fix her makeup. Although another line appears, asking her plans for the afternoon, she closes out the program and finds her sandals. Her first idea is to visit the Single Quarters Market and try out the words of Oshiwambo that Daphne, the cook, has been teaching them. But she isn’t sure whether it is a good idea to visit Katutura alone, and instead she finds herself walking to the Kudu Hostel. The Kudu is a small, garish two-tone building; its original structure is a white brick building in need of a power-washing, with the other third an incongruous wood-shingled extension in brick red. Painted on the fence is a curly-horned cartoon antelope wearing a wife-beater and holding a beer, alongside the slogan, “A face only his mother could love.” The place advertises bunk beds at N\$40 per night and a bar that’s open “until the ass-crack of

dawn.” Posted irreverently at forty-five degree angles from the top points of the door frame are two pair of Kudu horns, whose enormity and grace are betrayed by green paint polka-dots. The Global Studies students like it because it is cheap, and because it attracts people like them—foreigners who came to Windhoek without much idea of what to do with themselves.

She is friends with the bartender now, and they can take a shot together before she decides how to spend the free hours. Entering the lobby of the Kudu is like coming into an entirely different building—the space is almost elegant, its front desk an antique bar with a bright brass railing, and on its back wall is a floor-to-ceiling mural of a watering hole with its congregation of antelope, jackals and birds. Near the windows are couches with cheap canvas upholstery, and seated on one of them, holding an envelope up to the ceiling light, is Callie. The coffee table in front of her is littered with papers, plastic bags, and boxed of envelopes. She stares at the envelope so intently that Leona wonders whether Ella, their classmate, might be right; perhaps she is mentally handicapped in some way.

Leona moves a box of envelopes to sit beside her. “It’s hard to get to class when there are other, more important things going on. Am I right?”

Callie nearly jumps at her voice. “Well, shit,” she says. She mumbles a string of questions about whether Professor Erickson seemed pissed off.

Leona says it’s hard to say, given that her face seems like that most of the time. “I told her you didn’t look well this morning.” The sheer chaos of the table in front of them is oddly soothing, a reminder that her own life isn’t as crazy as she’d thought. She asks whether she can help with the envelopes.



“I’m going to be very picky about it,” says Callie, placing a box in her hands so quickly that Leona suspects she didn’t need to volunteer. She is given a ruler to measure three inches from the left edge of the envelope and one inch up, the correct position for the sticker, which should form a seal over the flap of the envelope. It reads:

Helene Donne Charity Fund Giveaway!

Buy me **before December 2<sup>nd</sup>** for only **N\$700**

Buy me **at the gate** for N\$1000

Prizes awarded at the Helene Donne Charity Fair

Saturday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2pm

Zoo Park, Windhoek, Namibia

(prize is **void** if envelope is opened prior to admittance on day of charity fair)

After adorning a few envelopes, however, she sees that Callie is dissatisfied with her work. “Are there addresses? I could copy them onto the envelopes instead?”

“No addresses,” she says. “I don’t know who it’s going to until I put it in their hands.” Callie has drawn a template on the yellow pad in front of her, and shows Leona how to fold each flyer to exactly the right dimensions. When folded down, she explains, the top right edge of the flyer should be fitted flush with the bottom right edge of the envelope.

Leona compliments her on the choice of font and detailing. The flyer is a simple stock-weight page with the advertisement:

The Helene Donne Charity Fund presents its

**Charity Fair!**

Sponsors presenting *this envelope* at the door are eligible for the

**prize** listed on the back of this flyer, including a

two-week, all-expenses-paid

**Trip to New York City!**

The flyer must be positioned so that, when held up to the light, she explains, the logo on the envelope does not obscure the print inside the envelope. Through the envelope, a single bold line is legible:

**Trip to New York City!**

The stack of envelopes reminds her of the dining-room table of her childhood home. Until she was in the fourth grade her parents worked as Ambassadors for Christ on college campuses, sending out mailings every two months to their current sponsors and recruiting new ones every spring. They spent weeks pouring over lists and letters on their computer, and paid small fortunes for boxes of color-printed newsletters. They wrote notes by hand.

Callie asks Leona if this is her big filming weekend. They've discussed her aspirations a few times now. This time, Callie looks up with a smile and squeezes her hand. "I have an idea!"

Leona has been casually flipping through the backsides of the flyers, which list

small prizes such as a coupon for half off at Benito's Pizzeria, bottles of wine, and a month of unlimited SMS credit through MTC phone service.

Callie tells Leona that she needs a promotional video for her campaign. Something to post on the Helene Donne website, announcing the featured non-profits. Two-minute montages, perhaps. She says she can pay an hourly rate, and maybe some travel money.

Leona thanks her, but it's unlikely that Michael would want her going into the sorts of places that non-profit organizations work in. She changes the subject, commenting that if you look around the reception desk to the mural on the wall are four small painted men in safari hats with rifles, one of them sighted on the herd of curly-horned kudu.

\*

By Wednesday evening Callie realizes she must have misunderstood something about Monday night. It is a running joke among the female students that the three-day rule doesn't apply to Namibian men. "If it has been three *hours*," said one of the girls, "you can assume he's not interested."

But Pate does call, finally, on Thursday afternoon. It is a household joke now to insist that Madison answer the phone, since it is likely someone calling for her. At five-foot-eight with honey-colored hair and bronze skin, she's often taken for a celebrity, usually Shakira or Beyoncé. The resemblance is real enough, everything but her wardrobe, which is modest and mousy-hued. She's like a celebrity trying not to look like a celebrity. Madison answers, and everyone else waits to hear who it is that reeled one in.

She doesn't remember giving him the number for the landline here at the house, but perhaps in the heat of the moment she'd wanted his call to arrive to her this way, with Madison announcing it to the house.

Answering, Callie imitates the chirpy voice she's heard the other female students use, but on the other end Pate is all business. "I want to say, it is best for you not to go back to the Wernhil Park Mall."

"Nice of you to call," she says, letting the sweetness in her tone linger as a bit of irony. "You are welcome."

"What—how are things with you?" she says, closing the door and tucking herself into the far corner of the room.

"It is not so good," he says.

She asks him what's wrong, and wonders as she says this whether she's laying it on too thick. Pate is quiet. To fill the silence she says, "You can tell me, if you want."

There is no sound from the living room. She kneels on a chair, backward, facing the exterior wall.

Pate says he's had trouble with his job.

"Was it because of the—?" She waits for him to reassure her, but on the other end is only the electric hum of the phone connection. "They didn't let you go, did they?"

"Sorry?"

"Did they fire you? Stop your job?"

"Not for permanent."

Callie remembers the steely expression of the diamond-shop owner, and the way her displeasure seemed to fill the tiny office. "You mean it is temporary?"

“They must bring me back, I can guarantee this. It is too difficult for them.”

Callie tells him she’s sorry to hear about the bad luck, scanning her memory for places they might meet up for cheap. “We can go for a walk,” she says, “when can I meet you?” Outside in the yard, a small gray creature shuffles through the dead leaves and out past the fence into the courtyard where they hang their laundry.

“I don’t think it is good for us to meet again.”

“Okay,” she says, feeling like a car that has jerked suddenly into reverse. She asks if he will be stationed at the diamond store again when he is re-hired. “Do you—can you see if that lady has my passport?”

“It isn’t a good idea for us to meet,” he says, louder this time.

She is ready to offer a rebuttal about simply conveying the information via text message, but if he has some deeper objection to communicating, she doesn’t want to hear it.

When she arrives the next day, the Namibian Artisan Jeweller store seems smaller than she remembers, and the owner is surprised to see her, fumbling with the lock on a jewelry case and then hurrying to stand between Callie and the door. The security officer who arrives is someone else, of course, a man with thick brows and big feet.

Callie says she came about her passport, which she seems to have left here.

The back office is more cluttered today; catalogues are splayed across her desk and on the floor. The woman is in purple with large solitaire earrings. “We have footage from the security cameras,” Mirjam says, rising from her chair almost as soon as she has sat down in it. “Hard to imagine that person could be anyone but you.” She folds her hands in front of herself, as if trying to let the words sink in.

The cards have been dealt. Uninvited, Callie pulls a chair from the side of the room and seats herself on the other side of the desk. She crosses her legs. "I didn't. I'm not the one." Mirjam's eyes study Callie but then drift aside, searching the air. A stutter in her breathing shows she doesn't have a clue what to do next. She lacks a plan.

The only way out of a situation like this, she thinks, is to be the calmer person, at least on the outside, but she hadn't guessed this situation could be so intimidating. She'd imagined a conversation like this in the masochistic daydreams she sometimes inflicted upon herself. The fictional world exhilarated her with its mild rumbling of fear. Daydreams like that were what got her out the door this morning to start her fundraising, but in the current situation she could wet herself.

"We have the video, stored and on file. The woman you blamed was nowhere near the place of the robbery." The woman *you* blamed. On the video she plays from her computer there is, quite clearly, no one near Callie for several minutes. Mirjam pauses the video as soon as the image of Callie moves away, pointing to the door of the case which hangs ajar. As another guard enters to stand by the door, the bet has been seen and raised.

She says she wants the name of Callie's partner, but this would be less important than other information that the ostensible thief might provide. Callie waits for the security guard to come back in and arrest her. No, a guard couldn't do that. The police, then. It might be several minutes.

"You have the wrong person," she says, and only after the words emerge does she realize how she can get out of this room.

"That is not for me to decide anymore," says the owner.

The ambiguity of this phrase suggests that she has not yet called the police, and can be persuaded not to. “You want to know how someone picked your lock?” Callie asks, lowering her voice. The woman’s eyes turn to daggers, bearing down on her. “I—I need to go. I need to get back to school. We have a project. I’m a college student.”

The school project is a lie and they both know it, but Mirjam nods in assent to the deal. “Tell me *who* first,” she says. “And next I will ask to know how.” The woman studies her eyes, then her hands, which Callie can’t help but let twist and fidget. There’s only one name that she knows to give.

Now that she has an exit strategy she’s a little safer, and the jitters rush over her. She is almost shaking, but the tale is easy to tell. She describes a wrist-and-fingertips technique that she remembers from playing the cello in seventh grade. She throws in a couple of jargon-sounding words and something about sensor imbalance. The woman writes it all down.

When Mirjam escorts her from the store, Callie pauses at her side before stepping off the marble tile onto the main walkway, as if an amber-skinned man might be waiting around the corner to confront her.

\*

Because Professor Erickson has effectively kicked her off campus while she is fundraising, Callie settles in at one of the pay-per-hour computers at the Kudu. Afternoons are busy here, with the bar-goers emerging from their dorm rooms to find breakfast and the *combis* returning from the Etosha game park, or Walvis Bay, or some dune-riding four-wheeler excursion. Even the lobby with its tall ceiling feels

claustrophobic and begins to smell like the bodies of tourists coming in from the heat. Being thus far unsuccessful in recruiting business sponsors, Callie decides to start from scratch with the non-profits she will register as beneficiaries for the raffle.

Down the hall there's a shouting match—Russian, perhaps, or Polish—and a clatter of dishes. A person would expect, in such a place, that the computers would be a haven for advertising spam, pop-ups, and viruses, but in comparison to the din around her, the internet world is mute. She pauses from her recruiting work to check a few reliable places: an AOL account that she has intentionally developed as a breeding-ground for junk mail. A series of shady websites. MySpace wallpaper sites. Napster. These were the places she knew to find Teddy, with his bubble-eyed cartoons and the bright red Helvetica font.

It is a difficult age for internet advertisers. The top bar of her browser flashes, telling her about the pop-up ads it is holding back from her. She resets the security parameters and lets the flood rush in, its icons flashing as emphatically as the lights on a police car. She wades through several websites offering free downloads of Grand Theft Auto and Halo. Soon she is awash in dancing babies, Red Cross advertisements, and diet pill offers. The scum of the earth is also among them, new so-called charity groups: [saveneworleans.org](http://saveneworleans.org) and [katrinavictims.com](http://katrinavictims.com) and [katrinarelieffund.org](http://katrinarelieffund.org). The straight-to-their-own-pockets organizations.

It has always been her guilty pleasure, whenever a natural disaster strikes, to watch Teddy spring into action. Last winter was perhaps the most innovative she'd seen yet: the tsunami that devastated south Asia saw the launch of an ad which caused her browser-window to tremor and shudder, rhythmically, like the out-flowing of large



waves. She'd worried at first that it was a virus, but once the mock-up of a Salvation Army banner came up, she knew. Clicking forward, it was of course not the Salvation Army but a new clinic to prevent hair loss. He is nothing if not tacky, but this is what allows her to find him so easily in the crowd. Today, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, she sees nothing.

It is likely that he has been unable to access a computer since the storm and floods hit. It is possible that through this trauma he has grown a conscience and decided not to be such an opportunist. She'd like to see him go straight, with all his talent. Although he's not the predatory type, he thrives on misdirection: click on the link to "Help the Refugees of Darfur" and find a promotion for a ten-day safari in Kenya and Tanzania. Try the flashing Confederate Flag, and he'll take you instead to Liberty Precious Metals. It is a living.

\*

To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Friday, September 16, 2005 5:08 PM  
Subject I sent you money (loan).

Dear Teddy,

I thought you might need some money for emergency expenses, so I deposited a few hundred into your paypal account. I wish I could say I don't need it back, but the money's not entirely mine to give you. It's only a loan to get you out of New Orleans or wherever you are. Pay me back when you can.

I thought it was the daughter who's supposed to borrow money from the Dad, haha.

You might be wondering how I got your email address and paypal info. You don't have to worry, because your personal materials are secure from the rest of the world, but I happen to have a friend who's the greatest wizard in all of Chicago. She found you for us in less than an hour. You can trust her—she is the most ethical person I know. She helps me look in on you once in a while, but we have never ever moved or taken anything. Anyway, if you write back maybe we can talk a bit this way and I wouldn't have to look in like this anymore.

Sincerely, Callie

\*

The dogs of the neighborhood are louder in the late morning. Today is the first time Callie has noticed; it's a Tuesday but class has been canceled so that the professors can hire a night guard for the house and office. From the balcony she can peer discretely into the courtyard every time the buzzer sounds, watching the next applicant walk through the gate. Since the first buzz at five to nine she smoked through half a pack and read three times over the first page of a dry article from *The African Historical Review* that Professor Shokatovola assigned.

They'd depended on a cheery older gentleman named Linus since the program launched four years ago, but Linus says it is too cold for him to sit out all night on the chair. His sudden retirement has Professor Erickson in a near panic. Today they are holding interviews.

Last night she didn't sleep; even an hour in the pool did nothing for her. During the wee hours she'd almost called Mom, but the timing is off. The coincidence is alarming, but Mom has chosen this week—of all possible times—to visit their old congregation at First German Lutheran. She reported that they have a new pastor, and the highlight of her trip was when he shook her hand and said he was delighted to meet the founder of the Adult Choir. As she has mentioned nothing and no one else, it is safe to assume the rest of the visit went horribly.

Thankfully, any anxiety she felt over a week of not hearing from Pate has passed. The relief she feels now at not seeing him enter through the gate indicates that her romantic interest was superficial at best. She even called him, two days ago, about this job. He didn't answer, and she left a message to come to the Global Studies house—19 Strauss Street, Windhoek West—right away on Tuesday. She'd called again yesterday to repeat the message and her mobile number if he had questions. She told him to bring his résumé and promised to put in a good word for him. It was foolish; did she really want to see this man every evening? Watch her prettier classmates bring him a plate of dinner?

She means to get caught up with her reading, as a peace-offering to Professor Erickson who makes no secret of being uneasy around her. They are reading about the democratization of rural Namibia, post-Independence. It is the most sparsely populated country in the world, and the question is how can these people show up for the vote, let alone learn about the candidates beforehand? Callie would like to know how she can be expected to come to lecture, let alone do these readings. She is taking a hiatus from the Charity Fair this week; it has occupied too many of her waking hours, and she'd like to pass her classes.

When the house phone rings on Thursday morning during Political Science, Callie knows it is him. The lonely ringing seems evasive; she has told him they have class every morning except Friday. Before returning his call she takes care of all the dishes in the sink and manages the entire chapter on the Odendaal Commission. Then she takes a nap.

He answers right away, cheerful.

Her eyes and mouth dry, she asks how things are going and, following his cue, in her brightest voice asks whether he's got his job back.

"You can be helping me to a better job," he says.

Callie imagines him in some florescent-lit office of the Wernhil Mall, his jaw going slack. Does he remember that he had walked past her at the worst possible moment, and that the camera had caught that, too? Or what she said over beers about being compulsive?

"It isn't good for me," he says.

"Did you get my messages? About the security guard here? The job?" This whole mess is as much his fault as hers. "You didn't come on Tuesday, to interview."

He says it's too bad he couldn't make it; he would have liked to work at her school. His voice is too airy to be a new flirtation; he sounds as though he is reading poetry into a microphone.

"Taking a break from working? To relax?"

"Not to relax, no," he says.

She reminds herself that, on that day in the diamond store, the first person to lie was him. She might have been vindicated more quickly if everyone had stayed honest from the beginning.

“What else, then?” he asks her.

Callie says the security position would be so easy, and probably pays better than the mall. He would only have to get up and walk around the property once an hour or so.

“No, I mean, what other jobs are there?”

“For you?”

“For me.”

Callie feels her ears burning. “Why should I find you another job?”

“It is polite,” he says. Before she can ask him to clarify, he adds, “I would most like to drive a *taxi*.”

“How am I supposed to arrange that?”

“It can be.”

“No one likes third shift,” she says. “But the job, like I said. It’s easy. Better than the mall.” When he asks again why she thinks so, she realizes that her enthusiasm for the placement is because she doesn’t take him seriously. Their house, with its tall white walls, in this neighborhood, hardly seems to need a guard. But she says instead that the Global Studies students would be friendlier than mall store owners.

Pate asks if she has a weekend job. She says no, but that her charity work has her bustling around the city all day on Saturday. “Every Saturday. It’s the only day I can count on. Uninterrupted work time.” She starts listing off things she’ll need to do: phone calls to make, things to edit and print, a deposit to make at the bank. Not all of it is true, and as she piles on detail after detail she imagines him on the other end, seeing past the exaggerated story.

“It is not so good, just going to shops and asking for money,” he says. He offers, in exchange for helping him find a job, to show her a more effective method. “After this, you can do the same for others—help the people to find good jobs. It is not so impolite as what you do with this thing. The charity, it is not so good.”

She says the Global Studies program pays well, from what she has heard. She lets her voice go cold.

He says he passed through her neighborhood yesterday, but it wasn't the sort of place he felt he could spend every night.

She says maybe you can't be that picky.

\*

To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Saturday, September 24, 2005 4:50 PM  
SubjectHas the pop-up master retired?

Dear Teddy,

Neither Mom or I have seen any pop-ups from you in a while, which has her very worried. I tried reminding her that you are probably at the Superdome or in a FEMA trailer and don't have internet access. I didn't tell her about these emails I'm writing to you, it would only upset her. I figured I should keep writing. I just sent you a little more money, if you need it. Also, G.W. was on the news a couple days ago, saying the feds are totally going to fix everything within the next few days. Haha. Don't worry. Haha.

Sincerely, Callie

\*

For Leona and Michael Saturday is date night. Michael likes to sleep in, and so Leona suggested they meet “over dinner,” when it is seven pm for her and noon back home in Kirksville. Recently Leona has been quietly pouring herself a glass of wine to go with whatever leftovers are in the fridge. Alcohol is forbidden inside the house, but she buys a large bottle, leaves the remainder on the table, and throws it in the dumpster when it is empty. No one else in the house voices any objections.

After a mid-afternoon nap she will venture into town to buy tonight’s bottle. Leona’s favorite thing about Saturdays is the free afternoon, and today she intends to spend it downtown, where she can see about getting a power converter for some of her film equipment and look into a driving tour, one of the package deals that include a visit to a historic San village for a demonstration of the San lifestyle. Even the thought of walking into the tourism office and asking about a four-day package exhilarates her, though she can’t be sure whether the nerves are for the trip itself or the conversation she needs to have with Michael about being away for four days.

As she gets ready to leave she hears the buzz of the gate doorbell, a squeal from the living room and staccato footsteps down the stairs and out the door. Out at the front gate, their housekeeper, Unita, makes quick work of the latch. By the clothes and hair of the person she is hugging, Leona thinks this a man, though he carries himself into the house with a gliding, feminine stride.

Unita is beaming. She says she knew this young man when he was just a boy; he and his siblings accompanied her family to worship every Sunday. She calls him by a

name Leona's ears can't register, something with a click, an *aw* sound and a chirp at the end. The students still at home have gathered now, and he shakes every hand, introducing himself as Jakk. "With two k's," he adds. For the sake of the crowd they switch their conversation into English, even though Unita is limited to short phrases. She asks after his parents and siblings. He says that, sadly, things have not gone well for them. Both of his parents have passed away, and he has not seen his siblings in a long time.

He asks if she is treated well, and whether she is in charge of all of these Americans. She laughs and says something in their click language, this time in a lower tone. He snorts and hugs her again. It is unusual to see a Namibian man like this one, who seems to balance on his heels and now tucks his arm into the arm of this portly middle-aged woman as though they are a pair of young girls sharing secrets.

When the man puts down the bag that is slung over his arm, there is a clatter of metal against metal, and the bag looks heavier than when he'd held it. Unita says the young man has come to offer them a cooking lesson. "No cost," she says. "If it is what you want, he can return."

His arm now free, Jakk stretches it over his head at such an angle that it seems his shoulder might snap off at the joint. Leona isn't particularly interested, but Unita's enthusiasm is infectious. He says he has just finished giving a private tutorial at the Kudu, and if they'd like a free lesson, it will only be an hour and at the end there will be Namibian donuts. "*Vetkoek*," he says. "It can be a first try. If you are satisfied, we will set a price that is reasonable."

On weekends their house cook is away, and the students are happy to have him. It's the women, of course, who crowd the kitchen. He is a delight to watch, his palms



churning a loaf of yeast dough as he describes the first time he'd ever made *vetkoek*. His aunt taught him, making him promise not to tell his parents about their project, which wasn't appropriate for Namibian boys to learn. As he tells the story his upper teeth chew at a corner of his lip. He is the sort that Michael might laugh at, particularly in the way he nearly dances across the kitchen to check the oil he is heating, or—perhaps this is his haircut—the almost helmet-like shape of his head. This is the sort of guy he would invite for a drink at the bar, just for the entertainment of seeing him in action. Michael is not unkind, only curious.

This curiosity might be the solution to her problem. When he comes to visit, she might convince him to accompany her out into the bush for her film project. She just has to work out the best time to ask. What she wants to do is research; he'd rather go to Victoria Falls. He'll say he has hardly come these thousands of miles to stand in a field and watch a bunch of men in loincloths. But he would change his mind, once he got there.

Jakk explains that the love of cooking makes him an outcast among Namibian men. "It is not the man's job to be in the kitchen," he says. "If you are Bantu it is not permitted. Even for me, and I am Nharo, it is not acceptable." He says his life's journey brought him to culinary school to study among the white folks. There is always a way. For him, it was tourists and foreigners, who don't judge him.

With the luxurious sizzle of donuts she realizes the solution to her problem. Two days should do the trick; Michael is almost certain to lodge himself in a swanky hotel, with a king bed with air conditioning. She'll introduce him to the beers he likes. When he's over the jet lag he'll be in the right mood.

Jakk calls each of them to his side for a turn at frying the *vetkoek*. In what feels like high ritual, the other women allow him to place the apron around their necks and then remove it when they're finished. He asks about their studies. He doesn't seem to be in any hurry with this cooking lesson, lingering over every step. It seems he will be here for hours before it is all finished. The girls come and go from the kitchen. The sole male participant, Seth, leaves after the first half hour or so, but Jakk seems almost happier, the more intimate things get. In fact, the moment he is alone in the kitchen with Leona he finds an excuse to stand next to her.

"Tell me about your lessons," he says. It is clear he's willing to hear anything at all, so she starts explaining the first thing that comes to her mind: the land crisis. How everyone in Namibia wants land. She asks if his family has land. He says no, and that he is happier in the city.

"Oh," she says. "I heard that the very best thing any Namibian could ever want is land. Farmland and cattle."

"We like meat," he admits. "We like meat *very* much."

"Same where I come from, in Missouri," she says. "Middle of the country. We like red meat. Lots of steak."

"The meat here is very good, yes?"

"Yes." She is pleasantly surprised to see that Jakk doesn't take any interest in Madison.

"Next time, I will be cooking steaks for you, if you like," he says. "But I must ask you to buy the groceries. Fifty dollars, U.S."

Leona clears her throat as she picks up some of the discarded pots and pans for washing.

“It is a joke! For you, I will bring everything,” he says. “You are quite pretty.”

Leona asks if he knows anything worth filming, and Jakk tells her there’s nothing at all in Windhoek. She says she doesn’t intend to film in the city; she wants to know about San territory. His homeland.

He says that his people have never had a territory of their own. Unsure how to respond, Leona picks up some of the discarded pots and pans for washing. Across the room, she hears a sharp cry and, from her classmate Ella, laughter. “What—why did you do that?” she asks Jakk. He shakes his hand vigorously, laughing with her. “Run it under cold water!”

Leona moves aside as he douses his hand in the sink, and Ella describes the way that he’d dipped his ring and pinky fingers into the pot of hot oil. Slowly, deliberately.

“I cannot explain it,” he says. “It is a tradition, from my father and grandfather.”

“*Every* time you cook, you dip your fingers into boiling stuff?”

“No, no no,” he says. “Only on certain occasions.”

“Why—what happened today?”

“I have not cooked for you before,” he says. “That was for good luck.”

