

Songs, Cities, Mountains:
Fiction in Africa and America
by
Eli Hager

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“A man’s work is nothing but to rediscover...those two or three great and simple images
in whose presence his heart first opened.”

—Albert Camus

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Abstract

This thesis, centrally, is about two opposing questions. The first is this: What does it mean (or what is it like) to live without (or in the aftermath of) real vitality, real agency, real culture and adventure and love? For example, how does it feel to be a woman who imagines travel, interaction, investigation of the world, but who has chosen safety and shelter instead? What would a woman like that do, and say? Or, similarly, what sorts of actions would arise from a character whose agency—agency being a way of advancing—is smothered by a fixation on the past? What about a man who's stuck because he *can't* remember the past?

What I'm looking for, in this thesis, are stories that ask these questions. I want to think, situationally, about what causes men and women to become opponents of themselves. To be human in the sense of having private goals and interests; but to be inhuman in the sense of not acting to attain them. This can happen with old age, when we start to forget, to lose our hands and voices, to withdraw into a cautious way of thinking. It can happen when we allow—and, therefore, endorse—racial or other separation, which deprives us of the means to know and act with each other. And it can happen (does happen) when we are lazy and afraid. When we hide from the world behind our walls, our windows, our fictions. When we use tools and technology, exclusively, to interact with that world: rather than going and meeting it for ourselves.

The second question is: Aren't all of these things illusions? Could it be that adventure (or in other words, risk) is the illusion of those who can afford it—those whose daily lives aren't themselves matters of risk and death? Could it be that the desire of oppressors to “get to know” the oppressed is an illusion too, an illusion that serves those oppressors the same way that their oppression does? Could it be an illusion that we were ever that close to nature, to culture, to each other? Alternatively, could it be that loyalty to the past is a good thing, and if so, to what extent?

This question, or set of questions, I hope to pose by setting my stories in Africa and the United States. Both places are dynamic and complex (where else would fiction happen?), particularly in terms of their music, history, and relationships with the idea of race. More importantly, both embody paradoxes I am writing about: paradoxes of agency and action. Both the American South and South Africa, where I've lived, have markedly vibrant, interesting, exciting, and *action*-oriented pasts—but pasts of brutal, remarkable violence. Both have a less eventful, but more progressive, sense of themselves in the present tense. And both the United States and Africa, generally, are places of extraordinary diversity—geographical, biological, political, artistic, intellectual, and otherwise. How does one act, or make oneself act, in such a place? How does one climb the walls we've built *because* of our diversity, go out into the world, and be just as complicated as it is?

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The Gullah Sea

From where she was at the back of the front room, slouched in a window seat and watching as the storm flashed and flickered and groaned, Madeline Macon could hear a man's knock at her door. It was strange, to hear the knock. The closest house was a mile away—Madeline and her husband lived in a township near the Georgia coast, fueled by the city but far from its crowded, intimate space—and it was almost midnight. The man would have had to walk the mile, in the rain and the dark night, to get to where he was; so, when Madeline pulled herself up, toward the door and the flash and sound of the autumn storm, she was wary of what was coming.

She opened the door.

The stranger standing there was wet and smiling, a man with hair on his face and a hat with a wide and fraying brim. He was younger than she, but in a caked, wrinkled, brown and dirty sort of way, with boots pulled over his pants and two layers of collared shirts. He smiled again, broadly, and his teeth were clean and attractive; he wiped both his boots on the ground.

“Good evening, ma'am,” he said, smiling still, and staring. “I was hoping I might come in from the cold.”

Madeline thought for a moment. Her husband, John, was in the basement, where he had told her it was safe during an ‘electric’ storm; she hadn't followed him there. John was a caring, guarded sort of man, a man who would risk his life for her—but who covered his ears with a towel, before every short thud of thunder. He was down there now, in the

basement, rolling up towels to place against the walls, piling up gallons of water and flashlights and cans of tomato soup, to keep the worst from coming.

Recently, too, there had been a home invasion: though it had been closer to the city, and the suspect was said to be black. Madeline looked again at the stranger in the door, and at the way he stood and waited. And she thought that he might mean no harm, that the good, full, easy smile he was showing was a true one—that he like any other good man needed a warm, lit place to be for the