Leona thinks of how much Michael would be entertained by this guy, and how much she misses him.

\*

### Chapter three

By Friday Callie has been in Namibia nearly a month, and buys a very large phone card on the grounds that a long phone call to Mom, while expensive, is the only way to make amends for her long silence. There have been several emails and phone messages she will need to address, and of course, she will want to announce her project. It's as good a day as any; Mom and Chris, to distract themselves from her absence, have brought home a puppy. True to form, it digs through their dirty laundry and piddles on upholstery. Mom feigned annoyance in the email, but she loves the chaos. Callie searches her purse for the phone card, pulling out a sandwich wrapper and then a pair of business cards, reminding her of touches she forgot to follow up on. Doing so, she sees that she needs to revise her brochure, because the line that reads "Sponsor a non-profit in your community!" sounds too much like one of those \$35-a-month campaigns where you choose your own beneficiary.

After this it is time to board the bus for Soussvlei. She has been campaigning while her classmates played up the weekends like tourists, returning with stories about 24-hour-long parties in Rehoboth or game drives that concluded with a buffet dinner under the trees while hartebeest gathered just after sunset. The weekend excursion is her first time leaving Windhoek. Apart from Leona the ever-faithful girlfriend she has been the only homebody. When two of the girls approached her about a hiking excursion, she agreed. She'd intended this weekend to complete her application for Namibian Nonprofit Center, but the work can wait. This is the park featured on postcards and in coffee table books, where the sand is rust-orange against the perfect blue sky. During an afternoon at Deadvlei they pass the black skeletons of a forest of camel thorn trees in parched white

clay, a forest that died over nine hundred years ago but never fell and never rotted. She thinks of that story in the Bible where Jesus cursed a fig tree and it withered on the spot.

On Sunday morning at half an hour before sunrise, Callie and her eighteen fellow tourists from the Kudu backpackers' group hike single-file up the gentlest ridge of the highest dune in the park. They are one of several groups; it is a pilgrimage of nearly a hundred people. In the morning, they say, if you arrive before daylight, you can watch as the waves of dark sand seem to be set on fire. One of the websites quipped, in comic sans font, that the Namib Desert is "the land that God forgot."

Even while climbing the dune she feels the guilt. She has not yet added a dime to the fund and has already spent a small part of the original sum. During their conversation at the bar, Pate implied that she was going at it the wrong way. He told her that if she wanted to raise money she'd have to spend time with people first. He invited her to his church, just down the block from where he worked. He may be right. Apart from a few small grassroots groups that Callie suspects may not have an actual building or more than a few members, no one has signed on.

They all sit cross-legged when they get to the top, and by the time the show begins at least half of the crowd is still climbing. The early sunlight on the dunes and the hush of the crowd sets her to shivering. Before her is an ocean of sand, as if an enormous excavator scraped away every last bit of life, down to the dregs. The sun arrives, giving its color to the many ridges of the sand dunes, and soon the landscape seems to echo the reds and oranges of sunset even as the sun shows a paler, cooler yellow in the east. It's another day. How many days have been given to her already, here in Namibia? The people gathered here seem like a congregation poised on the edge of a

great warning. Anything is possible on this earth, even something as terrible as an ocean of sand lit on fire. If there is a god who made and then forgot this place, it is a god of big shows. A god of Go Big Or Go Home.

\*

“You are President Nujoma,” Renée reads from the worksheet she has created. “It is April 2000, which means that all of sub-Saharan Africa is fixated upon Robert Mugabe’s fast-track land reform. Many Namibians now look to you, wondering if you will follow suit as you deal with this country’s own very unequal land distribution.

“First, decide what your policy will be.

“Second, write a speech that could be read to the citizens of Namibia on television and radio, explaining your policy and assuring them that this is the key to a brighter future for Namibia.”

This activity works better than most of the classwork she has assigned. The students have reacted strongly to the land reform quandaries of post-Apartheid Namibia, and they take to this task with more enthusiasm than she has seen for any previous activity. However, the positive energy may have less to do with the materials than with a conspicuous absence: the desk in the corner nearest the window lacks the long, slouching form of her most outspoken student. Callie has the incorrigible habit of speaking when it pleases her. The others chortle at her jokes, and there seems to be an arrangement in which Callie fills the classroom with enough noise for fifteen and the rest doze.

When two of the gals ask if they can come to her office that afternoon, she thinks perhaps they intend to take her up on the volunteering prospects she’d mentioned at the

beginning of class. It's the two bombshells, Leona and Madison. When they arrive, Madison sits in one of the plastic chairs near the window; the silent partner.

Leona crosses her legs at the ankle. "I've spoken with a number of students in our class, and there's something you should know."

"Okay. So you're both here for the same thing?" she tilts her head in the direction of the girl at the window.

"No, I mean, it's the whole class with the problem. I—we—are here as the spokeswomen," she says. Madison looks out on the courtyard in the most casual way possible, and as if cued to it, now turns to flash a smile that Renée does not find entirely genuine. "We have a few concerns."

Renée frowns.

"Some of the students are having a hard time with your class," says Leona, pausing for dramatic effect.

After a beat, Renée realizes she is being cued to ask. She has often had a hard time with Leona, who evidently craves attention of this sort. "Can you be more specific?"

"You're obviously putting a lot of effort into the class, especially since this isn't—since I'm guessing you maybe haven't taught for very long. We really appreciate that."

Even Madison grimaces a bit at these patronizing compliments.

"It's just—some of the students feel kind of threatened by you." Leona stops to let this sink in, as if the words will conjure memories of when she had, indeed, tried to intimidate the students into doing something they disliked.

"Well, it's good of you to bring this to my attention."

“So, I suppose you’ve heard this before?”

Suddenly she thinks she may have; there is a hint of déjà vu to it all, but not from anything concrete. She has never been known as an intimidating person. “And you’re saying more than one person is feeling threatened by something during my teaching?”

“Yes.”

“Can you be more specific? About the things people find threatening?”

“They said it’s not one thing. It’s like—it’s a vibe in the classroom. Like you don’t want us there. I’m not saying that’s what you’re thinking. She’s not putting words in your mouth, but that’s what it looks like.”

*She.*

“I’m sure you have good intentions.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, though there’s not much I can do about it without some specifics about what is bothering these people.”

“I’ll have to ask them. I’m happy to do that.”

“It might be most helpful if the person—*people*—who share this concern would come to me themselves.”

“Sure, I’ll ask them. Some people don’t like this sort of thing, though. It’s harder for them to talk to you about it.”

\*

**The Namibian Nonprofit Center**

57 Goreangab Avenue / Windhoek, Namibia



5 October 2005  
Calista Donne  
19 Strauss Street  
Windhoek, Namibia

Dear Ms. Donne:

Thank you for your application, which we received electronically on 10/3/2005. We look forward to working with the Helene Donne Charity Fund. We know you put your heart and soul into your non-profit organization, and with over thirty years of consulting and accreditation expertise, we're confident that The Namibian Nonprofit Center can be your ally in this process.

Your application indicates that we can reach you at +264 061 203 2117, but we have not been successful thus far. Please let us know if there is a different phone number, and what would be the best time to reach you.

At the time of our first consultation, we will need the following from you:

- N\$300 fee, to cover the costs of a background check
- Application A-2, attached to this email
- Names and addresses of three references

Until then, if we can be of any assistance or answer questions, let us know.

Sincerely,

Richard Zuze, M.B.A.

Executive Director, Namibian Nonprofit Center

\*

When, in the middle of a tutorial on chutney, Leona feels a hand on the small of her back, she decides it is time to bow out of the lessons. It seems he has conveniently forgotten what she told him about Michael.

With his other hand Pate presses out the softened pieces of date against the side of the saucepan. "If you had a food grinder," he says, "we would puree the whole thing until smooth. But it is also very nice with the larger chunks." The smell is delicious, like the tea house her grandmother took her to when she visited in the summer. It reminds her of Boston and cinnamon scones. When she retreats to the bedroom she leaves the door ajar.

After the scent of chutney and ginger-chicken curry finds her again she takes a new pack of Marlboros to the balcony. She'll have to quit before she gets back, but it's something to take the edge off of being so far from home. She hadn't been a smoker until she came here, but Callie and Dean have handed her cigarettes nearly every morning when they have breakfast on the patio, and she likes it. She'll have to lay off when Michael comes, which is just as well; she'll hardly miss the nicotine.

Jakk finds her on the balcony, enjoying her third. "It's been a pleasure," he says.

She looks him over. "You're leaving?" He makes an open gesture with his arms. "It was a great lesson."

"When your boyfriend comes, he must also be joining us for dinner. We will make something nice for him," he says, his eyes offering only sincerity.

She squints and says they don't plan to be around on the weekends.

He nods. "I approve of his coming to Windhoek, and I hope you have a very nice visit. He is staying, then, until you leave?"

Things like this make Leona think twice about introducing Michael to her friends around here. It would be too easy to misinterpret a statement like that. “I don’t think you mean to use the word ‘approve.’” She explains that this implies he is in charge of the situation.

He says he only meant that he is happy for them. “When you are finished with your travels, you can come back and I will teach you what you can cook for him. It will be better than anything you find in the restaurants.”

That would certainly be true; Jakk’s might be the best food she has ever eaten. “He’s only here four weeks and then he has to go back to work.”

“And what is his work?” He takes the chair next to her and removes a cigarette from the pack on the table, igniting it with the lighter from his own pocket.

She says he is a surgeon.

Jakk is duly impressed. He says when you are an important person you must choose between your commitment to the community and to your own family. “He is a surgeon? He fixes people’s hearts or takes out this . . . this useless thing here?” He gestures toward his lower abdomen; his appendix.

“Yes, but not for hearts. It’s different.”

“What is he fixing, neh?”

The work is hard to explain, and even more difficult with the language barrier. “He’s a surgeon for young men who have problems that keep them from living a good life.”

“What are the problems?”

She recalls the story he told her when they first met, the day she'd applied for a temporary desk job in his office. He was standing there with x-rays of a boy's skull. "Well . . . let's say you were born with ears that stick out very, very far, and everyone around you laughs all the time at your ears."

"Yes," he says, blankly.

"Michael can fix that. He makes them normal."

"That is not surgery."

"It's a very minor procedure, but it changes lives."

Jakk looks at her, waiting for something further.

"Okay, well . . . let's say you're a teenaged boy. Secondary school. And for reasons beyond your control, you have breasts that make you look like a girl."

Jakk laughs and gestures toward his chest, "That is very funny."

"Well, if that were you, wouldn't you want to get it fixed?"

"This would not happen with me."

"But if it did."

"It would not happen."

"It's a medical condition. *Gynecomastia*."

"That is a problem in the United States, that you have. Here in Africa, a man does not get breasts like a woman."

Leona pulls out another cigarette.

"You are also having this problem, that a man is together with another man. We do not have this."

"I wouldn't call that a problem."

“It is not for the men here,” he says. She frowns, willing him to notice the irony of his statement, given the talk about him at the house after their first lesson. The lean muscles. The high soprano laugh. How he’d invested himself immediately in their gossip. Ella was the first to say otherwise, that they shouldn’t jump to conclusions.

“But we are talking about Michael. What else does he do?”

“That’s it, mostly. A few other things. Cleft palate, sometimes.” She gestures at her upper lip.

“Why is he not doing surgery for the eyes or to remove the cancers?”

“Just not his training. Other surgeons do that.”

“He can come here. At Katutura State Hospital I think they need a surgeon. For emergencies here,” he says, motioning again toward midsection.

“The appendix? Maybe he will.”

“I do not think this is a good man for you,” he says after a pause.

She will finish this cigarette and find a reason to leave. The man across the table from her smells like five-spice and cardamom, but what is this to her? The thought comes as a revelation, confirming itself as she speaks it aloud: “He is the love of my life.”

Jakk leans toward her, as if ready to offer comfort. “He makes surgery on boys to take out the breasts.” He snorts a bit, and apologizes for laughing.

She laughs with him at the absurdity, all the more convinced now at the conclusion she has just come to. “A man who helps teenagers gain self-esteem,” she says. She could talk with Jakk about Michael all afternoon. Lately she has been complacent about their relationship, with all of his big talk and the stream of less-than-subtle hints.

But what she needed was an afternoon like this one. A challenge, a test of her commitment.

“I can be better,” he says. “I will soon be the owner of a restaurant in Etosha. Very high end. It will be plenty of money.”

Leona studies his face, grateful that she feels no further temptation to lean in and wrap her fingers around his ears. She knows now what she will say to Michael. They can tell their children and grandchildren about this adventure, the last one she took without him. He will like that.

“It can be a perfect place to live. So much open land where it is beautiful, in the north-east.”

“You Namibians and your obsession with land,” she says. “You don’t win an American that way.”

“Sorry?”

“Everyone here wants land. Am I right? Land and beef cattle? It’s not the same for us.”

“Where are you hearing this?”

“Every Monday and Wednesday our professor hammers it into our skulls.”

“Is it?” He likely hasn’t caught the idiom, but smiles at the expression. “And so, what are you most wanting?”

“You can’t ask that.”

“It is a question.”

“I told you about Michael.”

“It is smart for him to visit. Probably he shouldn’t let you come here by yourself.”

Jakk sits up taller. “He will not like me here, talking with you just now.”

“He trusts me.”

“No no no,” Jakk says, lifting her sunglasses from the table to study the pattern on their stems. “He will not like it.”

## Chapter four

Callie sits on a park bench a few blocks from the Windhoek office of the Cheetah Alliance office, when her phone buzzes in her pocket. She has been invited by a board member to make her pitch, and winning their name for her promotional material will bring the kind of public recognition she needs. She has arrived early to give herself time to practice her talk.

The text message on her phone is from an unfamiliar number, and says

Hello, Callie. Wondering if u found good job 4 me. Thx.

It has been almost three weeks since she last spoke with Pate. She writes that she is too busy, and thought he was going to return to his job at Wernhil Mall. Then she finds a tree and imagines herself shaking hands with everyone in the board room. She sets her arms akimbo and raises her chin, a power-pose she'd read about on a website. They say the first five seconds is when people make decisions about you, and the last fifteen minutes before you walk in the room are when you decide if you're important enough to win them over. Thus far she's been more successful over the phone than in person. Her first pitch to the Cheetah Alliance went well. She'd called last week and, in a flash of inspiration, said she was waiving the entry fee for non-profits. All she needs is a signature and permission to use their logo on her promotional materials.

Her phone buzzes again.

I think u know why this is not possible.

Since that opening conversation she has been on pins and needles waiting to hear back from them. She'd almost lost their interest, and for a moment thought it was going to fold on her. If she can just get one big headliner, though, everything will look so much



better to the business owners. This means her success is in the hands either of this organization or one of three others. She has already been shot down by the first place she visited, Erna's House, whose handmade, grassroots-empowering products every business on the tourist promenade is scrambling to keep on their shelves. Callie knew of them even before arriving in Windhoek. She'd earned an audience with their founder, Erna Ndopu, but botched her talk. She'd been too nervous. Erna smiled and said she was glad that the Global Studies program had students doing such ambitious projects. She said she might come by if she had the time, but that she couldn't commit to supporting a student project at this time. Callie had tried to explain that it wasn't for her classes, but it was too late.

Next weekend she'll borrow Leona's video camera and take a bus up to the Cheetah Alliance's rehab ranch. The website says that they have four nearly-domesticated "ambassadors"; she might perhaps convince them to bring one of them to Zoo Park for the big event. But when she walks in it seems Pate's messages have instilled bad karma, because they've forgotten about her appointment. The secretary has her wait in the lobby, and takes several phone calls before showing Callie into a meeting room, where she's met by a man with a very wide nose in jeans and a button-down shirt. He introduces himself as a member of the board. It seems unlikely that he will be able to make the decision, but she pitches to him anyway. When she's gone through the more mundane elements—the three-month contract for rights to their name and logos, the website information, the door prizes for business sponsors—she explains the big day. Carnival games, if she can get them. A booth with a banner for each non-profit. And, at the end, the big prizes. "The finale is quite simple. Each of our benevolence organizations

has one ticket in the fishbowl. The first one we draw out will win N\$5000; the second N\$10000; and the last one wins N\$25000. In cash, right then and there.”

The man with the large nose hardly blinks at the numbers. Perhaps they are handed that sort of money on a weekly basis. But if she can just get one big headliner, it will make her look so much better to the business owners.

Meekly, she asks about the ambassador cheetahs.

The man clears his throat, “So, this is the same—the same—Charity Fair—that I spoke with you about on the phone, the other day?”

She tells him that it is.

“I thought we’d already made our answer clear,” he says. “I wish you all the best, but it’s a ‘no’ from us.”

Callie swallows, then says it would be fine to have a booth without a live cheetah. If they are busy, it would be acceptable just to sign their name to the project without sending a representative. She could let them know the results of the raffle over the phone.

He tells her that the Charity Fair event itself isn’t the problem.

The phone in her pocket is buzzing. Callie says perhaps it is best to take a step back. “I’d like to pay a visit at your headquarters in Otjiwarongo next weekend. Saturday. Would there be anyone present that day? A decision-maker? Board member such as yourself?”

The large nose tells her she’s always welcome to visit, but the decision would be the same. It as if she has just sorted out the cards for a Euchre deck and is now missing the jack of spades. The game is over before the cards are dealt.

She holds back the ugly cry until she gets outside of the building. On her phone is another SMS from Pate:

I am sorry ur project is not going well.

She looks around the street for him, wondering how long he has been watching her.

Why do you say that? Where are you?

No doubt her eyes are red and the mascara is running; she is aware, more than usual, of how strangers stare. Another buzz in her pocket brings a new message,

I think it is not going well for either of us. Would u like to meet?

Along Castro Street are several men climbing into taxis or smoking, and another with a phone to his ear. All are rounder than Pate and too dark. She writes

Where are you?!

and then waves down a taxi for herself, remembering what Professor Shokatovola taught them about confirming the standard price with the driver before climbing in. She also remembers something someone else said—Daphne, maybe?—about not trusting Namibian men once they've flirted with you. When Pate doesn't respond it confirms her decision to splurge on the taxi and get out of there, now grateful he is not the man sitting in the security guard's chair at their house every evening.

\*

Renée loves Fridays because the students have the day off, and today Iris has invited her for tea. She hadn't realized how lonely she has been in the past few months until she was getting ready to walk over. It is her third year as an expat, and by now she

ought to have some more substantial relationships to show for it. Instead, she is still mourning the loss of her American colleague, Bruce, who resigned in the spring and left her in charge of the program. She wishes he'd left her better notes, for one thing, and most of the time it's as though she has been given the reins of a greenbroke stallion. Over the past week she has simply missed him. It was Bruce's tradition for the whole staff to go to *Gelateria Napoli* on Friday afternoons, but it seems that the tradition was contingent upon his presence because Renée has not been able to resurrect the event.

Iris is the sort of person she'd imagined becoming close to during her tenure at Global Studies. She admires her for doing what she didn't think could be possible for an Ovambo woman raised during Apartheid: she'd earned a doctorate in history. Coming from a village in the north, she'd worked her way through exams, undergrad and grad school. Iris' Ph.D. means something different than her own. Renée had, likewise, worked hard for her degree, accruing loans and dealing with skeptical family members along the way. In many ways, it seems like Iris' degree is marked with far more success than her own. Unlike Iris, who is happily married, Renée has so entirely surrendered her twenties and part of her thirties to the scholarly life that she can remember only a few scattered relationships and hook-ups along the way. Nevertheless, Iris' degree also seems to carry more weight. In the US, Renée is just a humanities scholar in an ocean of underemployed humanities scholars. In Namibia, Iris is a beacon of light and hope for black women.

When Renée arrives, Iris is busy with preparations: a bottle of cola, the teacups and saucers, and tiny, impractical tea-spoons she unwraps from a handkerchief in a shoebox. She surprises Renée with a plate of American-style cookies. "I have put Smarties in," she says. "This is like what I saw once at a bakery in Seattle." The rains and

greenery of that place are a frequent topic of small-talk. Iris was there once for a conference and says that during the dry seasons she is almost desperate to return.

The room doesn't have enough windows and Iris hasn't turned the lights on. Her mannerisms show nervousness, but it's hard to guess why.

"Kuume isn't at home?" Renée asks.

"He will be here later. You might see him."

After they've looked at each other awhile she decides just to say it outright: "Is everything well with you?"

Iris skirts the subject for a few minutes, praising the Global Studies program and Renée's hard work, before she comes out with it. "The history textbook," she says, "I would say it isn't very good." She points out that it isn't even a textbook, and that several of the events inside it have been proven very different from what's written. She says she has supplemented it with peer-reviewed articles from *African Studies*. The problem and the potential are the same: there is an enormous gap between the book and the articles. There are enormous conflicts between one telling and the other.

There isn't money for new textbooks, and tradition dictates that students don't buy their own here. "The group is sharp this semester," Renée comments absently. When Iris agrees it's obvious that she is doing so out of politeness, so Renée elaborates. "Callie, for instance. I can count on her for quite a few things." Iris offers her a cup of Indian assam tea as she says this. Renée has never been able to stomach black tea. Eyeing the cookies, she would like to ask for a glass of milk, but it seems that doing so would only draw attention to her foreign-ness. Instead, she pours in as much creamer as she can without looking conspicuous.

Renée describes the things she has learned from their student. During their lesson on F.W. de Klerk—a former South African president whom Renée readily admitted she knew little about—Callie offered a lengthy explanation of the man’s historic decision to facilitate negotiations that eventually ended Apartheid and brought Nelson Mandela to power in the following term. She explained that the de Klerk family owned a large coal mining estate and that his brother had pressured him to begin reconciliation measures with the black majority population, in hopes that doing so would result in a lifting of economic sanctions on the world market.

“Oh, don’t believe all of these things!” Iris exclaims. “I meant to tell you, in case you didn’t notice. She’s—I don’t understand it, but most of the answers she offers in class are made-up. Or at least, they’re not in line with the sources I know.”

“She told me she has a relative that works for Heinemann Press. That she gets advance copies of the latest histories and novels.”

“Maybe. But when she tells me that Nadine Gordimer is a regular attendee at Archbishop Tutu’s church, I have to question what comes out of her mouth.” Iris pauses to look at her mobile and compare it to the calendar on the wall.

Renée takes the opportunity to empty two-thirds of her tea quietly into the sink. She searches her memory, “You know, she tried to tell the class that Steven Biko was nearly elected president of Namibia in 2000.”

“You see what I mean?”

It is embarrassing to be called out like this on her ignorance. Teaching in Namibia, about Namibia, seems like trying to speak a foreign language. The longer she stays here, the more it all seems like a series of stories to which she is not and perhaps

never can be privy except in generalized, sanitized forms. She struggled with this very thing while writing her dissertation in Ovamboland: she wanted to ask more, she wanted to get the inside story, but nearly all of the time she only received anthropological information in the most general terms. Or she'd hear the same story over and over and over again. The safe things, the sorts of things that a person thinks, in the course of a conversation with a foreigner for a project they will never read, would be acceptable in the permanence of a tiny cassette tape.

If an American student can pull the wool over her eyes, how much more so the citizens around her? On the way home, she tries to engage the cab driver in a bit of conversation. "If you were former President Nujoma, you could pick up your customers in a helicopter, rather than a taxi," she jokes.

The driver turns back and asks her to repeat what she has said. When she does he shakes his head that he doesn't understand.

Renée tells him not to worry about it, and repeats that she would like to be let off at Kaunda Street.

\*

Michael comes next weekend. These several weeks apart have made Leona wonder how anyone stays celibate, and she has purchased a few new things for when Michael arrives. She told him so, and he has tried to bring it up in nearly every conversation, wanting to know a color, or hinting at how nice her abs are and what a shame to cover them. He might be taken aback, at first, with these new things, but under the brighter skies and amid the colors of the houses here she wanted something in a

brilliant yellow, with the back exposed instead of the midriff, and stockings. Maybe it's a bumblebee costume, but it suits her mood.

Since she and Michael have made plans for the next three weekends, and because today Jakk is going to make goat masala with fresh naans and spiced yogurt, Leona joins the other women in the dining room to wait for Jakk, adding her N\$50 to the envelope. As she does so, Paula asks whether she'd like to participate in the pool, as well.

Leona shakes her head and asks what the pool is.

"N\$20 gets you one guess at what stupid thing Jakk is going to do while he's cooking," she explains. "Last week it was swallowing a chicken bone. The week before it was the mug of dishwater. If no one guesses, the pot stays until the next lesson, until someone gets it right."

Leona puts N\$20 on cutting himself on the hand.

Paula says she was hoping for something more creative. "If it's cutting, you'll have to split the pot three ways."

As he begins on the naan dough, Jakk waxes rhapsodic about a particular brand of flour, going into detail about the gluten content and the way it has been processed and shipped. When asked what makes his chutney so complex and balanced, he says there is nothing to it at all; that chutney can be made with any fruit, and that it is very simple. Jakk's cooking lessons are the greatest stroke of luck that anyone's had on this trip, and even the students with no interest in cooking throw in their fifty to enjoy the fruits of the lesson after it's over. He's more than a line cook. When he arrives at their house with his single, tightly-packed backpack, it is like a symphony building from the melody of a single violin. First, the spices. Then the subtler smells of yeast rising and tropical fruits



being diced on the cutting boards. The female students who gather around him shake their heads and chide him for being so modest.

“The boyfriend comes soon,” says Jakk, correcting her hold on the knife as she cubes potatoes.

“Yes, we’ll be at Etosha this time next week, on safari,” she says. She is conscious of his hand over hers.

“You will want more than one weekend. You want a whole week to see it.”

She sees that he’s trying to start a debate, so she offers her best “you’re right” smile. “You can find the place where I will build my restaurant. It is near Namutoni, in the east.”

“Yes, you said that.” She has a bad feeling about being here, and when she’s finished her last potato she slides them into the pot and excuses herself to her classmates with a stomachache, saying she’ll need to lie down. Jakk catches her arm as she is leaving. Without looking at him, she says he should know why she can’t be here.

“Why is Michael not able to watch for himself that you are happy? You can enjoy a cooking lesson. It is part of the true Namibian experience.”

Leona says he doesn’t because he trusts her.

“It is the man’s job to make the woman happy.”

She says he made her happy in letting her come here.

“He is not a man, that he does not make the trip together.”

Leona says he’s being rude.

The other girls are at the table by the pool, mincing onions where the breeze can ventilate the stinging fumes. Jakk tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and asks if

Etosha is where she hoped to go. When her answer is less than confident he asks what she'd hoped for. She reaffirms her answer, but already she imagines Jakk leading the two of them on a tour of his homeland, perhaps showing them how to shoot a springbok with a poison dart or how to make click sounds with their tongues. If things weren't so complicated, Michael wouldn't worry so much. They'd be happy. They could pitch a tent under a tree, make love, then lay a blanket out by the fire and watch the stars come out on a perfect black sky.

\*

To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Sunday, October 16, 2005 4:49 PM  
Subject Clearing something up, if you were wondering.

Dear Teddy,

Can you imagine having a Dad who only comes into your life to sell you discount magazine services, weight loss supplements and trips? Most of what you advertise is way out of my price range, but I did buy the gold shoes you put in my sidebar once. For a while I wore them for church on Easter and Christmas, which is kind of sick in the mind, so then I took them to Goodwill.

I bet you can guess how Mom flipped out when you sent her an ad with a vacation package to New Orleans. Six days, seven nights in a hotel suite with a kitchen and dining room. She took it as a hint, and who could blame her? At that time you probably could have won her back. You have no idea how close she was to dragging me down to visit

you! She came to her senses, of course, and right now she is very happily married to Chris, so everything worked out. I just thought you might like to know that she doesn't hate you.

Callie

\*

Some days the house sours. During the first months of the semester Callie delighted in Windhoek West, with the palm trees and the clean white property walls with their wrought-iron gates, always make her think of vacations. Like Hollywood or coastal Spain. The parts that didn't reconcile to that vision seemed to blur off, because they didn't make sense, and Callie's brain blocked them off like blind spots. Only now, when she has learned to stare directly at things—the brittle leaves of a dying vine along the side of the house, a useless rain barrel with holes rusted in its sides, the white bars over all of the windows—that she could see past the exotic. She hasn't found a cigarette brand that she likes yet in Windhoek. The Kudu offers either Marlboros or Stuyves, and she smokes the latter because it is cheap and she doesn't dislike it. And after taking hundreds of pictures of everything, Callie notices that the ground near the laundry lines has a pink glow that unsettles her, that one of the trees in the neighbor's yard, when it had no leaves, looks like six or seven obese arms with stubby fingers, or that most of the time Professor Erickson, who has been here a while, looks depressed. Her classmates, Dean and Paula, sit beside her on the balcony with mugs of hot something, sullen.

Still, this morning is their official tour of the city, and a much-needed session outside the classroom. It is Thursday, and the week has gone well so far, in that she made

all her classes while putting in three or four hours every afternoon at the Kudu, making phone calls, stuffing envelopes and practicing her two pitches. The security guard has left for the morning and she takes his chair, watching the students walk past and climb into the *combi*. She will take her time; the inside of the white van smells like sweat, potato chips, and spilled coffee. A guide from the National Museum sits in his car just inside their fence, his nose in some manner of paperwork.

Dean leans toward Paula and mutters something into her ear. It's a residual argument: last night Dean dismissed Paula's friend, a thick-waisted guy from the University of Namibia, when he found him alone in the male students' dorm room. "He wasn't in our shit, but he was lookin'."

"Was he digging through your things, Dean?" asks Paula.

"No—like I said, he was standing there. I said what the hell? And he said it was nice here, he wanted to be a student here. Then he walked off."

Paula asks how it's possible, since she'd said goodbye to him at least an hour before the alleged incident. "You think he scaled the wall? Maybe came in through your window?"

Dean tells her to fuck off.

\*

Iris walks down the hill from the taxi-stop to the Global Studies Center, stung by her husband's words at breakfast. The cab ride this morning took her past Kakurukaze Mungunda Secondary School, not more than a kilometer from their home, which had advertised an opening this year to teach history. The old argument resurfaced: Kuume

wanted her to take that job, even though the Global Studies Center paid much better. He didn't dislike her American students, he explained, but the children of Namibia deserved teachers like her. This group of foreigners had not earned the privilege of the information she poured over for so many years during graduate school. How many young people from the villages and rural areas would be grateful to learn the history and cultures of their country? Last night he argued that the only way anyone was going to see a party other than SWAPO in the State House was if educated people like Iris used their talents and degrees to make it happen. Instead, her days are occupied with a half-empty classroom of American students who, she suspects, are not always entirely sober.

She has always loved her husband's staunch patriotism. In this instance, she can trace his anger to a recent announcement in the newspaper about a major construction project in the Northern Industrial Area which chose a bid from a company in China. Migrant labor again. He sees this as part of a perennial pattern in which Namibian treasures are claimed by non-Namibian before anyone has a chance to protest. Work, food, minerals, diamonds. The rich people who use clean drinking water to water large patches of grass on their properties. On Luxury Hill, a friend told her, on an especially hot day you can see water trickling along the pavement.

Today, Iris and her Ph.D. have nothing better to do than sit in the back seat of a *combi* while a hired guide from the University of Namibia teaches her students about the history of the city. Iris herself knows very little about Windhoek; until she was accepted to college at the University of Cape Town she'd never dreamed of living anywhere but Otjijarwa. The theme of the tour, he says, is to re-trace the forced movements of the black populations, starting when the Europeans first arrived in the 1850s. "In many

places,” the guide says, “only the history books can tell us who lived there.” One of the things Iris admires about these Americans is the polite attention they now give this guide for what will, of course, be a historically-based reprimand for the privilege that they, and people very much like them, have enjoyed for generations. It will be painful, as she imagines every class session is painful to them, but here they are.

Would she endure a busload of schoolchildren on a tour like this? She’ll never admit it to Kuume, but the few hours she spends with her nieces every Saturday are as much babbling as she can stand. The Americans are bleary-eyed, but the lull is pleasant. Even Callie, normally bursting with opinions, is mute. When they stop at the Namibian Parliament building with the statues of Witbooi, Kutako, and that Ovambo priest whose name she can never remember, the tour guide asks them how much they know about the German-Herero War. A few of them make attempts, glancing in her direction for approval. It’s a nice gesture. Independence Avenue offers its view of history via the German Alte Feste Fort Museum, the clean-swept, European-styled commercial buildings, and the State House that South African Administrators once called home.

The guide is good, she thinks, in how he paints the scene for them. She should tip him afterward. In a commercial district along Robert Mugabe Avenue, nearly indistinguishable from the other European-style storefronts that dominate the downtown area, he explains how, two generations ago, a person could walk down the street and know the ethnicity of its people by the way the houses were built. Herero and Damara workers built huts from clay and the thin, gray-white branches of desert acacia, the Ovambo built round wooden homes with thatched roofs. Here and there, a few of the Nama huts—small domes made entirely of lightweight materials—provided temporary,

movable housing. This had been the first location, and it lasted until the 1950s, when the people were relocated to the area now on the north edge of Windhoek, where the railway had been fitted to the gap between the mountains. A labor force conveniently situated between the capitol and Okahandja.

This second location is too far north for their tour, so Hendrik drives the *combi* east and parks between an elder-home and a park, each with imported palm trees framing them like so many pillars. The guide explains that, with each move, the black population simply used the materials they could find to build new houses for themselves: sticks and earth, then plywood, then scrap-metal. Then the white legislation would pretend to take offense at the *squalor* of these areas. They would barge in, claiming the area unfit for human habitation, and wipe it away.

The *combi* enters the prouder streets of Hochland Park, on its tallest hill, with majestic high-walled houses and fenced, manicured trees. “This is where the Main Location once stood.” Iris turns to reconsider the neighborhood, surprised. She studied these things only in textbooks. He signals Hendrik to turn off the engine so that they can hear him properly, and then calls to their minds the weaver birds that build those communal nests with two dozen and more entrances. That was the main location, and no one cared whether you had a pass. He says that the women sang together in the morning, the same songs from their separate houses, and in the afternoons they’d all cook until the smoke billowed into one cloud. And they protected one another.

This is hard to imagine; the houses around them are framed with wrought iron and straight-limbed conifers. The mansions are clean-swept buildings in the International Style. The names on the gateposts are German.

Hendrik retorts, in English, that he is talking like a grandmother. Has he gone to college for fairy tales, or is he going to tell this story like it was? He says his father lived through those years and could barely stand the filth in the alleys between the homes, each a long, uneven tunnel. Starting mid-afternoon there was cook-fire smoke everywhere, and between the heat of the day and the cooking it was almost impossible to breathe. What's worse, says Hendrik, if you wanted alcohol, you had to brew it yourself.

The guide says it was not so bad.

One of the homes has tiny round windows and a rounded outcropping like a turret, reminding Iris of a fortress in miniature. Hendrik tells him to get his head checked. "By the time the South African government forced them out, my father could tell you whether his neighbor had showered recently just by smelling the air. They needed more and more houses. They took oil drums and beat them flat, or they bought cheap lumber. Or stole it."

They turn now toward their destination, Katutura, the last place that Apartheid South Africa moved the blacks while they still controlled the region. Kuume asked her again recently whether they might move to Tura. For the culture. Because he has never felt settled in Rehoboth. Iris asks the students if they remember why the government had to keep pushing the non-whites around, and flinches a bit when the tall girl, Callie, opens her mouth. But she knows the lesson, responding that the African political groups were starting to show a united front.

The *combi* doubles back to Independence Avenue and drives north again, skirting the southern edge of the Ramatex Industrial Park. They pass the Khomasdaal Colored Cemetery, all pebbles and modest trees; its formal headstones framed in marble and its



ordinary graves marked with blond rocks. The guide initiates a long silence which the students observe without being told. Tura has grown out from its old boundaries; the first time he visited this area there were no homes here. Only when they have crossed the Western Bypass do they reach the limits of the first Katutura. The guide announces that this was the edge of the obligatory five-mile buffer between the White and Black areas, set down in 1959.

As they pass a series of bright-red rental houses the guide explains that these were built for the men who came in from the rural areas to find jobs, often leaving their families behind. Hendrik says no one could afford to live there, even twenty years ago. His parents spent almost their entire paychecks on rent and the bus tickets to work. Until the windfall of a dining-room table and chairs from neighbors who moved out, for the first few years the furniture in their home was a set of vegetable crates stamped *Port Elizabeth*.

A small group of street kids notices the *combi* and runs up alongside as they near a stop sign. Looking for a lucky break. It isn't so bad for them here in Hakahana as it would be a few miles farther north, which is perhaps where they came from. No one there would have much to give them.

One of the students, Dean, leans forward and asks Hendrik for more of the story. The schedule says it's time to move north into the informal settlement, but he takes this as a cue for a detour, and Iris does not protest. He turns right onto Monte Christo Road and then follows another sharp turn, describing a Saturday afternoon when he and his brother walked four kilometers to play football right here, on the best pitch they'd ever seen, nearly square, with barely a loose stone to pick up. He points to a corner store with

a generator in back, saying it would have been there, or perhaps on the next block. They played through supper, and when it turned dark his uncle arrived in his pickup. “He wasn’t mad, not a bit,” says Hendrik. “Even after driving for hours around Wanaheda, Hakahana, and Goreangab to find us, he was not angry. On the way back we took turns moving the steering wheel under his hands.”

Iris looks at the buildings, freshly painted in red and seafoam green, and then at her students, and smiles that she’s found what she’ll say to Kuume next time he asks.

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On another day, Callie might have been moved to sympathy by the deplorable conditions in the northernmost region of Katutura, where people build shelters out of scrap and wait for the government to offer amenities like plumbing and electricity. The street signs here dwarf the houses, and this is the only road that curves through. Today is different. The sky has retained its bold color and the dust rises in the usual way, but there is something momentous about the place, and Callie thinks that if she had enough minutes she’d call Mom, here and now, then hold up the phone to let this place reach her via satellite.

On the side of the road a boy walks with a yellow water jug perched on the thicker muscle of his neck, balancing it with the opposite hand stretched over his head. The yards in front of each house are dull, reddish gravel and the landscape is rugged, sloping inhospitably under the houses. The mountains curl behind them in four brown waves. Callie puts a camera to the window, and Leona clears her throat loudly once, then again. “Is that appropriate, do you think?” Leona asks, explaining it’s a bit like taking

photos of people as they walk out of a public shower in nothing but a towel and flip-flops.

A woman with a bucket sits beside a house with a slumping roof, busy at some domestic chore. What seems to be graffiti on a building the size of a mobile home instead announces it as a business, the Oshitenda Shebeen. The panels have begun to rust orange, and there are no windows. “It is the informal settlement,” says the guide. An immense power line towers over the buildings, at least forty feet tall, at the center of the neighborhood below. This is the township that workers flock to, building shacks until they can find jobs. It is supposed to be better in the city, they are told, than out on the farms where a family must fend for themselves. In the urban areas the municipal government supplies a water-line and sometimes light or electricity. It was meant to be temporary, but when the decades of high unemployment stretched on, then Windhoek fitted the long line of squatter-shacks with area-names and street signs: Goreangab and Shandumbala, Omungondo Street, Kamapala township.

The houses all seem built to the same pattern, a cube the size of a garden shed. Callie recognizes the place from somewhere. When the combi turns north again and trolls a narrower street, the view is familiar. She knows the old plywood, warped out of countenance, as though last month it was soaking in the swollen waters of Lake Pontchartrain and then laid out to dry. She knows the trees—the only thing the hurricane left standing—and the tree-branches, now stripped and planted into a fence like so many whale-ribs, pale and outwardly-arched. On the BBC news report last week she saw these charcoal-gray boards floating past the women standing on their own roof-tops, waving their arms. These were the shirts and pants that floated and then caught on the corners of

submerged buildings; now they are clean, set out on a line between the shanty-roofs. These were the iron rods she'd seen, laid bare among the crumblings of pale masonry. These corrugated slabs of metal had been strewn across interstate highway ten. Someone, it seems, has carved them into small sections and painted them. Callie marvels. The whole show seems home-spun and miraculous, and fragile, like so many houses made of cards. Made again from the remnants of what was destroyed.

A boy runs alongside the *combi* for nearly the full length of a street, shouting upward into their window, beaming deliriously. Busted tires sit atop a roof, holding the metal slabs in place. Another row of houses passes, with a woman sitting beneath a shade-tree with a fine bursting of gray-green leaves. Fences on everything. Not the white guarding walls you see in Windhoek West, but more permeable. After two months on Strauss Street these buildings seem naked.

If she can email enough photographs of this scene, she thinks, Mom will stop worrying about Teddy. The broadcasts have it wrong. The people who write about Hurricane Katrina are American; they live in air-conditioned homes, drive personal sedans, let machines wash their laundry and dishes. They complain when the soup at the diner is cold or the line at the grocery store is too long. What do they know about resilience? What do they know about building a life out of the scraps of a broken building, or of surviving a whirlwind of destruction?

## Chapter five

On Saturday Callie clears her schedule and arrives at the Tura Center, in the Wanaheda neighborhood of Katutura, at five minutes to ten, in a blazer and long skirt she bought just for the occasion. Iris told her this was the most impressive place she'd seen in years, with some of the most creative minds in the city. From the taxi she recognizes her destination by the crowd of pale arms and legs in cargo shorts sitting on the picnic benches outside. When she approaches the group of fellow tourists, she is pleased when they look her over for a name badge or some other professional marker, as if she might be the group's representative and not just another gawking face with a camera.

At ten minutes past the hour the door opens, but instead of the program director they are greeted by a flood of children and a burst of shouting, and before she can blink twice there are three hands clutched at her left arm, a face pressed against her elbow, and another face looking up at her with eyebrows raised and lips pursed comically. If she had tucked the thick wad of cash into her money-pouch today, she thinks, she would hand it over to the nearest staff member and be done with the whole game. As soon as she squats to eye level there are more children around her, fingering her hair and earrings. Their voices at close range are softer, more soothing, and though she can't understand a word, it seems they've guessed already why she is here and are praising her for it, until a piercing squeal at her ear nearly sends her sprawling on the ground. Somewhere toward the back of the crowd are two women, wearing thick layers of dresses, clucking at the children and pulling them aside by their collars.

The women who greet them seem less enthusiastic. It took Callie three weeks to build the courage to come here, but when a very small, button-nosed, thin-lipped woman

with braids like the lines on a barcode introduces herself as Selma !Naruseb, Callie wonders what had cowed her so long. Someone behind her asks whether the tour was supposed to start at ten. She'd expected a state-of-the-art children's activity center, but the building is like an old warehouse, with a low roof-line and a slip-shod paint job.

Once inside, she understands. Selma leads them down a corridor paneled with floor-to-ceiling murals in the oranges, reds, greens and yellows of old soda cans, their aluminum undersides gleaming in the fluorescent light. In contrast to the near-sowl on their host's face, the doors on the rooms are bright and welcoming, painted with the faces of African children. Selma indicates each door as a study room or an arts-and-crafts station, a library, a kitchen, or, under lock-and-key, the computer lab with four desktop PCs. Selma says this was once a dormitory to house an all-male workforce during Apartheid. "Previously, the men came here to make money for the rich and powerful. Today, children come to make a better future for everyone."

It's a very practical space, with a large open room the size of a basketball court. If the tables, decorations, sounds and whirr of motion were removed, it could be a site for nearly anything. Selma ushers them into the large main room of the Tura Center. Her voice betrays the long hours this job must demand of her, and she offers her complaints freely: the roof leaks on the south end, the refrigerator is dying, the computers are old. Callie occasionally looks over her shoulder or around a corner for a more gracious, optimistic host to pop out and call herself the real Selma !Naruseb, someone who fits the description of a successful grassroots organizer, ready at any moment to be blitzed by the Western media and awarded a substantial grant for community development. But even the children who pass them in the hall seem to shrink a bit from her. The other tourists

seem timid and reverent; they give half-smiles of admiration in looking at the ceiling, the walls, the tables, as if walking into a cathedral during mass.

*Where is Teddy?* She knows the heat of New Orleans, not from visiting her father but from a national youth gathering she'd attended once during high school. She pictures him trudging along the hot asphalt in some southern city, nothing but a backpack on his shoulder, then slipping into the first hotel with a sweet-faced middle-aged lady at the counter. That's how he'd win his free night's stay in the air-conditioning, by finding that right woman and talking her into it. *My house and everything are gone. I walked here. I'd never ask anything like this, but—* He'd win his way in. One day at a time, whatever it took.

Callie is twitchy and too hot. It is almost noon, and her skin is a soggy rag baking dry. She feels all patience dripping off the large bones of her wrists and out the back of her head. As soon as the children rejoin them it is chaos in the room. Somehow there is supposed to be a concert. On her toes and in a throat-clenching voice Selma announces something in Afrikaans, directed at the children and teens from middling-height on up. Some of them respond by gripping younger children by shoulders and arms and pulling them into formation. After about ten minutes the crowd is arranged roughly by height and one of the older children announces something that can't be heard over the general din. Someone presses the button on a CD player.

*PLANa tayi lu ongula onene*

*PLANa tayi lu ongula onene*

As the children sing it's all a bit better, more cheerful, and Callie begins to see the white walls and bare spaces as her canvas. She imagines rows of computers, murals, a fully-

furnished kitchen. Whatever they wanted, whatever they needed. Books and more books. Heating and air conditioning. More bathrooms.

When the concert is over Callie apologizes and asks for a moment of Selma's time. They walk into the shade of the entryway, followed by a boy of eight, maybe nine. His gait is rhythmic, giddy. Hers is trudging. He looks like he would turn cartwheels down the hallway were it not for the sobriety of this woman who, it turns out, is his mother. He looks at Callie, beaming. He leans into his mother's side and shakes a hand at the back of his head. "Is nice. Very nice." He means her ponytail.

"Thank you."

"I am being called Andimba. Like Andimba Toivo ya Toivo."

Callie explains to Selma the contest, the cash prizes. No entry fee. Your organization is sponsored by local businesses. You can do as much promoting as you like, or none at all. Every charity gets at least one ticket in the pot, maybe more. No cost to you.

Selma glances at the crumpled page in Callie's hand but does not take it when it is offered. Callie says she has cleaner copies back at the house. Selma says, "No matter. It's not for us, anyway." Already, before the sentence has left her mouth, her eyes are moving back into the room with the children. She has closed the window of opportunity. Callie may as well be absent, because Selma doesn't see her.

"It's totally free. No promoting necessary. You just sign a form that comes in the mail and send it back to me."

In Selma's hand, set against the backdrop of a wall covered with intricate woven hangings, each made of dozens of plastic shopping bags in the shapes of birds, the black-



and-white inkjet brochure looks childish and insincere. “I don’t think we’re interested,” Selma says, though the boy’s energy suggests otherwise. Callie only manages to ask whether she might come back sometime. Selma says of course, and her boy dances alongside Callie all the way to the front door.

Back at the house Professor Erickson announces that the students will be staying with families for eight days, to experience life in Katutura. and that some of them were children or mothers they may have met at the Tura Center. It’s all being arranged by Selma.

“Is she also hosting?” Callie asks.

The professor says yes, she is.

“Then sign me up for her. I want to stay at her house.”

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Michael cancels his long layover weekend in Cape Town. With a red-eye flight to Windhoek on Saturday morning he has enough time to drop his things at the Maximillian Hotel and have a shower before anything needs to happen. Sometimes a man knows when it’s time to set aside the shark diving and attend to business. What’s a day in Cape Town? It only touches on his cognitive needs. Today he makes sure he still has a girlfriend. Although the jet lag and the elaborate canopy bed call him to rest a while, what’s worth having is worth working for.

It only seems fair to offer the warning with gentlemanly discretion, so he pays the cab driver an extra hundred to stay parked alongside the Global Studies house. The cooking-expert man, it turns out, is not punctual for his lessons. He’s heard that Africans

aren't into timeliness, but after twenty minutes Michael begins to wonder if Leona misreported the time. He is counting on the conspicuous backpack to confirm his identity, with the copper saucepan that Leona insists upon buying as soon as she gets home.

He has to pay the taxi driver another fifty before the barley-skinned Namibian man arrives. Soon the money seems wasted, as do his efforts in arriving early; Michael thinks at first he is looking at a teenaged boy, like those who come to his clinic with self-esteem issues. This is a diminutive man, someone who looks like he's just grown into his skin and isn't quite sure how to wear it. As soon as Michael exits the cab he slows his gait, then smiles. It's a Johnny Depp smile, that Mona-Lisa type shit that some guys have.

Michael tips his chin to the man. "So, you're doing these cooking lessons? That's pretty cool."

Jakk glances down at the duffel in his hand, its bulges rounded out in the unmistakable form of saucepans. "Yes."

"Leona says it's a lot of women who show up."

"You must be Michael?" He breaks a larger grin.

Michael matches the grin, tooth-for-tooth, and extends his hand, and when they shake he lets his grip be firm and unmistakable. "Nice to meet you."

Jakk's face returns to level zero, a pensive expression that he is likely capitalizing on in the student house, which Leona tells him is about two-thirds female.

"I'm her fiancé," he says, projecting into the future in order to make his point unmistakable.

"Neh, yes. She has told me very much about you," says Jack, leaning back against the wall of the house.

The words are reassuring, but not satisfying. Leona's side of their recent online conversations has been flimsy, as if she's holding back. He slaps the man on the shoulder, and is impressed when Jakk takes it without wincing. "So, take me inside. I'd like to see this cooking lesson, buddy."

The courtyard of the study abroad building looks like a zen garden, with white stones in place of grass and a handful of alien-looking trees. Jakk looks down at the ground as they approach the house. Michael feels a low-grade headache spreading across the entire frontal lobe of his brain, begging him to lie down somewhere and close his eyes.

"I can hardly blame you. If I could get this many chicks to show up to something I taught, I'd do it, too. But then again, I *am* engaged."

Jakk looks up at him once, sideways, and then again, and lets his gaze return to the ground, but his chin and chest rise just enough. His feet are pointed toward the house, toward an upper window with yellow-flowered curtains.

Michael tells Jakk it is time to take a walk. "Before we go in there," he says, laying a firm hand over his bicep in case there is any confusion. As Jakk follows him back onto the street, Michael clears his throat.

"If you are worried, there is no reason," offers Jakk. "She is grateful for your employment as a surgeon."

Michael frowns to himself, wondering if this conversation is happening or if this is the cheap vodka from on the plane. He is walking down a white-walled street with this Johnny-Depp character, the kind with the brooding-eye thing girls go ape over, and the

buzz of some strange creature in the air and the flickering beginnings of what will turn into a migraine. “How about you take a step back, buddy.”

“It is a compliment to you. She would not be able to do this film without you.”

*Film.* Michael searches his memory for some mention of this.

“It will be worth the expense. She will bring the eyes of the world to Namibia.”

He needs a moment to clear his head, and he also deserves an opportunity to see all of this in action. “Hey man,” he says, “I’m gonna let you get back to it.” He tells Jakk not to let his girlfriend know he’s here.

“Your fiancée,”

“You don’t tell her I’m here. I came early and I want to see the look on her face.”

Jakk nods and returns to the house. Michael considers his options. The gate would lock automatically, of course, but he finds a few clothespins at the side of the house on the clothesline, slim enough to prop the door open unnoticeably.

He heads downtown, planning to amuse himself for roughly an hour, but entertainment seems spotty around here. There is nothing in the crowd or on the signs to indicate where he will find souvenirs, a good beer, or a decent brunch spot. The cabbie’s suggestion comes out like a question, and Michael tells him just to let him off somewhere on the main street. Windhoek is far less exotic than he’d expected; a city with an identity crisis. It has none of the gumption to build skyscrapers, and no tribal flavor, either. Although he hasn’t done much international traveling, he’s a bit disappointed that this is Africa. He hoped for big snakes, maybe. Rasta drummers on the street corners. Acacias framed by the sunrise. Thatched roofs on every house. Scanning each shop for items of interest, he is surrounded by people on domestic errands. The city center is mousy and

polite. It is a Saturday morning, but the sidewalks have a Monday feel, like the rest of the Midwest if you discounted the hum of life at Chicago, the Cities and Milwaukee.

By the time he gets back to the student house he's hungry, and the smell of heavy spices and bacon rushes him. The thick air seems like a familiar sensation, cueing nostalgia for the early days of dating Leona before he realizes why. His mind travels to the Dixie Kitchen in Evanston, and then he knows the smell: Cajun food.

*Cajun.*

And this is when the man Jakk seems much more of a problem than initially anticipated. This is the sign that his intuition was correct.

He enters quietly. The clamor in the kitchen allows him a measure of stealth, and through a wide serving-window that opens into the dining room he is able to observe the girls, all intent on some task this player-king has assigned them, chopping at something or peeling or stirring, heads down, concentrating. He recognizes Leona by the pixie cut of her dark hair, the line of her shoulders, and her pensive left-side lean. The bones of her shoulders seem to poke through her shirt. He'd forgotten, in these two months apart, how young she is, just twenty, and when they'd met two years ago he mistook her for a boy of fifteen. She really has no ass to speak of. Even now she has that aura of naïveté, chopping up a mound of green peppers, enjoying a joy-ride in Africa before graduation brings the real world crashing in.

To her right at two arms' length is Jakk, immersed in some wizard's concoction on the stovetop. He's pleased at first to see the man keeping his distance. One of the girls leans against the far counter, and he can make out just the profile of her face, a pleasant-looking kid with dark hair and glasses, staring at the cook.

There's nothing for several minutes, just a lot of chopping and almost no conversation. Then Leona shifts her weight onto her right leg and turns her head, slightly, to look at Jakk. By degrees she turns toward him until she is staring openly.

"Stop it!" she shrieks, rushing at him, pinning both elbows behind his back. The ladle of soup in Jakk's hand splashes over the stovetop, and the cooking flame sputters audibly. Soon two other girls crowd them, and the kitchen turns a clucking flock of hens.

"What was he doing?" one of them asks Leona, and then he watches as his girlfriend of a year and a half nearly capsizes in a fit of giggling while trying to explain that the doofus in the chef's hat tried to grab the dipper of the ladle with a bare hand.

"You make me nervous!" says the glasses girl, who is now wiping spilled soup from the stovetop. When she looks up to see Michael her jaw drops a bit, and this is when Leona turns and recognizes him. She lets out a squeal and dashes through the kitchen door to embrace him, her small breasts pressing against his stomach, her arm clenched to squeeze him. "I love you I love you I love you," she says, and he wraps a hand under the back of her neck and the other around her back, which stiffens a bit as she pulls away to look up at him. "You're early!"

"I came for you, Babe," he says, holding her, and some of women in the next room clap as if they were watching a romantic comedy instead of prying into a private conversation. If not for them he'd pull her down onto the couch in the next room.

When Jakk smiles at him it seems the worst possible reunion scenario has just played out, but when he leans down to kiss her, it gets worse. "Just a minute, just a minute!" Leona says, putting a finger on his lips and squirming away into the bathroom. This interlude evidently gives two of her classmates permission to approach him with

their small talk. These are her peers, but they seem far less mature than she is. Glasses girl starts up on the *where are you from* and *how long are you staying* shit, and the only thing that registers is how asymmetrical her eyebrows are. It's one of the hazards of his profession: he can't look at a woman without noticing the disservices she does to herself. When he started dating Leona he asked her to let her eyebrows grow natural.

Since his girl evidently sees no issue in leaving him here with a hard-on and two prattling women, Michael decides to use the time to set the record straight. "Hey," he calls to Jakk, "Outside."

As soon as the courtyard wall is between them and any listening ears, Michael squares his shoulders to Jakk. "I was always curious what goes through a man's brain when he decides to go after another man's girlfriend." He gestures toward the sidewalk, and as they continue he lays down the code of conduct. He says that the best possible solution would be for Jakk not to speak with Leona in ways that disrespect her prior relationships and commitments.

Jakk says he has only ever been respectful of Leona's wishes, as he hopes everyone else will be. There is almost a paternal tone to his words, as though Michael is a suitor coming to ask for the hand of his daughter. For an undersized man his stride is long and easy.

Michael gives him the benefit of the doubt; some people don't realize the poor first impressions they make, and he has better things to do during his first hours with Leona than explain a physical confrontation. "Man, I am telling you not to touch her."

Jakk shakes his head slowly. "What has happened between us may happen again. I would not be the one to stop it."

As his fists find Jakk's face and neck he wonders if one might blame some jungle fever for bringing a pacifist to blows. More likely it is the sleep deprivation. When Jakk cries mercy he lets up, and the barley-skinned man shakes his head but says nothing further, walking back in through the gate. Michael watches him slink around the house to the backyard.

Reentering the house, Michael is still charged up. "I'll be outside when you're ready," he yells up the stairs toward the bathroom that Leona disappeared into, and then walks back out into the white-stoned front yard. For a while, he isn't interested in seeing her again, or holding her. He thinks about going into the backyard and taking a few more swings. Pacing the cement walkway, he flexes his hands and tries to put Johnny Depp out of his mind.

The unfortunate sleeping arrangements of the house are that each sex has a single bunked dorm room, so he lets her follow him down the street to the taxi stand. On the way back to his hotel room, after she has kissed him for a while he puts his arm around her, ready to reconcile and get back to the bliss of a month in Africa with his woman. But then Leona pulls away from him and asks, "What did you do to him?"

The taxi seems small, and after twenty hours on three planes, his legs are cramped. Michael looks her over, letting his jaw set and his fingers curl, in and out. How attached is she to this small Namibian man? "I talked to him," he says.

"Bullshit," she says. "Did you hurt him?"

Ordinarily he appreciates this about Leona, that she says things straight out instead of making him guess around for them, but this time she needs to drop it. "Did you fuck him?"



Leona looks at him like he's a stranger. "No," she says, and then, "I thought you didn't pull shit like that."

He looks out the window, wishing he could open the door right now and walk out. He has come all this way and this is what she says to him? Leona touches his arm. "It's not a big deal. I—you have no reason to be threatened by him."

"Don't worry about that."

"Quit acting like you are."

His jaw hurts; he's been grinding his teeth. "When we get back to the hotel, first thing, you will do the study."

"I don't want to."

"Then explain to me—" he stops himself, because there's no point in asking. In this state even an honest girlfriend like Leona will bend the truth in order to keep the peace.

She's very quiet. She says it isn't like that. "Jakk is my—he's sort of my—ally. I don't know how else to describe it."

"Against what?"

"You're not a psychologist, Michael."

"Against *what*?" She looks like she wants to get out of the cab. He decides he wants to get out of the cab. He gets out. After a few blocks he is ready to hail a new cab. He imagines Leona scrambling to keep up with him, sniffing and pleading for him to slow down, but she's nowhere to be seen.

She is also not at the hotel when he arrives. He orders some drinks for himself at the bar and watches the broadcast of a soccer match from Brazil. If she is smart she'll

come back and apologize, but she is likely afraid of him. She needs to make good. She led this other man on, this Jakk-with-two-k's who cooks for the women at her house and is probably getting laid by at least a few of them, by the look of things. This is the very sort of situation he feared would come about during a time abroad. It is hard to know what a person in that situation—even his own Leona, who is closer than most people to self-actualization—it is so hard to predict what crazy depths they'll sink to.

\*

Leona suspects there are few arguments that some new lingerie won't smooth over. Doubling back to slip it on under her clothes gives him time to cool off. As she walks up to his room at the Maximillian hotel, however, she has second thoughts. She'd bought it at a discount department store, and as soon as she walked into the palatial lobby with its frescoed walls she feel like she's in a scene out of *Pretty Woman*. The underwire presses against her ribs. She'd about kill for a cigarette right now, but he'd flip if he smelled it on her. When he surprised her in the kitchen she panicked; the stench of her very last morning as a smoker still hung on her breath when he leaned over to kiss her. In the bathroom she brushed her teeth twice and scrubbed her face and hands until they were red.

She called ahead to say she was coming, and the woman at the front desk promised to relay the message. When she arrives at his suite the door is ajar, but Michael does not look up from his book. One of the bedside tables stands in the entry-way near the door, with his laptop sitting open. Leona recognizes the website.

“Impressive that your hotel has Wi-Fi,” she says, then feels like an idiot.

The air conditioning is a little intense, and he does not respond. On the screen the instructions read

Before you begin, please note that your answers will be stored in our database. Our administrators will send the results of the study approximately five to seven (5 - 7) business days after both parties have submitted their responses.

**Part I:** to be completed on a full stomach, when the test-taker has slept no fewer than six (6) hours per night for the past two (2) nights. Take this test in a calm, comfortable room.

Short answer; thirty (30) seconds per question. In the box below each question, write your best response. There are no right or wrong answers; do not over-think your response. Write the first answer that comes to mind. You will be timed for each question, and the window will close after sixty (60) seconds.

Leona's stomach tightens. "Babe, who looks at the answers for these?"

Michael looks at her directly for the first time since she came in. In his boss-of-the-office voice he explains that the Reitner Center evaluates each couple anonymously. "You and I are assigned a single code, which the evaluators use to match your response with mine."

For the first time in the fourteen months of their relationship, she picks up the laptop, carries it to the desk in the corner of the room, and clicks the "start questions" button.

Recall a day in recent memory when you received bad news at work or performed poorly at an important task. When you saw your partner after this event, what expectations did you have for him/her?

She fumbles to finish quickly, and then has an extra ten seconds to stare at her answer. She tells him that she doesn't really like having her answers to these questions "out there," no matter who reads them.

"Every evaluator is a professional. Not some desperate graduate student."

The next question appears in a reading panel, giving her a few seconds to read it before the answer-box appears.

If your partner wishes to engage in private conversation and you do not wish to have the conversation, how do you respond?

She says someone else could get hold of the answers.

He asks if she ever buys anything online. Does she give out her credit card information?

The computer starts beeping. Leona realizes that she forgot to hit the "pause" button on the exam, which has been trying to alert her, via three pop-up windows, of her delinquency.

How would you react if your partner refused to perform a sexual act that you requested?

She looks at the bed, which he has not bothered to turn down, its several pillows all standing guard against her. Back at the student house she was assigned a sleeping bag, but at the moment she thinks she might prefer that. She wishes he hadn't come, except that she is terrified about traveling out into San territory alone. "When I finish this study of yours," she says, "I want to talk with you about my plans. My latest film project."

Now Michael is up out of his chair, pacing the room, as though she has just told him she wants to commit a murder.

"There's a time limit," he warns her. Leona sees that the question has closed. She starts crying. Michael stands with one hand against a poster of the bed, his body weight leaning toward her, and the other arm flexed.

Leona can hardly find words. The bra is digging into her sides, and she excuses herself to the bathroom to take it off and stuff it in her purse.

When she emerges he can see what's missing. "Is that how you're going to play it?" he asks, coming over to kiss her head. "It's all right," he says. "I can forgive you." But as his hands move over her back they feel like dead weight.

She starts to cry and folds her arms into the space between her chest and his. She slips out of his room, and on the taxi ride home she watches the women on the sidewalks, with one hand wrapped around a child's and the other holding shopping bags, weighed down. Each woman waiting for a taxi, or for a tantrum to subside, or for the street light to flash its walk sign. Burdened. Michael wants a quiet life in the suburbs, she thinks, but here in Namibia there are hundreds of stories that no one in their country has ever heard. She would like to return to the room, lay down and wait for the storm to pass, but she has only five weeks left, and everything inside her says *go go go*.

\*

To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Saturday, October 22, 2005 8:00 PM  
Subject No hard feelings.

Dear Teddy,

If you write back, I promise I won't be angry with you, I just thought this might be fun. I'm twenty now, by the way, so it would be between adults. To prove it to you, I'm going to be completely honest: I had something to do with how Mom thought you sent her that New Orleans ad on purpose. I was fifteen. Stupid. My friend and I were playing a little joke on Mom. We got into your email account and wrote her a few letters from you. We figured she'd know they were fake, and we stopped when we saw her taking it seriously. We only meant it as a joke. It wasn't that I wanted you to get back together.

Anyway, for a while there when Mom got the ad for New Orleans, even I got excited that you were playing along, like you and I were scheming together for a good cause.

That was before Chris, of course.

Callie

\*

By week ten Renée gives in to what she promised herself she'd avoid at all costs: letting the students divide along the fault line of their preconceived notions and bicker it

out until the end of class. The words are out of her mouth before she lets herself edit them: “Who was the greater advocate of Namibian independence, Cuba or the United Nations?” At the moment she can’t think of anything better to fill the time. She hadn’t planned for this lesson, or for any of the lessons in the next three weeks. The Gutenberg office has been on her case for an itemized budget, she’s had a parent calling every week to make sure that her daughter is still alive, and she has just learned that the transportation company for their South Africa excursion is closing its doors.

Debate is the only thing she can still count on, though it seems nothing is gained when she introduces a topic. Today she hardly needed to say more than “Cuba or the UN?” to get them started. She knew already where the loyalties would fall. No American-raised student was going to like Cuban leaders if she were not already enamored with Che; it is remarkable, really, how well-engrained the Red Scare is, even in this new generation. Conversely, none of Che’s dotting fans would let the UN off the hook for doing absolutely nothing when South Africa refused to cooperate with their mandates. This is terrible pedagogy, she thinks to herself. At best, it is a test of their reading to see which factoids come out. In her few years of teaching she has learned to use her photographic memory to assess how much material the students have read, and at what depth. When Madison mentions the powerlessness of the United Nations Commissioner for Namibia, for example, she is impressed that at least one student has read two-thirds of the chapter, or at least has bothered to skim to this point. As Madison continues, however, her response loses specificity and confidence, and Renée considers some sort of punitive measure for the group. Soon there are only a few students engaged in the conversation, and before long it is essentially Dean and Madison against a handful of

more conservative students. Madison argues that the West has no business on this continent—not now and not during its independence-winning years. “The Europeans were just greedy power-hungry bastards,” she says. It is turning ugly. Paula, whose roots are at a mission school near Gaborone, seems to take the word “Cuban” as a profanity.

“The Cubans just wanted Namibians to take back what was theirs,” Madison says. “So they’d have a strong ally.”

“Sure, that’s all,” Leona says. “They started bringing in all the guns and devoting their military officers to the training of Namibians because they only wanted what was best for Namibia.”

After the class one of the quieter students, Steven, surprises her by approaching her after class. He is a thoughtful one, she thinks. He seems to pay attention during lectures, more than she had given him credit for at the beginning of the term. “Hey, what’s that region you were talking about, the one where you did your survey thing?”

He means her dissertation research. “Onamukuku,” she says. “Way way to the northwest. Ovambo villages.”

“They have any schools there? Universities?”

She laughs a little at the absurdity of the idea. “Not much use for it in such a traditional society.” He nods, and she’s encouraged to describe the sparse forests that seemed bullied by the bright Namibian sky, the bee farm where she learned how to locate a colony with a drop of honey and a piece of grass no bigger than a fingernail. When she looks up at him again she can see he is humoring her.

“You’re interested in Ovambo country?”

“I just thought about it. It could be where you go next after this.”



“For vacation?”

“Yes, or,” he stutters. “You could be a teacher there.”

“Thanks.” She does not ask him why he thinks she should return to teach among the Aakwaluudhi, or why his face seemed turned down in sympathy.

“Do you know what you’re planning to do next?”

“I suppose I’ll eventually find a tenure-track somewhere in the states. Or visit Ghana for a while. I liked it there.”

\*

Callie loves Fridays, which are for the Kudu Bar. After a particularly grim lesson about the economic plummet of Zimbabwe, Dean suggests Jaegerbombs and a toast to the demise of Robert Mugabe. “May his private plane crash and burn!”

Half of the group has gathered this time, and even against the enthusiasm of a group of Germans chicken-fighting in the pool, the Global Studies students dominate the room. They are inspired to continue their pattern with the next rounds:

“Here’s to Kim Jong-II! May he be thrown from a tall window!”

“Here’s to Putin! May he bleed of a thousand paper cuts!”

When they come to President Bush, Callie is nauseated and ready to leave, but for this special toast Dean insisted that every American raise a glass. “May he die in a FEMA trailer!” He adds that, if he were in the States right now he’d dress as G.W. for Halloween. Leona asks what’s stopping him; all they need is a party.

## Chapter six

Mara sees how it will be best to wait it all out. With her little brother, Andimba, every complaint requires a parental arraignment. A chard of a broken plate he's kicked with his big toe is his evidence toward a host of allegations, a preview of the courtroom prowess their father believes he will someday earn. That Mara with her sprained wrist is down to one good arm doesn't enter into it. Or that she must maneuver the broom, held under her free armpit, with only her left hand. It had been Andimba's own dinner-plate. It would be entirely possible, she thinks, for a boy his age to bring dishes into the kitchen after supper.

Their mother encourages the spectacle until she has finished loading pages into binders, as preamble to her own announcement: there is a new guest coming, the American girl, Callie, starting next weekend. "Something nice for you and your brother," she adds. "Someone from the other side of the world." How does she delude herself that this is still a functional family, capable of frequent hospitality to souls in need of shelter? To avoid the coming string of logical questions Mara has ready, she walks immediately to the bathroom and closes the door. "Something nice for you" is to justify how all of the cleaning and preparation for the visit will fall to Mara. Every evening of the coming week a group of Australian Catholics will be at the Tura Center to paint or teach English or whatever her mother will assign them.

Although she should be incensed, Mara feels only a bleary lightheadedness. It is a Saturday morning and unusually warm. The ibuprofen—did she take the next dose too soon?—is kicking in. The effect on her psyche isn't unlike the feeling just before she fell straight out the front door of the bus. Carefree.

When her mother comes out of the bathroom she yells to Andimba that they are already late. To Mara she says, “You can start on the usual, since you are not coming. Am I right?” In truth Mara intended a return to Youth Club and her friends this afternoon, and would be ready to move past last week’s unpleasantness, but they are out the door before she can think of a way around it.

With the washing machine broken and one good arm it takes hours to work the pile of laundry over the washboard. By the end her left shoulder is sore and it is nearly impossible to bring the clothes up over the line to dry. After this she is not inclined to do anything except find the coolest corner of the house to rest in, which at mid-afternoon is a stuffed chair in the living room with a fan set on the windowsill to blow over her face and neck. The water on the front of her jeans is a help.

This guest would be a departure from the routine, Callie from Chicago, city of many skyscrapers; a student with money enough for a university with a satellite location here in Namibia. Staying for a week with a host family because she wants to know what Katutura life is like. No doubt this would be a “how it’s like for them” experience, a looking-down, except Callie was so adamant on the phone that theirs was the only family she’d stay with. It is hard to guess at the allure. There is no crisis to Callie’s situation, no lost job, no illness, no red-and-purple across the face. She first visited them at the Tura Center a few weeks back to incessant snickering from the younger kids. She was taller than a woman wants to be, with white-pale skin, orange hair, and almost no eyebrows until you were up close. The usual crowd gathered; Brianne, who considers herself the spokeswoman of the Youth Club, gave her the song-and-dance, but their guest looked around at every face in the room as if trying to discover some terrible rumor about

herself. When she retreated immediately to a chair along the wall, Mara was ready to apologize for them, but Callie was frowning at the crowd over a notebook pressed against her knees. Andimba, who fell immediately in love with Callie, approached her nearly every half hour, but she turned him away. He reported afterward on the only time she spoke, a private conversation with their mother in the office. She wanted everyone to join some kind of game she has arranged. "Mama said no, but thank you." She turned her down in two minutes flat, which was probably for the best: it is painful to imagine such a girl standing in front of a crowd. Mara suspects that they are welcoming Callie because her mother cannot say "no" twice in a row.

The visit is almost certainly a bad idea, but there is no talking to her mother about any of this. She'd take in whatever objections Mara offered and then, the tears all dried, her energy spent, she'd offer some simple, irrefutable reason for things to go exactly as planned. Her mother is a modern-day Melchizedek. Hers is the voice that commanded the bricklayers of the pyramids. Yet, for the last twenty-four hours Mara has been immune to it. Toivo's famous speech has been in her ear ever since her brother gave his smug presentation in Youth Club, the one she memorized in standard four: *We do not now, and will not in the future, recognize your right to govern us; to make laws for us in which we had no say.* And when she wakes from her nap the solution is there for her, just to let it happen. To let things collapse by their own inertia. Standing in the backyard she sees it beginning: apart from a row of pants hanging steadily by their own weight on the line there are only the splatterings of cotton fabric below and the orange container of clothespins to one side, unused. In the dust, at least two dozen socks like peppered

dumplings. A few t-shirts, a green-and-cream dress. A pair of Andimba's shorts with its muddy underside starting to flutter in the breeze.

When her mother and brother come home it's *we don't have time for this*, which Mara finds precisely accurate. She sets everything to soak again in a clean tub of water and then starts on the living room as her forearm begins to throb. The pain takes up the better part of her attention, so that she has sprayed two of the three couch cushions with bleach solution before her mother rushes in to pull the bottle from her hand. "Wet rags, wet rags!" she exclaims, and with the adrenaline of this minor catastrophe Mara returns to her old self, momentarily, rushing to the sink, expertly dampening the old towels, then kneeling with her mother to dab away as much bleach as they can. The damage is minor; a speckling. Mara suggests hitting the third cushion with the spray bottle, for symmetry.

During the reprimand that follows she studies her mother's red face and the explosiveness of her gestures. Probably she was worn out by yet another working weekend, and should rest. The revelation has already arrived to Mara: this visit will fail. When she searches for the source of this insight, she recalls the family of insects—like beetles, but so agile—climbing the walls of their bathroom. According to Teresa, who lives next door, and whose television gets better reception, American females are deathly afraid of cockroaches. Mara offers this information solemnly, like flowers on the grave of a departed idea.

Her mother asks what is the problem, since there are no cockroaches in their home.

The nebulosity of this term is to her advantage. She says cockroaches are the little brown bugs that came in last winter. Her mother lowers herself onto the couch and

begins the deep-breathing exercises that Pastor taught her. “I give up. Find my mobile,” she says. But instead of calling to cancel the girl’s visit, their mother takes up the SMS routine. She sends messages to everyone in Katutura, querying her problems: what is the recipe for hot dogs? What is the recipe for spaghetti-and-meatballs? How much water does an American need for washing herself?

When the phone beeps with responses for the cockroach problem she tells Mara to get supper ready, then stands by to micromanage. The effect on any other day would gall her, but today Mara is taken in by the flutter of soap suds pushed between her fingers. After the kettle boils, she mixes its contents with the inch of cold in the sink until it nearly scalds her hand. She can recall the self who only yesterday was animated by the brevity of an evening of homework and chores, but today she is content. While scrubbing and peeling she must hold the potato with her slung hand, close against her stomach, and soon there are wet peelings down the front of the countertop, clinging to her jeans, and on the floor. She likes the way the naked potatoes wobble across the table, and she likes the fragrance of their own bodies in the warm kitchen. When she reaches for the cleaver her mother her mother scolds her away. “Another day,” she says. “When you’re less clumsy.”

It would be enough work to be just the three of them this week, without this guest whom Mara imagines will sit beside her in the living room each day like a rock lizard, unblinking, unresponsive. Yet when her mother says, “She may surprise you,” the tone of the words sticks in Mara’s ears—there is a grating edge to her voice, the tightness she remembers from days when she’d been quarrelling with their father or when it was her turn to moderate the Standard Sevens at the Tura Center.

There is a fix, it seems, even for the cockroaches. Andimba, for whom every idea deserves a formal announcement, stands to block the television with a hand behind his back and says he has seen exactly what they do in the United States. He reveals his right hand, in which he holds one of Mara's maryjanes. If there is a bug frightening women, you can crawl on the ground with a shoe in your hand and *smack*, it is not a problem.

"Use your own *tekkie*," Mara says.

What follows is a show of quietude from Andimba that no one has seen since the week the paving crews came to the neighborhood. He sits on a chair between the television and the open bathroom, shoe ready. At first it seems he has forgotten all about the task, staring alternately at the ceiling, a loose string on his shorts, and the television. But when the onslaught begins he crouches diligently in the bathroom, where she can hear isolated *thuds* at intervals. Mara finds him trying to pounce from a standing position, lurching forward after a gray flash that has already reached the other side of the room. The sight tugs at her heart, awakening the familiar rescue-urge. He is helpless without her. She tells him it's an idiot's way to go after them. She asks if he will also try to put food in through his belly button or scratch his head with his toes. He giggles at this, drops the shoe and lifts his shirt to tuck under his chin, squeezing the lean folds of skin at his midriff. "Mowommomomm." He makes eating sounds, and peeks up at her every few seconds to see if she's laughing. It's the same way he takes every criticism. He might be permanently scatty. As Teresa said, these are little boys' tricks. Being nine, he is too old to take everything so literally. Teresa's younger brother, though nearly the same age, is more advanced. With Andimba, everything must be spelled out: "Why hold the shoe in your *hand*?" she asks, stomping her foot a few times.

Teresa's arrival next door this July was the first fortunate turn of events for Mara in at least a year. Teresa calls out truths that Mara never found a name for: that the annual school play is invariably about being good citizens. That football club makes boys stuck-up. How nail polish takes forever to dry during the rainy season. She can only guess at the circumstances for Teresa's being singled out among her siblings to live with her aunt and uncle. They have no children, and she is the oldest and likely most appealing candidate. Teresa's brother and sisters still live with their parents in the Ovambo Area, and because she doesn't have them to watch over she usually comes to Mara's side of the fence while Andimba carries on in his invented universe. Teresa's not afraid to say what their mother won't admit: that he is not a normal boy. They are able to chat in stops and starts as Mara shouts to him about things he shouldn't be doing.

On Sunday afternoon Andimba is on the couch fidgeting with his *mealie-pap* and milk. Because it has been more than five minutes the food will be cold and there is no chance he will eat it. His continued fixation is Callie's hair, which he says is like a pumpkin, and also crazy. After their introduction to the American girl at the Center he claims to know everything about her, though this detail is his sole example. Her hair is like a grandmother's with the scarf off her head. Their mother says white people's hair is different; it doesn't need braiding or straightening. That is their fashion. He says he would like to braid it for her. As another example of her brother's misaligned development, there is the interest in women's hair and clothing.

Teresa said once that teenagers in the United States get paid for their chores. Allowance. There are also boys in their standard who get this, sometimes for no reason at all. Mara's mother says that chores are part of *being a woman*. It's an old line, which



worked while she was getting her new breasts and her period. But it seems that *womanhood* is the only reward her mother plans to offer—barely a *thank you*; never a *that's enough*. So when the moment presents itself, Mara retreats to the fence-line to wait for her friend. After several minutes it seems this has worked—her mother will leave her be. Inside the house she can hear Andimba resume his mission, this time squealing at a pitch even their mother can't abide for long. She pushes him outside, where he begins pirouetting around the backyard with a rag in his hand.

This is a boy, she thinks, who may never have a girlfriend. It seems like a topic to broach when he's older.

When he approaches Mara and Teresa he has the prize in his hand, wrapped in one of the good dishrags, and out of consideration for their feminine sensibilities he holds it near the crook of his arm, protecting them. “Did you kill it just for me?” she asks him. She likes it when he displays his affection for her in front of her friends, and she tilts her chin toward him. “Kiss me for luck on the hunt?”

“Why can't you be like this with Samwel?” Teresa asks, because it is high time that Mara found a boyfriend. Mara says it is nothing like this with Samwel. Teresa says no, boys are not so different at any age you know them.

Around sunset, her brother shows them five carcasses in the bathroom sink. Their mother tickles his neck, makes him carry his kill out behind the woodpile, and hands the bug-smearred rags to Mara. “It is not *so* much work, for having an American guest here,” she says, looking buoyant, then adding that the bathroom sink should be cleaned again. Mara thinks it is funny, how an American can show up at their home for no reason other than curiosity. Someone told her that Americans have television shows just for watching

other people's lives. The very idea has Mara spellbound, and after a few minutes her mother says that the nurse has prescribed too many painkillers. Although Mara hasn't taken a single pill all day she allows her mother to lead her by the arm into the bedroom, hold the nightshirt for her to duck into, and turn off the light. It is still too warm for sleeping, so Mara picks at the cracking blue paint on the headboard and thinks of a long trip across the Atlantic, carried by an airplane on a pocket of air.

\*

When Callie steps inside Wernhil Park Lutheran Church it seems finally she has gone back to the beginning. After weeks of missteps and botched opportunities her instinct in coming here was inspired. Whatever bad blood stands between her and Pate, regarding this church it seems he was right, and she'd be a fool not to grit her teeth and ask him anyway. The building was poured from the same mould as the dozens of churches speckled across Chicago, with the familiar ranks of lancet windows, the vaulted ceilings and the brick bell tower. She'd gone to Lutheran worship with her mother every Sunday from her first memories until the ninth grade when she'd been confirmed in a class of one and decided to stay home. After that, until the day her mother quit the bookkeeper job she entered the First German building nearly every week but never the sanctuary, waiting in the lobby certain days after school until her mother locked the office and let Callie drive the two of them home. It was a small suburban congregation, mostly blue-haired women, many of them obsessed with the condition of the disproportionately large pipe organ behind the choir loft. For her confirmation party

they'd crowded her house, turning their living room into a church narthex for sharing coffee and gossip.

Nothing in her experience at First German prepared her for this place. Because she is late to worship at Wernhil Park the music greets her on the walk in. The hymn is so loud that there's no mistaking its origin: the entire congregation is singing in harmony, and she can barely make out the piano accompaniment.

*Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee.*

Entering the sanctuary, which is twice as large as First German's, she sees no gaps in any of the pews; as the hymn starts its next verse, more congregants stream in, seating themselves singly in the gaps between families or on the floor of the aisles, close against the ends of the pews. The sanctuary itself also has that familiar stamp—white walls, dark-stained wood, many tall colored windows, and a single unadorned cross behind the altar. Although she is somewhat conspicuous, being one of few white attendees, no one seems to notice her.

*Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee;*

*E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me.*

She sees Pate within the first several minutes; when the room begins to over-fill he becomes a bouncer of sorts, protecting some of the older attendees from the young who try to invent new gaps to sit in. Eventually he stands at the back of the sanctuary, blocking the latest arrivals from entering. The congregation sings a third opening hymn, and then a fourth. A woman beside her offers a view of her slim hymnal, in which the words are printed but not the musical staves. It doesn't seem to matter.

When the pastor stands he is wearing the familiar alb and green stole. He asks for announcements, and there are several. Choir rehearsals, Bible studies. A woman stands to announce that a member of their own congregation has died, leaving small children, and next Saturday she will hold a *braai vlies* on their behalf.

After worship Pate is nowhere to be seen. It's likely he is avoiding her; amid a congregation that's almost entirely black and, to her eye, dressed like there's a wedding, she's conspicuous. Instead she finds the pastor and asks for a few minutes of his time. The man has elvish ears that wiggle when he smiles and apple cheeks, the sort of man any mother would ask to tell her children about Jesus. He stands attentive, but seems distracted by the din around them. She asks if they might talk in his office, and when he tries to suggest an appointment during the week she says it will only take a few minutes. She forces a smile. "What if I told you that in about five weeks I can offer you a booth at the biggest charity networking event of the year?"

His eyes twinkle, as though she is a little girl who has asked to sit on his knee during the children's sermon. He asks what event this might be.

She says he might meet someone at the Fair who could help the newly-orphaned children in their congregation, or install an air conditioner, or pay for repairs. Anything.

He is taking her seriously now, and apologizes that he will be away in Rehoboth for the week. "Please call us at the number on the bulletin, and our secretary can put you in touch with me."

"Sir, if you—" she sputters a bit. A few of the women standing nearby, their heads wrapped in the rounded Nama style, seem to be listening in. They are waiting for

her to finish. "I can put you in contact with the sponsors you've been hoping to attract, in a situation where they can't say no."

The pastor frowns and repeats his offer, his eyes darting from her face to those in the waiting crowd.

"I am ready to waive the entry fee."

He asks for the name of the charity event and she tells him in a low voice, suddenly embarrassed. He shakes his head in non-recognition, and she tells him it is the inaugural year of the event. She says there will be food and wine, and that her objective is to offer three prizes at the end. Five thousand Namibian, then thirty-five hundred and twenty-five hundred. Cash.

One of the women at his side asks her whether she is in charge of the event, and when she says that yes she is, the whole group of them smile out of the sides of their mouths. The woman suggests, gently, that she try such things when she is back at home. "You are from Britain, yes?"

Callie says it shouldn't matter, adding that she has, in fact, brought a large sum of money over on behalf of her hometown. She clears her throat and leans toward the pastor. She asks to know the names of their congregation's biggest supporters, and any members who might have connections, so that she might invite them to the fair. "I am ready to waive the entry fee and the booth rental, but I need information from you today."

It's at this moment that the women close rank, touching Callie on her arms and shoulder and thanking her for the kind offer. The pastor is gone before she has a chance to speak again.

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From the moment their first guest arrives, Friday night's Halloween party is an exhibition of the strangeness of American customs. Lacking any manner of Halloween supplies at any of the local stores, they made their own costumes, cut witches and bats out of paper and fashioned spider webs out of white yarn. Attendance is strong, but despite the explicit instructions on the invitations, all of the guests arrive in fashionable street-clothes and, misunderstanding the word "pot luck," have come empty-handed. Within an hour Callie and Paula—by virtue of wearing the least-ridiculous costumes—are sent to the nearest gas station with a handful of money to buy as much food and liquor as they can carry.

The next day the news from Chris is bad again. Mom tried attending choir rehearsal at First German, and he wants to know why she is punishing herself in this way. His next question was why Callie is punishing both of them by refusing to write or call. Especially with the Teddy situation. But after such a streak of back luck she is not ready to call, and so it seems only fair to offer Mom and Chris a different ray of sunlight in her stead. For old time's sake she starts on a message to send from one of Teddy's old clients, a discount perfume warehouse. A limited-time-only blow-out sale. She starts with his signature border pattern. Following the Halloween theme she uses the graphics program on her computer to fashion a set of dancing skeletons to use as the border of her message, arranging the arm and leg bones so they seem to be dancing. Her hands are shaking and her teeth chatter before she realizes the blue-gray skin her mind is painting over the bones, which are no longer dancing but floating in a red t-shirt and bluejeans alongside the contents of someone's garage. She slams the laptop closed.

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Until he is given some indication of the new rules of conduct, Andimba thinks, there will be more cold, bland suppers and more of the crossed-up twitchy-leggedness that means *Don't come near me*. It is the third evening of Mama being away at the Tura Center after work, because the Australian priests are building a new fence. It is the second of four weeks that Papa is in Elizabethtown to finish his school and become a certified diesel technician. He knows that he is being punished by Mara for something. After a Monday at school without a lunch he has been putting salt-beans and cabbage in a bag and eating it with his fingers. Also, when he can sneak them, half a row of chocolate-coconut biscuits. Mara is a dictator and does not inform the convicted of their charges. Tonight she has again made nothing except a pot of *mealies*, now stiff and inedible on the kitchen table. He would like to remind her that, if this has something to do with the dog-drawings on the poster, he himself punched John in the stomach for it and then tried to throw the thing away. If Papa were here he'd know exactly what the bad thing was and what he must suffer for it. He would accept that. He would accept no television and extra truck-cleaning-out chores on Sunday afternoons to have things normal again.

Mama told him not to leave the house for any reason, but at present Mara is stationed in the living room—the only cool-enough room of the house—with her mobile phone and an open schoolbook, and when she looks at him it is only with her eyes and the upward curl of her lips. As soon as he recognizes the sound of Boss and Reuben playing *policie* down the street he is out the door, brazenly, with Mara cocking her head as she watches his exit. It might mean a belting when Papa gets home, but Boss and

Reuben have been away for nearly a week and he is an excellent *rower* because he knows how to belly-crawl through a gap in the fence at the Ded Zone.

Even when he discovers that Boss and Reuben's house is dark and their car still missing, and the shouting is just some older boys who only ignore him—even so, it is better to be outdoors. He has already earned either the whipping or his sister's unspoken appreciation for leaving her alone. He'll know when Mama comes home. Because it is supertime he wanders the neighborhood for a while; Mrs. Dax or Stephen's mother might acknowledge his deprivation and invite him in. He stalls awhile near the fence of the newlywed couple's house because the food there always smells the best. Most evenings it is loud inside with guests, and sometimes the wife walks out the front and around the house to put meat on the *braii*. He might catch her attention. The wife looks to be about Mara's age and doesn't speak much of any language except Oshiwambo. How long, then, until his sister marries or moves out for college? Perhaps she will manage one or the other before things get any worse with her.

Mara says it is Ovambos and not the #Nukhoe who fuss over meanings of names. Mrs. Shopa told them that a person's name is a destiny to be fulfilled, but his sister says hers comes from the Bible and therefore doesn't matter in that way. He would like to ask Mama whether this is *woman things* or *being a teenager* or if it is the start of something more permanent. Even his friends say they do not want to come near her, when only a few months ago they loved her better than any of the other sisters. They might have done those things to her poster because she now ignores them. It also might have been because Mrs. Shopa was in charge of the Tura Club activities that day, which meant that everyone looked for ways to misbehave. Punishment meant being sent outside, away from the *life*



*opportunities activities* and into the courtyard to play football or watch the older boys' wrestling matches. Mrs. Shopa made them wait turns in queue for the computer, where one of the Junior Leaders would look up their name on the internet. It was there that Theofilus heard about *Mara* in the Bible. When he got back to their table he said, "I have figured out the whole problem with her," and Andimba hoped at first it had something to do with Mara finding a boyfriend so that she wouldn't cry so much, but Theofilus would not explain, he only said, "Leave it to me." Then he did nothing while Mara came over to sit beside Andimba at their table, helping him draw a picture of Andimba Toivo ya Toivo shaking hands with Nelson Mandela. Mara's own posterboard remained at her table. No one touched it until Mara and her girlfriends abandoned their table to watch the older boys at their wrestling.

Theofilus watched her go, then sauntered to the teen girls' table, an operation seemed so precarious that Andimba called after him. Mrs. Shopa reacted only to Andimba—"In English! Say it in English!"—and allowed Theofilus to sit there for several minutes, drawing in thick red marker. She told him to get down when he stood on one of the chairs, but did not stop him from raising the drawing over his head and announcing himself to the room.

The stick figures in his picture were a girl and an animal and three long lines. "Dimba, your sister is named as a beater! She is taking dogs and beating them!" When Mrs. Shopa pulled him down from the chair and directed him outside, John stood to offer the refrain—dog beater! Dog beater!—and this was when Andimba leaned over to punch him in the stomach.

Out in the courtyard his friends would not let him play football, so he sat in the shade of the building to watch the wrestlers, none of whom had any of the aggressive energy that tugged at Andimba. It seemed he could pull down any of them, with how they were content to walk circles, yelling and slapping at each others' backs, always stopping to shake hands before anything real got played out. He heard the heavy clank of a latch and recognized the green of his sister's dress just outside the gate. Until that day, Mara always complained about the dangerous men lurking near the Tura Center and insisted on taxi money. It was the first time he'd seen her walk home alone. Watching her leave, he felt sure his friends were wrong.

But now, as even the older boys down the street are going in for supper, he is reminded that Theofilus is the smart one who gets the high marks in school. With the glow of the late sun on the houses, Andimba suspects he is the only boy in the neighborhood being left to fend for himself. When he is hungry enough to return and eat the *mealies* he remembers to lift the door on its hinge so it won't creak, then appraises the scene from the doorway. There are no new aromas of Handy-Andy or soup, and no sign of Mara until he hears the huffy sounds she makes on the other side of their bedroom door. It is late enough in the evening that she will now be doing homework, but it has always been her preference to suffer through the hours while fully visible at the coffee table or in the kitchen. Today is like the time a cat on their uncle's farm stowed itself in a tiny gap between grain sacks on a shelf in the storage room, raising claws anyone who tried to shoo it back to the courtyard where it belonged. No one would tell him what happened, but he didn't see it again after that. Mara does not answer when he knocks.

As soon as Mama comes home there are noodles and tomato chutney to eat but no television for anyone until Mara completes her chores—a punishment Andimba loathes. With Papa it is a set time when the shows can go on again. With Mama there is a litany of reasons why the television is an unreasonable request, followed by what she would do, were she a boy wanting to grow up and be a famous lawyer. There is only one talk show left between now and the cartoons that he has looked forward to all week. He can't enter the bedroom because Mara has not said anything yet about his being outside, so he peels the two freight-truck magnets Papa gave him from the side of the refrigerator and carries them to the couch. One has a pair of toy wheels that spin on plastic axels, and while he spins them he remembers what Papa has been teaching him in preparation for the weekend when Andimba will accompany him to Otjiwarongo and back. He knows already what to do if there is a blown tire, how to steer out of a skid in bad weather, and all the positions on the first gearshift. Papa says you can learn more in four years of being a truck driver than anyone got from a university. He can already see this is true: when Mara emerges to receive instructions from Mama he realizes that he is going about this problem the wrong way. The most common mistake truck drivers make, Papa says, is to smell burning oil or rubber and keep driving, not wanting to know what it is. *Do that*, he says, *and you can plan on being stranded along the M52.*

He wants now to tell his friends that they got the name wrong. *Bitter*, he wants to tell them. *Bitter*, not *beater*. It's not quite as bad that way. He knows that with the name *Andimba* he is destined to be a great hero of the people. He will start his own law firm, like Nelson Mandela, and then he will steal Mama away from Mr. Kamhulu and make her his own legal assistant. But he will not make her do any work unless she wants to.

Even though it was stupid to name his sister that. She might have been christened after their aunt Martha who is married to a hotel owner and lives on Luxury Hill.

By the time he has steeled himself for a try, Mama has placed a bucket of washing-water in the bathroom and seated herself to wait in the kitchen with her work-binder open, her eyes darting upward as she listens for the slap of a wet rag against the tile. Mara, who is to stay in the bathroom until this is done, stands in front of the mirror and has undone the first two rows of braids on the left side of her head. There aren't many ways to get her attention when she is like this, but he knows at least one. He swings himself through the bathroom doorframe on his taut right arm and whispers to her, "Frizzy frizzy," before hurrying into their bedroom on the other side of the wall. He guesses at the approximate spot that would be opposite the mirror. He must first calm himself, and thinks of being stared down by a mamba who will strike if he shows the slightest break in concentration. "*Vul'indlela,*" he begins, "*wemamgobhozi.*" With the first phrases he tries to sing quietly, but can only manage a squeak until he switches from Brenda Fassie's soprano into his own register. "*He unyana wam, helele uyashada namhlanje.*" It is Mara's favorite song, and therefore the last thing she wants to hear from him. "*Vul'indlela.*" He braces himself against the wall, crescendoing with every phrase to be sure she can hear him.

It is only two days until the American comes. He mumbles through some unknown phrases up to the song's big proclamation: "*Bengingazi! Ngiyombon'umakoti!*" It is possible that the thing has already happened to Mara. She will never be married. She will not leave the house, will not go away to college. He leans back against the frame of the bed, pressing a heel into the wall with the forward beats of the song. He employs both

feet at the bridge of the song, thumping at his sister and letting the “Woo! Woo!” echo across the house so she will think about these things.

It doesn't matter about him being outside. There are no punishments to be given, Mama and his sister will continue like this, and he can pound and yell all he likes. He hoots as he taps out the bass line with his heels, and when he forgets the words entirely he improvises a new rhythm, harder and stronger until his heel goes through the plaster to reveal a pair of sloping red and white wires and the elbow of a bathroom pipe.

\*

On Friday evening Mama pushes one of the bunk beds flush against the wall with the hole he has made and then barks at him to get the flowered sheets from the clothesline. When guests come it is hard to know if the house-cleaning is *good enough* until this moment—starting now, if Mama is displeased she will glare at things that are wrong whenever the guests aren't looking. When he woke this morning there was the smell of new bread and a good deal of whistling, but now Mama tugs and taps at her weave each time she bustles in and out from the pantry. She has sent Mara on an errand, and it is only two of them in the house when Callie arrives. Mama nearly runs into her bedroom to put on a clean dress.

As their guest with her ghost-pale legs climbs out of the *combi* and Mama takes her bags he can see the blond back of a male student's head resting against one of the rear windows. He would have liked a college boy instead, so that they could have the whole bedroom to themselves and he, Andimba, might be the one to give the grand tour. With girls there are rules about propriety, even with his sister and cousins. His aunt says that he

and Mara shouldn't share a room anymore now that he is getting closer to the coming-of-age. There will be more rules when that happens. Papa insisted on a girl because their house has two women and no adult male while he is away.

Andimba can't understand English out of Callie's mouth but comprehends Mama's side of the conversation. When they sit down to a glass of Fanta and some biscuits she asks how it is possible for a college student to come every evening to the Tura Center for so many hours of physical labor and also take all of the classes at her school. The American sits at the very edge of the sofa and does not eat anything. Her words are stilted, as though she were not the native speaker, and Mama frowns into her glass of water. "Education is just very important," Mama says. "You should have the best for you that is possible."

When Mama steps out into the backyard his sister follows Callie into the kitchen and does not stop her from taking all of the dishes herself in two armloads. The American pulls an elastic from her wrist and uses it to bind her hair in an ugly blob at the back of her head. Because he is shy about his English he tells his sister in Khoikhoi to ask about the orange color. "If it is normal, or if it is put in." Mara ignores him, but it is not long before the American's curiosity requires her to ask what he's after.

He would most like to know how this has all gone topsy-turvy, his sister leaning against the counter as a spectator while their guest stands at the sink, elbow-deep in cold water.

For the first time Mama is angry at the spectacle, though she keeps her composure until she has seated Callie in the living room with a few slices of buttered bread and another glass of Fanta. She takes Mara into her bedroom. He likes having Callie all to

himself and wishes he could think of something to say, but with the bickering in the next room he is too nervous to think straight. The American gestures for his attention and begins what seems like a puppet show, with a pencil and the scarf she has untied from her neck, and then he sees what she is doing, making it seem as though the pencil is cut in half and then back together again. In the other room his sister is trying to explain the dishwashing. “Show me a daughter I can trust and I will believe you,” says Mama.

“Tell me where the pencil should go,” says Callie. He says he wants it in the kitchen, and she rolls her eyes but then hides it under the scarf and, simply by pointing at it three times, transports it. “Go look,” she says, and in less than a minute he finds it under the table, only a bit nicked, with no clues about how she got it to do that.

\*

Mara knows within the first day of Callie’s visit that it is no use explaining her mother’s silly rules to their guest, or trying to tell her mother why, after being firmly discouraged from participating in household chores, Callie rose early this morning to scrub every dish they’d left sitting in the sink. She said she couldn’t sleep, and that washing dishes was calming for her. Mara can witness to the insomnia: last night there was a clocklike dependability to Callie’s sighing, each one a warning to Mara that the bed was about to shudder with her movements.

But it is harder to understand the compulsive dishwashing, or her keenness to sit beside Andimba for hours, rehashing his English lessons. He wants her to say certain words *ad nauseam*—milk, school, that, this, praying—and it is hard to say which of them is more enthralled. Tutoring Andimba is the one thing their mother does not object to, so Callie

has thrown herself into it. The only logical conclusion is that she wants something from them.

Mara is alone in the house for the afternoon, and reminds herself that these may be the last hours of peace she has for a while, with only the occasional squall of the neighbors' new son. There is homework to do, chemistry, which she likes well enough because their teacher has reviewed the same material redundantly for the past month. Each equation clicks solidly into place on the lined pages:  $2 N_2 + 1 O^2 \rightarrow 2 N_2O$ ;  $CH_4 + 2CO_2 \rightarrow CO_2 + 2H_2O$ . It's a pleasant tedium that keeps her from thinking too much about being ostracized by her mother. As always, she has theories about this. Most likely her mother overheard a certain conversation in the kitchen yesterday. Callie, while letting several liters of cold water run into the sink, asked whether Mara thought her mother liked her. Their guest's voice shook a bit when she said it, and Mara was thinking about the water and said too loudly, "It is okay. She isn't friendly with most everybody," and when she thought to take it back, she couldn't. It felt true.

The three of them are taking a bicycle tour, of all things. Hardly the "typical #Nukhoe living" that the Global Studies professor asked them to demonstrate to Callie. Mara herself has only ridden a bicycle a few times in her life, and would have difficulty maneuvering one even with two steady arms. Her mother waited until Mara left the room announce it—a ride on rental bikes to the Single Quarters Market—and there was never a discussion of whether Mara might find some alternate way of joining the trek. She also did not list off any chores for while they are gone. It is a subtle trap: no chores means no instrument for protest, so that an afternoon of leisure means obeying her mother's wishes. She has lately suspected her to be the most deviously clever person she knows. With a



rental bike for herself, Mara would take off on her own, riding straight to the Botanical Gardens and staying to watch the sunset.

She reconsiders their guest. She hadn't thought anyone from America would want anything from Katuturans, and Callie's discomfort in their home is self-evident: the need for washing-water in the evening and again in the morning, the sleepless night, the bits of sausage tucked into her napkin during supper. But her eyes have lost their former reptilian glaze, and she has praised nearly every trinket, gadget and meal in their home. Mara can't remember another guest so eager to please their mother. No one would strip and re-paint all the doors and window-frames at the Tura Center with no pay, as Callie did last week, unless she wanted something big.

None of this makes sense until she considers the charity festival Callie keeps talking about, which, as anyone can see, her mother has filed irretrievably under Things I Want No Part In. As Callie described her plans their mother assumed her counselor's posture: head tilted a bit sideways, nodding, eyes dancing a bit as if reading the speaker's words off a script, looking for holes in the plot. Looking for where everything went wrong. It is her habit to assume that a person is out of whack when they visit her. She listens a long time and says almost nothing, just a few gentle questions when the crying or yelling subsides. Then the person's response determines whether the counseling can continue. Callie was cut off. Her mother's all-important question—"What is most valuable to you in all this?"—was met with a stuttering return to the first lines of her sales-pitch:

"It's easy! And it costs you absolutely nothing!"

Mara herself is drawn to the idea of a city-wide Charity Fair. She likes the English word “fair”—equitable, balanced-out. She wonders if Callie intended this double-meaning, because why is it that everything falls to people like her family, all the donating and all the midnight phone calls? As Callie says, many local businesses are probably looking to save money on their taxes. So many wealthy people would like to clear their consciences by making a change for the less fortunate, and all that is needed is this thing that she is doing. Mara’s mother would have none of it, and side-stepped Callie’s query into the material needs of the Tura Center. Off the top of her head, Mara can come up with dozens of things: tables, a new refrigerator, computers. Money to buy the empty house next door and start a real tutoring center. A hired electrician to fix the flickering lights in half the building. Scholarships.

What could be a more sensible solution to all this than signing up for a chance to win twenty grand? Unless a person were obsessed with playing the Hero of Katutura, the lone savior of the neighborhood, what could be better than balancing the equation a bit?

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Although dinner is very late and he is hungry, Andimba is content to read another book with Callie. When she speaks and he can see the words, it all comes together like a puzzle. The buzzing-insect sound that means “a” in “laughing.” The questioning lilt at the ends of some phrases isn’t actually a question. He touches her hair and fidgets with the rings on her fingers. Mama is making pizza, cursing the cheese that won’t melt and the crust that is burning. His sister proclaims that no one can make pizza without an oven. The sun is already at the horizon by the time they sit down to eat, so they have missed

*Passions* and part of the evening news, but Mama insists on hospitality manners. They watch as Callie takes everything in very small bites, complimenting each element repeatedly. He can now understand the word *cheese* from her mouth, with its drawn-out donkey vowel.

When it is finally their turn to eat the pizza he is required to eat it properly. It is work to move the fork through the blackened crust, and after a while he gives up and begins to scratch at a scab on the back of his leg. He takes up the fork again and begins flaking off the purple top with its tines. The ensuing itch of the exposed skin matches the tone of the American's voice as she explains something involving sick people and an airplane. Even with fork to scab they will not acknowledge him. Although Mama and Mara are still eating she leaves her chair to fetch a bag from the bedroom, and again he is pleased because these are presents and she has brought him a small box that rattles, which she calls "legos." She passes things to all of them. Callie rattles off a story too quickly for him to understand. Mama grips the sides of her skirt with tight fists and her ankles twitch, but she smiles and she is listening.

## Chapter seven

Mara, who has developed her mother's sixth sense for trouble, wakes when her bunk bed goes still for too long. It's a bad sign. The weird parts of trauma or homesickness always emerge at night, and she has come to expect a certain level of chaos in the bunk below her. Most often it is just crying, sometimes for longer than a person would think possible. Always muffled, unless it's a kid. More than once her mother has found food gone from the fridge or shelves the next day. A few people have locked themselves into the bathroom. Children close to Andimba's age get stomachaches. With Callie it was the unhappy shifting from side to side. Silence is the biggest signal of emergency.

Mara pulls back the curtain to check the bunk bed above her brother and then puts an ear to her mother's door for any sounds of conversation. When the backyard, too, is empty, she decides there is nothing to be done about it. Only a few guests have left like this, without anyone noticing. Her parents' philosophy was to let people do their own thing, except the time it was the little boy from Omitara whose grandfather was in Katutura Hospital. For that her parents woke Mr. and Mrs. Dax and went out searching. It is hard to guess whether Callie qualifies for a grand search, being technically an adult but also an international guest in their mother's custody. It is the sort of thing that could land them in the newspapers.

Instinct brings her to the Ded Zone because it is the only light and commotion on the street, and because Callie wouldn't know where to find a taxi at this hour. A girl with a good reputation should never go to a place like that, and certainly not without a male chaperone. Her mother says this is where they go to find "*those* women." As Mara

approaches the windows along the side, she is reminded of all the times she'd peeked in on the way home from school, in the heat of the afternoon when the music still wasn't on very loud and Mr. Shihepo was sweeping the floors or sitting at the counter, watching television. Back then she'd wanted to stand next to the large fan and roll the billiard balls over the green felt tables. That was when she'd needed to stand on a crate to look in. Now the walls are painted a sunny yellow, and there are flashing arcade-style machines along the far wall. It has been years since this place held any interest for her. Although the ruckus from this *shebeen* has clouded her weekend sleep for as long as she can remember, Mara realizes that she has never known who was inside.

She sees Callie's red hair first, at the bar. It isn't surprising. Through the window, the whole scene contradicts what she always imagined. She'd thought somehow that the creepiest souls from around the city infiltrated their neighborhood *shebeen* at night, but she knows everyone here. The taxi-driver who is always asking her father to look under his hood. The man living next to the barber shop with his big dogs. Her standard-six maths teacher. She has even seen most of them drinking before, at a *braai vlies* or a wedding reception, but this is more private, like she is spying on them through the walls of the men's bathroom. Despite the vibrant music, the crowd is meditative. At her stool between four men, Callie seems to blend in.

When Mara enters it is as though she has come in a Santa-suit: half a dozen men stand and clap, and the laughing freezes her at the door. "*Anis!*" says Teresa's uncle, who she hadn't seen as she spied through the window. He knows why she is here, Selma's daughter, the Mother-Hen-In-Training. "She is coming to collect her lost chick."

Callie waves to her from the bar, her head shrinking between her shoulders. She apologizes profusely until the man beside her slaps a hand over her mouth and draws her back into a discussion that Mara's entrance interrupted. Mara recognizes his profile first, though she has to walk in closer to believe this is the ill-fated Mr. Alweendo, with a cigarette in his hand and in effortless English, proclaiming to her guest and to anyone within earshot that Almighty God in Heaven is ready to reward him for his suffering.

To Mr. Alweendo's left is a shorter, younger man she does not recognize. "Why aren't you in bed?" he asks her in Afrikaans. "You can maybe come stay with me, if you need a bed." This is the very thing her mother warned her about, but Mr. Alweendo and a stranger sitting with them are quick to put the man in his place. Callie looks from one face to another, protected by the language barrier, waiting to be let in on the joke. The shorter man isn't finished. He leans toward Mara to say she can return in a few years. Mr. Alweendo says that his woman problems would not be so bad if he would stop hitting on adolescents.

"That's why I said *a few years*."

Callie shakes a nearly-empty bottle. "I'll just be another minute, to finish this up. Really quick. Your mother worried?" Mara notes a change in her expression as she asks this, a new nonchalance. In front of her on the bar is an empty water glass with a coaster over its rim. Standing on the coaster is an upright cigarette with a coin balanced on its tip.

"It is not good for you here, *Anis*," Mr. Alweendo says as he studies the tower. He squeezes Callie's arm and asks her for a hint. She tells him he doesn't want one, which pleases him. "I don't need anything!"

Mara can think of nothing to say. All of her blood has rushed into her head and lower anatomy. The rest of her is an ice cube. Mr. Alweendo offers to her in Khoikhoi that he will share his winnings if she will tell him how this is done. When Mara asks what the trick is, he brushes her off. He pivots on his stool and crows to the rest of the *shebeen* that he will share his earnings with anyone who knows the game. Mara wonders at the transformation. She has seen this man twice. The first time she'd had a school-free weekday and tagged along with her mother to a funeral, Mr. Alweendo's wife's funeral. There had been a small girl at his side, their only daughter, and then the girl also died during the summer. The second time she saw him was in their home, at the kitchen table. He was the only man to sit at their mother's table and cry. From the next room she could hear the low sound of her mother's praying and the man, sobbing in a way that frightened her. Her father turned up the television and pretended not to hear any of it, and then saw Mr. Alweendo to the door when it was over. Someone said he'd tried to kill himself.

Mara brings a chair in to sit between them. "You sure we don't need to get back?" Callie asks her. Mara asks what the game is. There is a wager, Callie says. Whoever can get the coin from on top of the cigarette inside of the glass without touching anything. She apologizes again for leaving the house. She couldn't sleep, and needed a beer. "Do you want something? Appletizer?"

The music, which nearly drowns their conversation, is a song she has heard only a few times, something new from that band everyone in Africa loves, with a bright running guitar melody and a xylophone. Mr. Alweendo drums at his legs and the sides of his chair. With the rhythm of the xylophone he waves his hands around the tower. "It is not possible," he says, slapping a N\$500 note on the table. As soon as he does this Mara is

certain it is a lost bet on him. She would like to tell Callie to quit it. She would like to get up from the stool and walk home before the money is gone, but at the moment every man in the *shebeen* rises to stand behind them and Mr. Alweendo begins pumping his fists in the air. He quips a line to his friends from a Castle Lager commercial about beer and a beautiful life, and everyone laughs.

Mara squirms when Callie puts a hand on her back. “Don’t worry,” she says. “It’s just like a carnival game. At the fair. Just hanky-panks. Just fun.”

The trick is so simple. As soon as Callie begins to crouch beside the glass, Mara knows. A person only needs to blow once, forcefully, and the coaster pops up, disrupting the whole lot. The coin at the very top, being heaviest, drops into the glass. Physics. Around them the reactions are garbled. A few men laugh. Someone repeats the line about the beautiful life. The rest stand in quiet attention to Mr. Alweendo, widower and father of a lost daughter, who now has his head down over his arms on the table, nodding a bit to himself as his index finger traces the lines of the glass.

Mara expects the worst but, like a phoenix, he jerks upright again. “Wonderful!” he resumes beating at the air, orbiting the sides of his head with his fists. Callie laughs with him and tries to hand back the N\$500, but he refuses it. “You are a citizen in the Land of Bush, and you will need it,” he announces for the crowd. “Things will get very bad for you!”

Callie slaps the note on the bar and says that her new friend is buying a round to everyone, and as they rise to crowd the bar Mara sees that the best of it has ended. If they could leave immediately it might all stay exactly like the beautiful life in which Mr. Alweendo is rewarded by heaven with joy that defies the horrors he has endured. He pulls



the pack of cigarettes from under Callie's arm. "I will build for *you* now. Anything that you can imagine. I will re-make for you the Twin Towers of New York City."

As everyone starts in with the football chanting and vuvuzela sounds, Mr. Alweendo tries to set cigarettes on end in a row. Despite elbows swinging over his head he does not look up, his hands steady and sure, as though he has forgotten about the Ded Zone, the lost bet, and the absurdity of sitting at a *shebeen* with a red-headed American and a schoolgirl. The best he can manage is a row of five, leaned slightly against the side of a rocks glass.

For Mara there are two ways to look at all this. One is to watch the storm clouds ahead. The Ded Zone is loud enough now to wake the neighborhood, and next week the women will knock on Mr. Shihepo's door to say that if he wishes to continue at this volume every night, he can enjoy the company of their surly children in the mornings. Her mother by now will be waking Mr. and Mrs. Dax to search the neighborhood. Mr. Alweendo will be back at their kitchen table again within the month. But Mara is a bit tipsy even at the smell of all the drinks passing over the bar. The other way you can see it, tonight is a gift, a world to soak up and then whisper over the fence-line tomorrow until Teresa's eyes are bigger than communion wafers. Who can blame her for ordering another Fanta and lingering until the men remember their obligation to kick her out? She will stay to watch the Twin Towers resurrected while her neighbors dance and, under the blue lights of the bar, two white arms stretch to offer out two more bottles of beer.

\*

It is the wee hours of a Sunday morning, and when Callie arrives at the front desk of the Kudu there is, of course, no one available to check her in. She came here for the cigarette machine near the entrance, but once she had a few she felt she might get a bit of sleep. The guard tells her that the rest of the staff usually arrives around six AM and gives her permission to camp out in the lobby until then. She's already cold, but the bar is closed and the pool area is quiet, so she changes into shorts and a t-shirt and swims laps until her arms grow heavy. She hadn't expected Selma to get so angry. Walking back in the dark with Mara she'd felt elated; despite the gloomy silence from her fifteen-year-old companion, she'd been sure it would smooth over. They were greeted at the door by Andimba, whose method of alerting their mother was to screech the announcement at the top of his lungs. Within moments—though it felt like hours—Selma was back. Who could guess she'd recruit a neighbor to help scour the area, banging on doors at three in the morning after a daughter old enough to care for herself? One might expect a fifteen-year-old to bear some responsibility for the decision, but Mara sat beside her mother like a wounded bird, her left arm cradled in the crook of her right hand and looking ready to cry.

Callie would have preferred some kind of lecture or punishment. Selma offered a terse explanation of her shock at waking to find her daughter and guest gone, conveying emotion abstractly in the content of the words but not the tone. She wouldn't look at her. She ordered Andimba back to bed, told Mara to come and sleep in her room tonight, and left Callie adrift in the living room. That was fine; even if she'd felt welcome to reclaim the bunk bed she needed a cigarette first, and she hadn't packed any.

She left a note, of course, with a long apology. She included a paragraph at the end, in the most diplomatic language she could muster, saying she'd like to come by the Tura Center during the next week or so to make amends. Andimba was such a sound sleeper that Callie had no trouble gathering her things from the bedroom. If Selma or Mara heard her rustling around they did not come out to check.

Wernhil Park Church is a mile and a half away, but she leaves early and walks there, wondering what further penance will be necessary to patch things up with Selma. She arrives in time to watch the earliest congregants file in before the pianist sits down for the opening hymn. The sanctuary has three generous sections of pews, each at least twenty deep. By the third song there are people seated in folding chairs along the aisles. When she finds Pate in the crowd she keeps an eye on him, and approaches while he is still blocked into place by other church-goers on each side of him in the pew. Across the crowd she tells him he was right about this place, with its excellent music and fine preaching. As soon as the family standing between them moves out, she shuffles in to sit beside him.

"I'm very, very sorry," she says.

"Thank you." The placidness has returned to his face and the words are formal.

She asks whether he would consider a career at a factory, because according to the websites she's visited there are several entry-level positions available.

"Is it?" He raises his chin as he says this, calling her bluff.

She corrects herself: "I would be willing to look online for you."

"After this long time?"

She's in a terrible position for favor-asking, except that there are so many people around. She introduces herself to a woman in a floppy hat in the pew behind them. "Pate has offered to show me around your wonderful church," she says. "I am finally taking him up on his offer."

He asks who she'd like to know, and she says if she's going to make up for past wrongs she'll need to start networking.

"You want to do charity?" He is kind enough to hold off from lecturing her again about how her mission is a waste of resources. "There's a woman you can meet," he says. "She is like this Selma !Naruseb. Not as busy, but very smart."

Two laps around the sanctuary and narthex offer no sign of her. The building is nearly empty, and the failures of the morning begin to weigh on her. Callie blinks back tears. She asks whether there is anyone else.

"Here," he says. "Wait." He steps outside the building and waves to a man and woman she'd seen through the glass. The woman is elderly, in a traditional cotton dress and a wheelchair. The man pushing her looks like he could bench three hundred pounds. He turns the chair around on the gravel and starts toward them. "On another day I could introduce this woman, but it doesn't matter. You can also meet Justus, he is very good."

Pate introduces him as a war hero, recognized by Mr. Nujoma himself for bravery. Justus smiles like a third grader in the school play, and his expression does not change. He is much darker than Pate, and built like a soldier. Until she notices the gray at his temples and the wrinkles striating his neck she assumes he is their peer. Looking from one man to the other, she notices a softness to Pate's features that she hadn't noticed

before; even though he is angry with her his posture is unthreatening and he offers her a hint of a smile from time to time. Both are indications that he might be thawing.

The woman in the chair, Justus' mother, pulls at his arm to know what they are saying. Justus speaks to Pate in Afrikaans and relays information to his mother in one of the African languages.

“So, he doesn't speak English? Your friend, Justus?”

Pate looks at Justus and nudges him. The darker man says, “Neh, yes. I can speak.”

“You fought in the resistance struggle?” After a moment Pate offers a translation. Justus nods once, but his smile shifts by degrees and the skin around his eyes begins to crinkle. Callie says she'd like to hear more about it, but the mother wants to be updated and he leans toward her, nearly shouting at her ear, and Callie notices that the suit coat he is wearing is a little tight, stretching at the line of his shoulders and around his biceps.

In English he tells Callie that it does not matter anymore; there are new jobs to do. “We have today many different missions.”

She smiles and tells him she agrees about the new missions.

He says he must bring the Gospel to people who have not heard. As Justus' Anglophone ability seems to accelerate the conversation turns into a dead end. In simple sentences he tells her about a tiny group of San people that he meets with, on the second Sunday of the month, for worship and a Bible study. He has built an entire evangelism team for this purpose.

His mother interrupts with a question, gesturing at Callie. Justus leans in, looking her over as he answers the question in their language, and Pate takes the interruption as

an opportunity to excuse himself with a slight bow. “Be well,” he says to her. It hardly matters; they seem to be the last remaining churchgoers. She can hear the buzz of insects in the pauses of their conversation, and remembers that if she is going to feed herself while staying at the Kudu she needs groceries.

“What does she want to know?” she asks Justus.

He shrugs her off. “It is nothing.”

“Your English is very good,” she tells him. “Where did you learn it?”

The question is designed to derail him, but it doesn’t work. “English is very important to the mission. We are trying to teach it also.” He adds that they need new tutors, especially native speakers.

She doesn’t have her phone to know the time, but the heat of the day has now come in full, and on a Sunday, if the grocery store is still open, it won’t be for long.

“You can be teaching English,” he says, and pulls a receipt from his pocket and bends over to set it on his knee, then writes out the details of their next trip in careful letters.

Taking the suggestion, she shrugs her non-commitment and tries another diversion, asking whether they go out into the bush for their Sunday missions. He pauses over the question. It isn’t in the city, he says, but it’s also not in the wild. And they have their own land, where they will build a church. “It is the most beautiful place in Namibia,” he adds. “Very much green. When you come with us you can see this.”

“You must be very proud,” she says.

“We have bought it for a good price,” he says. “From the government, they are selling it to us because we are a church.”

The idea doesn't come to her right then, or she would not have been so quick to point out how Justus' mother looks uncomfortable in the direct sunlight. She doesn't think of it until she is in the kitchen of the Kudu hostel with her groceries, browning half a pound of beef for a Hamburger Helper and trying to read an article about the carving of the African pie, and how King Leopold II of Belgium personally laid claim to the entire Congo. This is, admittedly, an embarrassing way to come at the plan, but it is hard to imagine a better prize for the raffle.

Late in the evening she lets herself into the Student House for a change of clothes, her swimming suit and promotional materials. By Tuesday morning she is back for her suitcase and books. The others are still with their host-families, and a new, unfamiliar guard—a young man not much older than she is—sits at the chair even in the late morning, listening to a battery-powered radio. No one else is around. Passing the empty classroom, she thinks there is still a chance to finish the Global Studies program. She might use this time away to get ahead on the readings. She could also call Selma and reaffirm her offer of free labor, but right now there is the problem of getting a down payment to the caterers and revising her pitch for the non-profits.

It's five days until the trip with Justus and his missionary friends, and it seems this opportunity is the only good luck she will be granted. Later that week it is a strong "no" from the John 3:16 Institution, likely because she resorts to a few hard-selling lines she's heard on child sponsorship commercials. That was the moment they shut her down, and when she countered with her offer to waive the fees they told her flat out that the carnival-style event doesn't coincide with their philosophy. The next day she is forced to break into the prize money to meet her financial obligations, which are far greater than

she had anticipated, even after she decides to forgo the full carnival-equipment rental and assemble her own party games out of what she can find at the Pep Store.

On Friday night Dean, Ella and Leona show up at the Kudu bar, ready to drink themselves silly. After eight days with their hosts they have used up every ounce of politeness, so they burn through three pitchers and two packs of cigarettes as they recount awkward meals featuring mystery meats and neighbors and strangers requesting scholarship money for schools in the States. Dean has them all beat, describing the painful sequence of moments during which his host-family discovered he was atheist and worked, with increasing desperation, to pray a “sinner’s prayer” with him before he left their home. For the sake of peace, he let them teach it to him, to be prepared if he should meet up with the Holy Spirit in the next few weeks.

They tell Callie there’s no reason not to come back to the house. No one knows what their grades are, and no one seems to care. The semester is mostly over, and everything seems to be flying out of control. Dean and Leona have each broken up with their partners, and Leona’s man is likely wandering around Zambia with an engagement ring in his pocket.

\*

It’s a toss-up to Renée which would be simpler: getting Callie caught up with the work of the semester, or doing the paperwork to release her from the program. Letting her go would be a first in the history of the Windhoek semesters. She’d have to forfeit of her own accord or go through a series of warnings. Then she’d be giving up both room and board along with the coursework. Is there a partial refund for this? Renée searches



her memory, thinking the program must have language against that. After all, the tuition has already been invested.

When Callie shows up for class on Monday, she takes a seat in one of the desks rather than coming to the front of the room to explain herself. She sits down as though she's never missed class, relaxed, looking alert and confident. Renée writes herself a note to pull the girl aside after and have a word. She reminds herself that this is a time to let Callie do the grasping for words and the explaining and the asking. It's a time not to let irritation show. In truth, she sees this as the beginning of a maddening pattern, a student who is bent on walking the tightrope of just-barely-enough, of riding upon the unspoken agreement within the study-abroad community: let them off a little easier, they're young and in a new country. Pass them, if at all possible. Don't push it.

Callie presents herself the front of the room after class, apologizing for her absence. "I've been busier with the project than I realized," she says confessionally. "It's bigger than I planned on. I got behind. I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you."

"I'm listening."

"Wouldn't it be great if the whole group were involved in something greater than their own education?"

"Well, aren't they already?"

"I'm saying, they could get out into the community. My program is all about coming together. Ubuntu. They'd make contact with local organizations—"

"But how are you going to do the *homework*?"

Callie shudders visibly. "Do you *really* think—"

Renée stops her, saying she'll need an answer to that question the next time she comes to class. Callie nods, and even as she walks out Renée knows this was the last battle.

\*

## Chapter eight

Justus and his fellow missionaries make space for her in their *combi*, even though it means that one of the mothers must ride with her toddler in her lap. It's a Sunday morning, and they're on the road before the sun is up. In the dim lights of the church yard Justus had introduced her to their fellow travelers—two men, six women, a teen girl and the boy—but she hadn't been able to connect any faces with the names he gave her. In her seat in the very back she is adjacent to the storage area where, between stacks of hymnals, Bibles and textbooks, she sees the various boxes and bags of food and a large green cooler of water. She asks how long the drive is.

“Maybe four hundred kilometers.”

She didn't think to bring food for the trip.

As soon as the sun gains strength it becomes difficult to look out the window, so Callie studies the swirling braid patterns on the backs of the women's heads. Along with Justus, a few of the women speak English, as does the teen girl. For the first few hours of the drive she, in her conspicuous foreignness, is the primary entertainment, and the six faces in the middle rows are all turned to face her. When the words run out she finds a hair elastic in her pocket and does a few tricks with it, making the two loops seem locked together and then freeing them, then wrapping them around her left fist and, with two taps of her right hand, making the elastic vanish and then reappear in her left palm. The teen girl in the other back corner leans over her mother's lap and frowns, requesting several repeats of the trick and then asking to examine the hair bands.

Near Tsumeb the tree line fills out and the grass is a thick blend of green and gold, reminding her of home except that the pixelated look of the mountains at the

horizon are something out of a Mario Brothers game, a sandy color dotted with pale green. She wonders whether the woman next to Justus is his wife or girlfriend. Their conversation, though she can't follow it, has an easy cadence, as if they are discussing their grocery list or their child's Little League game. Their shoulders touch as the *combi* jostles, but they don't look at each other. She has a rough plan of what she'll say to Justus, though she knows she's on her best game when she lets herself work extemporaneously. He's the sort of guy who hates saying "no"—that much is evident in how he treats his mother. There are farmsteads nearby, but the service is held in a half-sphere of straight, limber branches with a gray tarp stretched over the top for shade. When they arrive the heat is in full bloom and the other half of the congregation is waiting in the shade of one of the houses. It is nearly an hour before the group is gathered to sing and pray, so that with the first hymn Callie's stomach grumbles. Every part of the service is conducted in two languages, but she doesn't understand either of them.

Lunch follows worship. Because her fellow travelers invite her to the table she helps herself to a few handfuls of potato chips and a *vetkeok* stuffed with peanut butter. She is still hungry, but it is obvious that there are more mouths to feed than the group had planned for, including four children who look to be under six. To pass the time she repeats her hair-band magic for the people sitting around her, who react with smiles of reverence. Through the woman beside her they ask Callie what the spiritual meaning of this might be, and she replies that it isn't that serious. Then, for fear of misleading someone, she reveals the slight-of-hand, showing them how the position of her left hand concealed her pinkie, which holds two strands of one elastic in a bind around the other

until the moment when she pulls the other elastic taut with her right, freeing both. “It isn’t witchcraft. It’s a game,” she says. “In the United States, it is just a way of playing.”

Justus leads her back out into the courtyard for her tutoring session. Stacked against the wall are the books from the *combi* which, as she peers around the wall, is gone. He says the driver went into town for gas. Callie is angry, and wishes she could have gone with into town to buy food for herself at the convenience store. Without a vehicle in sight, the exotic scenery sucks the life out of her. Around them are several buildings like this one, private residences, and before them is a nearly perfect flat plain, with rusty mountains and, strangest of all, a full bank of clouds.

She would be helpless here, if left to herself.

As soon as she can catch him alone, she inquires to Justus after his mother. He says she is still in good health and living with his sister and her two young sons. By way of transition, she comments that much of his time must be spent with helping to care for his mother and also to prepare missions like this one. He rubs the top of his head and offers a stiff nod. His eyes are lively, taking in the various clusters of teachers and adult students. His attention is with them, so she is careful to phrase it as an offer of new opportunity. “You could teach me,” she says.

When she first asks about the possibility of buying a piece of land like this one his face resumes its third-grade smile, as if he doesn’t understand the question. She tells him that his mission group could be featured at her event, as well as Wernhil Park Church. “Anyone could win the land,” she says. “I would buy it, and then anyone who is entered into the drawing could be chosen.” After this she has to explain what a drawing

is, and then he has questions about the carnival. “What I want to ask you is, can you help me to buy land, like this?”

“You want to live here, in Otjozondjupa?”

“No no,” she says. “I want to buy the land and then give it away. To an organization like yours, or a wildlife refuge. Whoever wins, I will give it to them.”

“If you want to buy land,” he says, “it is fine.”

“And you’ll help me?” She reads the skepticism in his eyes as a comment on her background, and adds that she doesn’t have much money. She might look like a rich American, but she’s trying to make a difference on a shoestring, just like he is.

“I can maybe ask,” he says. It’s hard to know whether he is just saying this to appease her, but she thanks him. On the way home from Otjozondjupa the combi is hot, and the little boy whimpers until the woman next to his mother takes his head in her hands and coaxes it onto her lap. Callie leans forward to Justus and asks if they could meet for coffee, maybe next week some time, to discuss the land purchase. He looks uncomfortable that she is asking him here in the crowd, but he agrees.

When Callie gets back to the hostel she knows that she ought to be doing homework, but she can’t get her mind off the potential for land, so she starts to do internet searches about the land at Otjozondjupa. She begins to think of what a non-profit could do with such a prime piece of property. Before she knows it, she is drawing up the flyers that she could—if only she can convince Justus—distribute to potential sponsors.

The Helene Donne Charity Fund

Announces a **new grand prize** for the Helene Donne Charity Fair

Saturday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005

**Grand prize** (to the winner of our non-profit raffle):

**Five Hectares of Prime Real Estate in the Otjozondjupa Region**

Hundreds of prizes available:

**Three \$N1000 cash prizes** to non-profits

Many **surprise gift packages** provided by our sponsors

*And*

**Door prizes** awarded to every sponsoring business, including a **trip to New York City!**

She prints a copy and is elated. This is, she is certain, the best possible thing she could do to boost the Charity Fair.

\*

Once the flyers are in the mail, Callie is obligated to get the land and fulfill their promise. She remembers how Justus' brow softened as she described all of the non-profit organizations she wanted to help spread the word about. He likes her passion. Unlike Pate, he shares her devotion to these near-impossible causes. The meeting goes better than she'd let herself hope. For one thing, he asks her to go for a walk in the park with him instead, because there are things he wants to say in confidence.

As they walk through Zoo Park he apologizes and says that it will all be an uphill battle for her, for reasons she understands. "The land I have now for Wernhil Park Church, I am not permitted to say how I purchased it. At the moment this region is occupied by squatters because the government cannot decide. The Minister of Lands

would like to give maybe 370 hectares to non-profits that benefit the area. The Minister of Works wants the tax revenue instead. It cannot be advertized that I gained the land in this way.”

“But you think maybe there’s a chance for me?”

He says it might be possible. “But you need someone local. Someone who can speak for you, and sign the forms.”

“Is there any way I can ask you—“

“It cannot be me.”

“But if I found someone?”

“Maybe. I think maybe yes.” Justus tells her the land would run her about US\$11000, and that he can’t promise that the government will accept the application. He adds that she would need a Namibian sponsor with an excellent reputation within the nonprofit sector.

Callie walks home, calculating what she might say to regain Selma’s interest. At the Global Studies house her mail cubby is stuffed with responses from non-profits and even a handful of business sponsors, some of whom have included a check and request sponsor envelopes. A few business owners misunderstand, writing to ask whether the land is available as one of the door prizes. On a whim, after a glass of wine, she calls Selma again. When the voice on the other end of the phone is cold she almost cries. Selma says she’s willing to allow Callie to help with some of the physical chores, but asks her to stay clear of the children unless there are other adults nearby. Weakly, Callie asks when the manual labor might take place, and accepts an invitation to clean the Tura



Center kitchen on Friday afternoon. She warns that it won't be pretty. Callie says she'll be there.

\*

When Mara arrives at the Tura Center with her mother there is a small ruckus in the main activity room. Two of the tutors and seven students are gathered around a long table. All are busy with a craft project; there are scraps of bright-colored plastic on the floor and large white slabs of foam board leaned up against the walls, some blank, and some decorated already with the concentric rings of a target. Others feature a large black circle at their center, with the words "SPOT DROP" stenciled over it. Leaning over the shoulder of one of the younger workers is Callie Donne. Her mother has gone straight into her office, so Mara rushes over to amend the situation, whispering to Callie that she can sneak out through the library. Callie asks why she'd want to do that. "Your mother will be very pleased with how nice the kitchen looks. I spent all day on it, from seven until these kids showed up. I'll clean this room when we're finished."

A few weeks ago this American was her mother's mortal enemy, but sometimes even Mara forgets how quickly the storm of her mother's fury passes. "Are these also part of your hanky panks?" Mara stares at the piles of cardboard zoo animals, flat plastic discs the size of her fist, and shiny foil stars. Her friend, Nani, is using an X-acto knife on a large green mat, and the smaller children are cutting animals with new scissors. They aren't using any of the Tura Center's materials, and Mrs. Shopa, who comes on Friday evenings to tutor the secondary students, says that their American guest has offered prizes to the children for their efforts.

“After she said this, I couldn’t convince anyone to work on their maths homework!” She smiles knowingly. The students who come to tutoring are never the ones who need it. Tonight the intensity normally channeled into long division and basic algebra now hovers over two knives and five pairs of scissors, cutting precisely to the black line at the edges. “The Friday group always impresses me. Callie has asked them to be very professional, and look what they can do.” At the table the other tutor sits with a ruler in hand, measuring each of the cut-outs and trimming them as necessary, throwing a few to the ground and stacking the others. Objectively, it still looks like a children’s craft project, but Callie sifts through one of the piles quietly with a pair of scissors, smoothing corners and shaving away rough edges.

“Won’t it be fun?” Callie offers to show her the games, and one of the younger students pops out of her chair to give the demonstration. Her father and Andimba are at home, likely watching a movie on television; the mental image of them in their chairs makes her loathe to return to the stack of filing her mother has assigned her. She walks instead toward the row of clean new carnival games, but she excuses herself to her mother’s office and closes the door to muffle the American’s voice.

“Did you know she would be here?” she asks her mother.

“It’s a community center. She can do as she likes, if she’s obeying the rules.”

For the next two hours her mother invents busy work to keep them both in the office until they can no longer hear the tutoring group in the other room. She doesn’t mind; just having Callie in the same building with them has the happy effect of setting her mother to dote on her. The incident at the Ded Zone had the unexpected effect of winning back her mother’s good favor. Callie became the villain and Mara the sweet

daughter in need of protection. There was a stern lecture that night and then her mother sent her to bed as if she were ill. Then, over the next week her mother came straight home after work, cooking dishes that their grandmother used to make. Tonight while she dusts her mother's bookshelf she describes the lamentable situation of not having a dress that fits her for the Winter Festival on the last day of school. She mentions Samwel, who goes to church every Sunday and works a job after school to save money for college. Who also waits for her outside the English classroom just before lunch. Her mother says "I'll think about it," which means yes.

On Saturday the Youth Club group is smaller and Callie's group, now relegated to the dining room, is large enough to fill both tables. Two pieces of foam board are covered with red plastic cups, all glued bottom-down, and set outside on the picnic tables to dry.

Her mother is distracted today; the application for a grant is due early next week and as usual the rest of her committee is dragging their feet. Late in the morning she steps out in to the front yard to get better reception on her mobile, giving Mara a chance to peek around the corner. "Do you need anything?" she asks Callie.

The American asks to know the time.

Mara says she ought to get a watch; it might have saved them from trouble the other night. She smirks a little, and the American pretends to duck behind the collar of her shirt.

Two of her classmates are entrusted with a large canvas banner and pints of acrylic paint. They unroll the fabric in the hallway and draw large, slow letters. It's easy to see how she has recruited this enthusiastic crowd—atop the refrigerator are two plastic shopping bags filled with small stuffed animals and a third with what look to be boxes of

biscuits and candy. By contrast, in the main activity room Mrs. Shopa has everyone seated in rows of chairs while a man her grandfather's age talks to them about the sacred fire. During one of her mother's longer phone conversations she joins the dining room group again and lets Nani show her some of the games. Nani hands her five of the small plastic disks and lays the "SPOT DROP" board on the ground, explaining that she'll throw down the disks to cover the black spot without leaving any gaps or moving them once they've landed on the board. The younger boys soon volunteer to demonstrate the techniques they have developed. One of them, after dropping his disks, shouts "I win!" and hides the exposed bit of black with one hand, while pretending to direct her attention to an elephant outside the window. Mara pretends to fall for it.

In the hallway, the banner reads,

100% of proceeds to Beneficiaries of the Helene Donne Charity Fund

and in smaller letters her friends have painted the names of several local non-profits. She notices that the Tura Center is not one of them.

"My mother might seem a little stubborn," she says in a moment when she is alone with Callie. "But it's not like that. She just means to be careful." They are in the back, hidden from view of the others by the wall which divides the Tura Center from Manny's Small Electronics Repair. Callie doesn't want to be a bad example with her cigarettes.

"Can I have one?"

Callie's eyes turn into a startled antelope's.

"I'm just kidding."

Callie kicks her lightly on her right calf. "I've corrupted the boss's daughter."

“It all seems really great, your games.”

She exhales the breath is full of emotion, like her mother’s every time father gets back from a long trip, then follows it with a long drag.

It isn’t until Wednesday that she understands the meaning behind Callie’s long sigh, when her frustration echoes in the voices of the after-school reading group. They interrupt their progress to ask her whether they will still get their “reward.” It seems the American promised something to those who helped with the preparations, to be handed out in two weeks at the Charity Fair. They are standard fives and sixes, old enough to attempt nonchalance about the toys. Mara says they can probably arrange for a *combi* or a carpool from the Tura Center that day.

One of the boys blinks and tells her the Fair has been canceled.

Callie herself shows up about an hour later, bringing the bags of toys and candy into the computer room and asking Mrs. Shopa to distribute them fairly among the participants. She does not deny the rumors. A white *combi* is parked outside, its driver enjoying a cigarette on the picnic benches. She says the Tura Center is welcome to keep whichever games they like, but she has an hour to get everything packed in or she owes the driver an extra N\$500.

The best thing about Mara’s mother is that she never stays mad at anyone for long. Even with the crazy girl they took in once from off the street, who slipped out with her parents’ two mobile phones and Father’s GPS, even with that one she was ready to take her back in if she asked. Just so, her mother comes out of the office and thanks Callie, in front of Mrs. Shopa and the other students, for her efforts to raise awareness of these needs in the community. She welcomes her back to the Tura Center and says she

could become an honorary member of the Youth Club if she would like to join them on Saturday afternoons. Callie says she'll be leaving for the States in a few weeks.

“So, you can try again, maybe,” Mara says to Callie. “It can't always go badly.”

“Just like that, she's fine?” Callie mutters, pulling new trash bags from their box and shaking them open.

“If you asked to stay at our house again, she will say yes.” Callie sputters out a laugh, her pale cheeks taking a quick blush, so Mara demonstrates, announcing to her mother from across the room that Callie needs a bed for the weekend. Her mother agrees so quickly that Mara realizes she has been listening to their conversation this whole time. She is staring at the words in one of her binders but hasn't turned the page for several minutes.

“So, you can stay with us. Then we can maybe, if you like. We can try it again.”

Callie says she has plans to travel over the weekend, maybe see Etosha, but that Mara would be welcome to join her.

Mara says there is no way her mother would let her do that, looking over to see that her eyes have left the binder. “Right, Mother?”

Callie says it's wonderful that the two of them are so close; she's never seen anything like it back home. She snaps one of the foam boards into four pieces and shoves it into a black trash bag.

“How is it with you? Is your mother still living?” Mara asks, and is surprised when Callie says she is. “And you've named the entire charity for her?”

Callie breaks another game board and says that some people do good deeds in thanks for the things they have, and other do good deeds for the sake of things they want.

Mara doesn't push for more, and she also doesn't ask about a father or siblings; that much has been plain on her face since they met.

"Your mother would be proud just to know about your plan," she offers, but when she reaches for one of the painted targets Callie stops her.

"Don't—I'd like them intact, for sentimental reasons. Leave them."

The American is blinking back tears, and says that in some cases only results matter. Mara is ready to cry with her. Callie excuses herself to load the *combi*, and after the first load there is a parade of volunteers behind her, hands ready to tear red plastic cups free from their glue or break down the plastic structures, faces turned toward Callie as if waiting for her to say the games are back on. After several minutes approaches Mara again, looking ragged. "Please," she says, "I want to load everything myself. Will you just. Keep them busy."

Mara watches the small hands stretched to carry the large pieces of foam board, and the tiny legs tripping over themselves. "I'll find them something to do while you're working."

Callie nods, gathering her breath again and studying the grocery sack of plastic stars in her hand. "Is there any way your mom would sign for me? I just need a signature. I have the money. I've saved it for *years*."

It is the way of the world to make sure the people who want something the most will never get it. They both know that her mother won't sign any paperwork; already she is looking to an excuse to pick up her things and move closer, to keep an eye on Callie. "I could give her the paperwork to sign. I could talk to her."

"It needs a lot of information. Phone number, office address, references."

“It’s no problem.”

“She’ll need to initial in several places.” Callie pauses, as if calculating something. “Maybe—you don’t have to tell her it came from me.”

“It’s no problem.”

\*

From Callie Donne

Date Saturday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005 6:10 AM

Subject Medical concerns

Dear Mom,

Sorry it’s been so long. I don’t mean to alarm you, but I’ve come down with something and they’ve taken me to the hospital here in Windhoek. It is probably nothing, but they have to make sure so they are running a bunch of tests on my blood, urine, and who knows what else.

I don’t know how much this is all going to cost, but they said something about my insurance not covering. I don’t think they’ll let me out of the country if I don’t have money to pay for this. Can you send something? I am really sorry to ask, but it might be thousands of dollars. If I don’t need it—if the insurance goes through—I’ll just wire it back to you before I get on the plane.

Love,

Callie

\*



To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Monday, November 21, 2005 4:41 PM  
Subject You can be proud of your daughter.

Dear Teddy,

By the way, how's it possible that you *didn't* know about me and Jessie hacking into your email account and your work portfolio? We played around in there for years. We never sent or erased anything, but we changed a few file names. I always wondered that if you know so much about computers, then you *must* have known we were hacking you. You'd have seen the IP address. You could've guessed it was us. Why didn't you write? If you *had* written to us, I could also have let you in on the awesome project.

You would probably be really proud of me and Mom, especially after everything we've been through.

More later, Callie

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To Callie Donne  
From Helene Donne  
Date Tuesday, November 22, 2005 4:11 AM  
Subject Urgent! Please write ASAP!

Dear Callie,

I have some IMPORTANT news to share with you. Since I have not been able to reach you via phone at the hospital or at your house, I thought I would email. I have tried

calling every hospital in the city. I also tried a place called the Kudu Hostel, since a classmate of yours said you'd spent some time there. Please call me as soon as you can, anytime, night or day. I don't care if you wake me, it's not like I sleep much anyway. It makes me very nervous not to hear from you right now, knowing how sick you've been. It has been a very difficult week here, and we'd like to come to some closure. It would mean everything to me to hear your voice and know you're all right.

Love, your Mom

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The already-thick heat of the morning reminds Callie that it is almost December. The grounds at the Kudu Hostel are far less ornate than the student house, with several large succulents in the front; the rest of the outdoor space is concrete, likely for easy clean-up when the guests are too enthusiastic with their revelry. The pool has a very faint, unsettling green tinge, and it is difficult to sleep without earplugs. She doesn't mind; it seems God brings greatness to people who live in humble places, and today it seems greatness is indeed on its way, to be delivered Wednesday, in a taxi, by Mara !Naruseb. As the dogs of Windhoek West sound off to each other she takes to the pool in her sleep-shirt and shorts. She swims, pounding the water with one butterfly stroke, a second, and then the flip, until the tiny pool answers her at each turn, the water-weight heaving against her body. She snorts and grunts at the surface. The larger waves fracture against her strokes, the pool yields, and the water shudders against itself, spilling over the tile ridges onto the patio.

The next morning she decides that she deserves a vacation. At Wernhil Park it is Advent, and underneath the palm trees at the side of the building is a nativity scene, Mary and Joseph kneeling together, but an empty manger because Mary is still pregnant at this point in the story. This afternoon she will finish the arrangements with the event rental company and tomorrow morning she will get on a bus for Etosha, just overnight, enough to see some of the animals, and then be back to purchase the land title early on Wednesday morning. It wouldn't be right to spend four months in Africa without seeing a few elephants and zebra. She meant to attend one of the girls' Saturday food extravaganzas, but the final two have been canceled, on account of the expense and the chef's being a bit of a player. She gives everyone at the House a free pass to the Charity Fair instead, and leaves two for Professor Shokatovola and Professor Erickson. It isn't their fault that she has dropped out of classes. They might have let her stay at the house, since she's paid for a semester's board, but she didn't ask. During these last weeks it makes more sense to live near a computer she can use for business.

At Wernhil on Sunday the church sanctuary is warmer, too, and packed tight in the pews. The pastor announces that the circuit for the ceiling fans has shorted, and it is only a matter of minutes before perfect strangers in their synthetic churchly fabrics radiate their intimate bodily odors. There is a social contract not to notice. During the sermon she begins to regret the email she sent Mom, who has developed a talent for mourning needlessly. Most likely she expects the worst about both Callie and Teddy—Teddy who, as anyone might have guessed, has used this opportunity to disappear from their lives for good. The news reports are dismal, of course. They make you expect the worst, telling you that a mutant species of bee will kill your small children or that there's

mercury in your tap water. You can't blame them: there are bodies floating in Lake Pontchartrain, and everyone has to sell something. But it is a shame that Mom can't see past the hype.

Teddy is the sort of shyster that God seems to favor on this earth, for reasons beyond human understanding. Indomitable, *shrewd*. If you look at the Frank Abignales and the Joseph Weils and the Bernard Cornfields of the world, you see God throwing up his hands and letting them do their thing. In the Bible Jesus tells a parable about favoring the shrewd. He told his disciples about a man employed to keep track of a rich man's money, who does something to get himself fired, but at the last minute he has the brilliant idea to make some alliances with the rich man's debtors by cancelling part of their debt. Apparently Jesus thought that was the sort of person he wanted on his team, or at least wasn't ready to kick to the curb. Callie read that parable back in her Sunday School days, and it seems to her that this made far more sense than anything else Jesus talked about.

There are only six days left until the Fair, which will be only a shadow of the event she'd envisioned when she set out, but nevertheless exists. Today, perhaps at this very minute, her friend Leona is scouting the real estate at Otjondjupa, creating a promotional video for the launch of her website.

It may be that she is becoming numb to rejection, but when she approaches Pate after the service and touches her arm he doesn't seem to recoil. It's as if he expected her to find him. When she asks whether he has found a job yet he says no, not yet, but the tension is gone now from his jaw, and he has stopped staring her down.

She says that's a good thing, because it means he wasn't meant to stay here.

He asks if she has a better idea.

Callie smiles and leans in. “There are better jobs in the States.”

Pate doesn’t respond, but he can’t hide his interest. His head starts to waggle slightly. She pulls a homemade brochure from her pocket, pointing to the prizes for business owners. “A trip to New York City,” she says, recapping the structure of the event. As she talks his head bobs more dramatically. She isn’t sure whether to be encouraged or angry.

“I can stop you there,” he says. When she asks why he doesn’t want to go to New York City he tells her that nothing about her plan makes sense to him. His arms are folded across his chest, but he is smiling.

“All right, then,” she says, leaning back against the wall to call his bluff. It is a long minute that she stands there, tapping the brick with her fingernails. She doesn’t have to look up to know that he’s studying her.

“If you can explain the raffle to me,” he says.

Callie tells him about the five hectare grand prize, the smaller cash giveaways and the networking opportunities for nonprofits and businesses. She keeps her voice low, giving him an excuse to lean in. “And *then*,” she shrugs her shoulders, pulling at a lock of her hair, “we have the prizes for our sponsors.”

Pate lifts his chin. “I have a problem with this,” he says.

“Of course you do.”

He asks her how she got the five hectares, and by the shadow over his eyes she knows it isn’t just flirtation.

“I’m buying it. With money I brought from home,” she says, adding “and a little from here,” because he seems to know when she’s lying.

He asks whether this doesn't seem like a problem to her.

She reminds him that she isn't keeping it. "Unless you think I should set up a farm for myself, and raise some cattle. Dig a well or two. Buy up the rest of the community and invite my Chicago friends." Pate seems tight-lipped, like he has been holding back something while she's been speaking. She looks him in the eye. "Oh, you think because I'm an American, I should do my fundraising in the States?"

Pate looks at the ground, letting the slight cone at the back of his head point toward the ceiling. He shrugs, agreeing with her. "You are using Namibian money to buy Namibian land, yes?"

She looks at him hard, letting his words sit between them for a while. "Fuck you. What do you know about America?"

As his gaze drifts toward the exit she remembers the first time she held the wad of money she keeps in her suitcase, secured now in locker 3 at the hostel. How that was the single hardest thing she'd done in her life to that point, or even to this day.

"What, you think you have a corner on getting shit on? You think it's so fucking easy with us."

He puts up his hands. "It is impossible to know things about another country."

"That is fucking correct." She is ready to walk away.

"And what was so hard for you?"

"My mother lost her goddamn *job* for this money." The words are out before she has a chance to censor them. Pate lifts his chin slightly, and she remembers the circumstances of their first meeting.

He clears his throat, “What would they do with it?”

“The government?”

“The winners. What would they do with the land?”

“Expand. Help more people. Or sell it, I guess.”

“But you cannot sell it.”

“I’m not selling it. It would go to a charity. They could sell it.”

This is how the conversation goes until she realizes that everything is getting far more complicated than it needs to be. She starts again. “All I’m asking,” she says, “is whether you want to go to New York City.” From her purse she pulls out one of the white sponsor envelopes, and tells him she knows which one this is.

Pate sits down in one of the pews, rubbing his head.

She knows right away that she will convince him, just as she knew she would fail at talking with Selma !Naruseb or Erna Ndopu. The light in the sanctuary shifts as she explains her offer to him, as if God were also indicating his attentiveness. “Thirty-five hundred Namibian dollars and *this* envelope is yours.”

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To Theodore Donne  
From Callie Donne  
Date Thursday, November 24, 2005 10:25 AM  
SubjectRedRiverFloodVictims.org

Dear Teddy,

You know, a person’s reputation is everything.

If a person used his internet savvy to, say, create a website that well-meaning people would visit to donate money to flood victims in North Dakota, and then KEPT THAT MONEY FOR HIMSELF, it would pretty much ruin things if the government found out.

All I'm asking is that you call my mother and tell her you're all right. The number is (773)490-9705. She's ready to pick up anytime, night or day.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Callie

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## Chapter nine

Driving out of Windhoek, Leona feels like the woman in the legend who could only make baby sounds. It's a story Jakk told her, about a tribal leader's daughter who was unable to speak any better than the babbling and shrieking of an infant. In her own case, the paralysis seems to have taken not only her tongue, but also her sense of direction and her ability to read street signs. She's in a rental car, a manual transmission that she climbed into on the right side of the vehicle and must now focus on keeping to the left side of the road. This task disables any other navigational capacities, so that she spends the better part of an hour pulling into every parking lot in the city of Windhoek, re-assessing the streets and squinting at names.

The trip would have been easier if Jakk were with her, or if she'd never met him. As it is she has no traveling companion and feels the burden of two breakups in quick succession. She'd never intended on driving to Otjozondjupa alone, and if she hadn't signed the contract with Callie—whose eyes had a desperate energy during their negotiation—she'd have cancelled. Under normal circumstances her brain would compile a tall list of worst-case scenarios for the solo excursion of a non-native female into rural Namibia. Today, with the weight of the past month hanging over her, her brain articulates no specific concerns to her nervous system, only a nebulous sense of dread.

It takes several tries to find the B1 but once she's on it her task becomes far simpler, and within fifteen minutes she has left town. She now has only to stay on this highway until she reaches the town of Otjiwarongo, and from there she will fuel up and re-assess her situation. This highway, though paved, is only two lanes. It extends all the way from Windhoek into the heart of Angola, but you wouldn't know by looking at it.

Ahead she sees a four-by-four and behind her is the vague outline of one or more sedans; it is still. There are no trees near enough for her to catch the rustle of leaves, no bodies of water, and in the morning calm even the grass is still. With only the hum of the air conditioner, she lets herself slide deliciously into nostalgia for this place, with its sparse greenery and abundance of sky.

This trip is a sorry excuse for a vacation, but Callie is paying for it, and she'd have gone on her own nickel if things had turned out differently with Michael. As it is, she has the use of a Sony Handycam, a two-day rental on the Ford Escort and miles of lonely highway. It isn't the Cape Peninsula or the dense forests of Zambia, but she has it to herself. Callie says she can keep the rights to any and all of the footage she takes in Otjozondjupa, so long as she can provide a four-minute montage of the land and any local persons who agree to speak with her.

Other than the camera and her journal she hasn't packed anything to listen to or to do on the trip, and she realizes it's because she'd expected Jakk to entertain her. Saying she wanted to know more about the San people was like opening a floodgate, and whenever she visited he regaled her with one story after another. He could tell she liked the dirty ones, like how the first Nharo men didn't know how to have sex with the Nharo women, who laughed at them; how the women then climbed a tree, and told the men to look up at their naked asses. Or how all of the lakes and rivers in Otjozondjupa were created when the Trickster-man's testicles were bit by a snake and dragged under him for miles and miles.

Something in those stories felt like a warning, as if she shouldn't have been surprised to find out about Ella. Looking back, she sees it was more than the rebound

effect that kept her guard up. She'd never thought of herself as Jakk's girl. He didn't act like Madison's beau, parading her in and out of every bar in Windhoek. She'd liked that about him, the lack of ostentation and the lazy evenings at his little house in Pioneers Park, cooking together and sharing the Nharo stories. He told her stories about a jackal who tricked a lion and stole his wife, tricked the lioness into eating her own children, then tricked a hyena into jumping into a fire and roasting himself for supper. The stories were all lighthearted, like Sunday morning cartoons. The Trickster would do anything—cut off a piece of his own arm, or play dead, or throw himself into a pot of boiling soup—anything to get what he wanted. Like a cartoon coyote who'd run off a cliff in chasing the roadrunner. Who knows what Jakk did or said when he was with Ella, but likely she wouldn't have flown off the handle like that if she'd heard the stories, like a disclaimer in the advertisement.

At Okahandja she stops long enough only to fill up and buy a few sandwiches at the convenience store. Two men in white cotton jumpers approach her car and ask permission to wash it for her, and she lets them, but she wants to do the gas herself. As soon as the gauge needle flips to "F" she feels elated, as though she has just come over the apex of a roller coaster. Leaving the parking lot she nearly forgets which lane she is supposed to be in, but her right hand is starting to recall the use of the gear shift and she has memorized the streets she needs to take in finding the C31, which will carry her to Tsumeb.

When she gets onto the highway and heads northeast the landscape changes, offering a lush spectrum of reds and greens, she wonders if this isn't what she'd wanted all along. It was Ella, of all people, who showed her. She came in ready to tear Leona's

hair out, calling her a skank and a two-timing whore. Michael had been off by himself, touring Victoria Falls and the Caprivi, for nearly two weeks, and Leona found herself at Jakk's house most evenings. She knew this because it never seemed like she was two-timing anyone. Standing beside the student-house bathroom with Ella's nails in the meat of her triceps, this was how she knew it was over with Michael. As soon as she walked out of the Maximillian with her bra in her pocket, she had every intention of letting Michael take the taxi ride to the airport alone, two-carat diamond and all.

She checks into the hotel in Tsumeb and gives herself the evening to lie on the bed and read romance novels. Only the next morning when she arrives in the region—by her odometer exactly 45 kilometers east on the D3306—does she worry she won't find the right spot. It's a beautiful region, and she stops several times to get a panorama of the landscape, or to film a troop of baboons crossing the road, and before long she knows she's in the Kalahari when the landscape offers every color of autumn, its brightest yellows, its pale greens, the speckling of orange, and the nearby hills almost mauve in the shadow of the clouds. The coordinates match Callie's instructions, but she'd expected a wilderness, and on every side of her are farmsteads, marked off with barbed wire and guarded by red-clay houses, cattle, and chickens.

The filming itself is easy enough, and she finishes in a few hours, but beyond this she's hamstrung. For one thing there's the problem of language; before long some of the farmers walk out to greet her, but no one speaks English. Subconsciously she'd counted on Jakk to do that for her. And then there's the white dust that gets onto and into everything. She spends the rest of the afternoon in the car with the windows rolled up,

using her spare shirts to wipe the camera. On the way home she feels the mild dread that she has permanently jammed it and will now owe the rental company at least five grand.

Back at the student house some of her classmates are already starting to pack up for end-of-semester travel, and the living room floor is covered in souvenirs and old clothes as they sort through what is worth packing and what to give away. The windows are open to let in the evening breeze, and she thinks of how cold it will be in Missouri. The word from home is that the snowblowers and plows are coming out. She takes a laptop and a glass of wine out onto the patio. The film is good, although she wishes now that she'd spent more time filming the people she'd met out on the farms. As it is, she compiles a montage of mountain scenery, exotic baobab trees, warthogs, baboons, and enormous ant hills. It looks like a tourist's reel. She tries a few times to call Callie about whether she wants the wild animals in the clip, but there's no response. She's starting to get used to this about her.

In the morning when she's out for her jog she finally sees Callie, standing in a small crowd on a streetcorner. They are a strange sight outside the rowdy Kudu Hostel, and from a distance they'd looked like a legal team or some government agency come to investigate a code violation. Then she'd seen her pale friend, taller than her two male companions and the girl beside them. She wouldn't have recognized Callie by her attire, the dark suit and the frizz smoothed from her hair. The Namibian girl, in her youth and the careful press on her blouse and skirt, seems equally anomalous.

Leona took the long way through the neighborhood, past several dogs who stared her down from one edge of their lawn to another and a dachshund that chased her for two blocks. One of the men turns profile and she sees a slight protrusion at the back of his

head, like a bicycle helmet, and a backward lean to his posture. *Jakk*. In a suit and tie he would almost be a different person, just as she'd hardly recognized him the first time she saw him in streetclothes. Callie is beside him, her arm extending now and again to touch his bicep or his shoulder. The girl and the other man stand closer to the curb, motioning at the taxi cabs that approach from the far end of the block. One of them honks and the man flicks his hand out again.

She speeds up, hoping to intercept them before they get into the cab, and when it stops she starts yelling to Callie, but there is a new cramp in her left side, so that she must choose between forward motion and the words of warning. Among the four climbing into the car, it is only Jakk who sees her, and when they make eye contact her throat clenches into a growl, so that when she yells again for Callie the sound cuts at her throat and comes out an octave too low. It'd been this way with Ella, too, during the confrontation outside the bathroom—the girl had nearly hyperventilated before the accusations came tumbling out in fits and starts. As the car pulls away she marvels that this is how he does it, sliding out of one slick skin and into another and grinning his easy grin until the people who know his game are reduced to sputtering and babble sounds.

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To Theodore Donne  
 From Callie Donne  
 Date Wednesday, November 30, 2005 7:47 AM  
 Subject What it will take.  
 Dear Teddy,

I wish you'd called Mom. If you're not going to make her feel better, then I will. To do that, I'll need my money back, and I'll also need the rest of what's in your paypal account. The good news for Mom is that her reputation in Chicago will be better than ever. The good news for you is that I'm keeping quiet.

Yours always,

Callie

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On the phone last week Callie asked Mara to wear something appropriate for church, but Mara does her one better. She is giddy on the ride there, wearing her beautiful neighbor's work skirt and blue silk-chiffon top. There is only four years difference to their ages and they wear the same size. She borrowed the black pumps from her mother's closet last night while she was watching television. The rest of the arrangements were incredibly easy; her teachers accepted the note asking for Mara's presence at the U.S. Embassy for a Global Ambassadors assembly. The paperwork in her canvas bag is done up in her neatest hand, and the signatures are indistinguishable from her mother's. When this is all over her parents will ask how she had the foresight to see this through.

As promised, Callie meets her cab at the corner of Beethoven and Mugabe streets and hands the driver N\$70. Mara wants to laugh a bit when Callie says they must wait at the corner for the security guard. For visiting downtown Windhoek on a weekday morning, it seems like an unnecessary precaution. Callie looks nervous; it is several minutes before she acknowledges the smart outfit or asks to see the contract. When their guard arrives, Callie again reaches into the cab to hand the driver some money but makes

eye contact with no one. The man greets her, but she has returned to the old version of herself, almost reptilian, as if waiting quietly to let a predator pass her.

The first thing Mara notices about their bodyguard is that he's not a Bantu African. He might be San, she thinks, judging by the ochre tone of his skin and the flat, slender nose. During introductions she giggles in spite of herself. "It's quite a name," she says.

The guard tells her that his parents named him "Pate" as a joke, a temporary name, but it stuck. She asks whether it was hard to get a security job with a name like that.

With Pate at her side Callie relaxes enough to join the conversation, adding that he is one of the few people she trusts here in Windhoek. "I put you in jeopardy once already. Your mother would never forgive me."

Callie's neighborhood has wide, clean streets and palm trees radiating over the sidewalks. Where the houses offer a low metal fence instead of a wall she sees lawns of a green color to rival the parliamentary gardens.

Mara likes the second man, Justus, from the moment she sees him. He reminds her of the sort of man Father was, years ago, before the long weeks in the cab of a truck rounded out his belly and hunched his shoulders. When he still played football with his friends on the weekends.

He joins them at the corner near the supermarket, and as they walk toward the State House the two men step each to one side of Mara and Callie, with Pate slightly ahead of them and Justus behind, as if they were on official state business rather than the Lord's.



She wishes now she'd asked to borrow one of her neighbor's suit coats and a pair of earrings.

It seems inevitable that she will continue in her mother's footsteps, devoting more time and energy to the Tura Center than most people do to their day jobs. Someone needs to take over, maybe sooner than later. Her mother is fifty, but people who don't know her guess much older than that. She's been dragged down by years of doing it the hard way, using only Katutura money to keep roofs over the heads of Katuturans. Mara herself is already too well trained to see desperation. Even now, in watching a cluster of boys on the other side of the street, she can't ignore the signs of need. Their t-shirts are too well worn and their eyes too well versed in studying the crowd, perhaps looking for tourists. This work is in her blood.

The boys from across the street have spied Callie and now make their way over. They're foolish in their approach; one or possibly two of them would be able to make good on it. More than this and she is likely to be overwhelmed by their requests. Solitary children do much better in begging because their presence is less threatening. The boys seem oblivious to Justus and Pate, who stare them down as they approach. As soon as she's sure of what they're after she yells a warning to Callie, to watch for small hands at her pockets or in her bag. She notices too late that one of the taller boys has a small knife, which he brings to the back of Callie's neck and uses to make quick work of the rope that suspends the money-pouch under her shirt. Mara puts both hands to Callie's stomach, holding the pouch in place. By the thickness of it, it's possible that she has brought cash with her, after all. Callie's hands cover Mara's, grabbing so forcefully that she yelps and draws away. Callie looks wildly at the two men, who have turned around to face the

boys. There are five, maybe six of them, and despite the knife and their aggressiveness, Mara is scared for them. Faced down by two adult men, these boys lack common sense. A boy in a white shirt lunges for Pate's back pocket, but when he has the wallet he seems stymied and Pate has time to catch him by the arm and wrestle it from his hand. Pate holds it over his head and whistles to the boys, and Mara thinks he is smiling a bit as he curses them out in Afrikaans.

Their strategy seems to be diversion; at any moment two or three hands might grab at her sides, prying into a pocket, while another tries the clasp on her necklace. Pate tells Mara to hold her hands up and then shoves his wallet into her hand. "Pass it!" Justus reaches toward her, and she offers it into his hand. Just as quickly he gives it back to Pate.

"Where is the money, you little bastards?" Without question they're the most persistent thieves she's ever encountered. Most boys work by speed; within twenty seconds they either have your valuables or not, but either way they will put as much distance between themselves and you as they can. This group is different.

Pate turns from the boys long enough to squeeze Callie's arm. "Where's yours?" he asks. She fumbles to hand it to him.

He extends his hand to keep the boys from intercepting, but presses the pouch against her abdomen. "No no. In the pants pants pants," he says, and turns his back to guard her as she does so. "Where's the wallet, boys?" he calls in Afrikaans.

The game seems to work, giving Callie enough time to stuff her money into her belt and button her jacket over it. Pate thrusts the wallet back into Mara's hands, and she looks again at the two boys as they lurch in. They seem threatened by the men, and this is

how she knows the boys are faking it. They have none of the shark-like quality she is used to seeing. Most of these street boys work like they have nothing to lose. These kids are doing it for the spending money. They'll go home tonight to their ordinary, insulated homes with a warm meal and homework. They're truants. They probably pulled those t-shirts from the trash cans near a department store.

Two things happen in quick succession: the white shirt grabs for Callie's money and the rest of them coordinate a unified lunge for Mara's raised hand, easily pulling it down and securing the wallet. As soon as they have it they're off running. Pate and Justus chase them, evidently unaware that there's one boy here yet to threaten Callie and whatever she has in her pouch. She has more money than would be in Pate's wallet; they must have known that. The other boys are quick, dispersing in separate directions to make the two men choose among them. It's a gamble: the boys are playing the same game Pate initiated, *who has the wallet?*

Callie lets out a guttural sound and then grabs the boy with both hands, twisting an arm behind his back and forcing him to the ground. It happens easily, and at first the boy is too startled to respond. "Let me go! Please," he says in English. It's a little ridiculous to look at them: a grown American woman, her hair still slicked into a tight bun, her skirt hitched up awkwardly, seated on one hip on the boy's back. He makes a demonstration of his wheezing breaths, but he's breathing, and his head torques from side to side, watching for his buddies.

A few women pause to consider them, ironically asking whether the boy is alright. Mara says everything is fine, but Callie is panting harder than her exertions would have dictated and her face is wan. Her eyes scan the corner with the department store on

one side and fried chicken joint on the other, the buildings that Pate and Justus disappeared behind in pursuit of the boys. Mara tells her not to worry; downtown Windhoek is one of the safest places in the city, perhaps the whole country. She tries to prove it by asking the boy where he goes to school, but he curses her out until Callie pulls at his arm again.

Her mobile phone says it is already past nine o'clock, and a government agent will not look kindly upon tardiness unless it is his own. "You might as well let him go," she says.

"Sure, just a minute," says Callie, but nothing moves apart from her head and shoulders, which shudder as though she is physically marking the seconds. "Where'd they go?"

Mara says she's not sure, but The State House is only a few blocks away. "It is really *very* safe here," she says. "This boy and his friends are idiots."

"Oh, *fuck*," Callie says, her breath growing short and rapid, and Mara lets a spasm of laughter escape out of the corner of her mouth. It's a foreigner's skewed understanding, walking into a Tura *shebeen* alone at night. Bringing large wads of cash downtown and then parading along Independence Avenue like a foreign dignitary. And now, sitting atop a schoolboy, she surveys the buildings around them as though she expects an SADF soldier to spring out with a machine gun. Passers-by stare at them.

"Are you hurt? Are you comfortable to walk? It is just a few blocks now." She asks whether Pate and Justus plan to meet them at the State House.

Callie looks down at the boy, then jerks both arms backward and up in a motion that leaves the boy writhing in pain. “Are they on their way back?” she asks again, this time directing the question to him.

The boy shakes his head and begins to cry. At this, Callie begins to thrash him, first on his back and then his head. His hands now free, the boy covers his face and curls into a fetal position, crying for her to stop. Callie grips him by the collar and begins again at beating the boy’s arms, then his hands and face.

“It’s just money!” Mara yells to her, “just money!”

Neither of them knows anything about fighting; Callie pins him because he’s smaller but her hands can barely maintain a square grip on his shoulders and, although she looks ready to bite, she doesn’t know what to do about the leverage in his flailing legs. As he cries out her hands go for his face, one palm contorting his jaw and the other a claw at his ear, and then he screams and starts to kick at her nether parts until she is forced to shift off him. The boy sits up and tries to shuffle away on feet and elbows.

The screaming brings spectators. Although she has the advantage, Callie bellows like an old cow, raining tears on her adversary as she forces him back down onto the pavement. The kid doesn’t move again except to curl further into himself until three adults run forward to pull her away. A woman with a huge black purse approaches them and asks what has happened. Mara says the boy tried to steal, and in Callie’s defense tries to explain about the larger group and the knife, but the woman is already fussing over the boy, checking his face and cooing over the scrapes on the backs of his legs. She asks him for a phone number, then uses her mobile to call someone, a grandmother.

The boy is oddly quiet, and Mara looks to the woman with the phone, then to Callie, who now searches the block with the frantic attention of a lost child. When she returns Mara asks if she has phone numbers for Pate or Justus.

Callie moves to put her hands on Mara's shoulders, then cups a hand at her own mouth, her top teeth bared against the skin of her hand. "It's gone, every bit of it," says Callie, yanking the rope from under her clothes and throwing the pouch to the ground. "That's not mine."

Mara looks down at the pouch, still thick with money. Who knows how much. "The boys didn't touch it—I didn't let them," she says, her eyes darting between the American and the pouch. The weekday morning workers and shoppers continue to pass at her left, oblivious.

When the boy finally starts to cry it is almost a relief. The woman with the purse sits beside him, and his face is starting to swell a bit on the left side, and now that his adrenaline is starting to subside he shows the pain of his wounds, grabbing at his stomach and moaning and rocking. Callie looks at the boy, and the boy looks at her. Mara picks up the flesh-colored money pouch from the sidewalk, but doesn't have to open it to know. Anyone could tell, by the feel through the fabric, that newspaper is different from cash.

The damage looks worse now; there is bleeding from the side of his head and his thigh. When the boy starts to cry again, Callie finally turns her head from staring at him. She brings her head down into her chest and sobs. Soon it is hard to tell the cries of one from the other.

\*

As Callie has been absent from her classroom for three weeks and evidently vacated the student house shortly after Thanksgiving, Renée is surprised to see the same shock of red hair through her office window. The woman who knocks and then enters without waiting for a response is not Callie but an aged version of her, wider at the hips and bust, with dark-rimmed glasses and none of that cocksure swagger. “I’ve been to every hospital in this godforsaken town,” she says. “No one will show me her records. No one will tell me what’s going on.”

Renée doesn’t want to think of how much those plane tickets cost, and she is embarrassed that she didn’t know about Callie’s medical emergency. “It’s been a long time since any of us had contact with her. We’ve tried, of course,” she offers, feeling stupid and wondering now whether she ought to have written to her about Callie’s absence. She has several hours’ worth of essays to grade, but she offers to make phone calls. She helps Mrs. Donne connect to the internet on her computer.

Within a few minutes the woman lets out a yelp. “Katutura Hospital,” she says, and as they rush out the gate she repeats the room number to herself like a mantra.

On the taxi ride to the hospital Mrs. Donne says nothing, and it is several minutes before Renée realizes the shock factor. “Don’t worry, it’s a good hospital,” she says, glancing out the window at the modest homes, informal food stands and graffiti. “Good doctors, a great reputation.” She isn’t lying, but she silently hopes Callie’s ailments are minor. The building itself looks like a 1960s Soviet replica, a giant block of concrete with a helicopter pad on its roof. Inside, the walls are a sunny yellow and the staff, though sparse, are attentive.

There's a note on the door of the room, labeled "Helene Donne." Helene rushes into the room, only to find that Callie isn't there; it's a boy who has been in a fight.

Renée hands Helene the note.

Mom,

I'm broke can you pay

-C

Helene demands to know why her daughter has been turned out of the hospital room. "It isn't that way," Renée says, reminding her that this is a state hospital, and no one is turned out.

An older woman emerges from the room with the beat-up boy to ask for quiet. Renée's Oshiwambo is limited but she manages to understand that much. She'd like to ask "what happened?" but past tense is too hard so she just says "what is?" The woman says something about a white person and points to her son. When a nurse arrives they learn the whole story. Helene asks how this can be possible when her daughter has been sick in the hospital all this time.

The nurse says a girl with hair like Helene's was here for a while with the boy.

The grandmother says the girl ought to be in jail.

\*

If Callie had it to do over she'd have pinned the boy but let his arms loose so he could flail at her all he wanted. She wishes she'd never hit him. They were on her before she had a chance to finish, those strangers, grabbing indiscriminately at her arms, her hips, even her right breast, and they kept their grip on her even when she let go and



they'd dragged her under a tree. She'd have made it a fair fight. She was about to release the boy and let him have at her, let him sucker punch her if he liked. Whatever he wanted until he was done. For one thing he wasn't particularly strong; for another, the jab of his knee and the pressure of his hand against the base of her skull made sense, as if each blow were a message. She wanted to know just how much more she owes now that the money is gone, and if the strangers hadn't interfered she'd have the answer by now. When she visits him at Katutura State Hospital she tries willing him out of the bed into the hall to give her the rest of what was coming, but he doesn't move. He seems relatively unfazed by Callie's presence. They spend quite a bit of time looking each other over through the doorway while waiting for nurses to bring results, and he is either unrepentant or spaced out on some drug.

She lingers near his room almost a full day to see whether Pate or Justus would check on their young recruit, and when they don't she feels a small tug of pride at her own decency. She's left her information with one of the nurses. The technicians do an x-ray and maybe also a CT scan on the boy. No concussion, but quite a bit of bruising and three compresses on his body and face. He needs stitches for a gash on one knee and she stays around for that, allowing herself a chair in the hallway just outside the room. She thought she'd be one of few people here for a kid like that, but within two hours the room is overcrowded with dark faces that glare out at her now and again. What's more, the family arrives with toys, flowers, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. It is as if a mask has been lifted from his face, revealing a prince where she'd seen a pauper desperate for food. She wishes now she'd broken the boy's leg.

His grandmother emerges from the waiting room after a while to chew her out in Oshiwambo. Eventually a younger man comes over to translate, and for about twenty minutes the translator relays the standard exaggerations: *what kind of human being does this sort of thing? He was a good boy. You ought to be locked up.* And then he says, “You have crippled him.” The translations come to her in monotone, and she realizes that the man is likely softening the words out of politeness and confusion.

Callie feels her insides convulse. “How is he crippled?”

The translator says he hasn’t said a word since they got here. Then it is another round of *he was a good boy and you should be in jail.*

The phrase *he was a good boy* almost gets her in trouble again; she is ready to storm back into the room and pull the cords on all of the beeping machines. Instead she asks the man to translate for the grandmother. “Tell her—“ she fumbles in her pockets for what’s left of her money. “Tell her I’ll wager N\$100 that I can get the boy to talk again.” It pains her to look at the pink bill in her hand and know this is what’s left. From four thousand twenty-four U.S. dollars to this.

The translator holds his breath a moment and then responds, without further involvement of the grandmother, that it would be better if she left.

Later that afternoon, the attendant at the window of the Wanaheda Police Station asks Callie to repeat herself twice before he understands her request. He’s an older man with white-speckled cheeks and a slight twitch in his face. He asks her what the charges are and she says nothing yet but she’s ready to wait until someone calls them in. He sways a bit and she realizes he’s waiting to hear it from her now, but odds are if she tells

this man she'll have to give the same talk to at least six other officers before they admit her, and she'd rather not have to go through that more often than necessary.

The old man sits on a stool in a small booth, guarded by security glass, and mentally Callie is already imagining herself in a space like that. Small, monkish. "What kind of charges are we talking about?" The voice is projected past the glass by a microphone.

"Violence. Against a minor," she says, and when he doesn't gawk at her it confirms that jail is the right place, the place where the socially bankrupt people end up. And those who are broke, which is also her situation. From the outside it's a pleasant building, with an ornate brick design on its face and mercifully few windows.

She balks when he asks if she's ready to make a statement. It's hard to say how long they'd keep her in one of these holding cells, or if there would be prison. She gives the man her name and tells him to look her up in the computer. There is a green synthetic-leather couch in the entry way, and she is tired enough to lie down. Looking down the corridor toward a security door to where she feels likely they'll lock her up, she is able to let go of any thoughts about the boy. As soon as her eyes close, however, her body floods with liquid fire and she lurches upright again, sputtering. There are two long, thin windows facing the outside, but it seems unlikely anyone outside would find her here just yet.

"Are you intoxicated?" The old man is leaned forward into the microphone.

Probably she is. Something in this room smells like a garbage can, and it might be her own suit jacket. There was a bottle store a few blocks from here, and she'd spent most of her last pink one hundred on beer and some chips. She should have bought more

chips for the wait; she is hungry but despite the haze she is cognizant of a warning she'd lodged for herself earlier today, a strict resolution to bring herself here and be safe. This building is sturdy, with the barred doors and the heavy locks. There are police officers here somewhere with guns.

Callie plucks at a worn place on the couch where the faux leather is broken into flakes. A firing synapse alerts her to get up and do something very important. In her memory is a green velvet bag with a padlock on its mouth, and the synapse tells her the padlock isn't secure; she can reach inside and take what has been portioned to her, a *talent* for which she will be responsible. The green is the lawn at Zoo Park, and inside the bag is—

Another signal flashes through her brain like a growling dog, warning her away.

She'd meant to go to Etosha and see the animals, and then something even better was going to happen. The bag sits on a desk at a church, as she reaches inside she knows already there is nothing but shreds of yesterday's *Chicago Tribune*. There is something she wanted to tell Teddy or—

A third sensation flickers in, a low voice telling her to leave the building. She jolts awake again to see the old man standing in front of her. He says she might as well leave because they will not be taking her in. Even if there are charges, someone has agreed to post bail and, since she is unfit to see herself home, will arrive shortly to pick her up. She straightens herself and taps at her knee, then smiles at him. "How much do they pay you here?"

The old man looks her over, his lips folding in like a duck bill, amused.

“What if I told you—“ she begins, but the idea is gone. She flounders for it, tracing through context clues. “What did you just say to me?” but the man has already closed himself into his booth. In view of his clear disgust, Callie spins through a mental rolodex to a different personhood, someone vibrant and clever whom she’s been before and could put on now to impress him, but first she’d need some solid food to steady herself, and again there is the growl of warning that tells her to settle back into whomever this is now. Better to wait on this couch, in this waiting room with blessedly few windows.

It is best, in fact, not to open her eyes at all, not even when a different voice registers on an instinctual level, a higher voice than the man’s, with the wobble of a gull’s cry. The sound conveys what the boy’s flailing arms couldn’t tell her, and the wreckage at New Orleans couldn’t tell her. It has the glow of sunlight and the migraine force of a hangover, so that after the squeal of shoes on tile forces her to look, she buries her face in the soft, flaking shoulder of the couch. And next there are arms around her, and she’s almost choking but doesn’t say anything because she’s sure now that there’ll be no dark room for her and no rest, none at all, because there is only one other person in Windhoek today with hair that color.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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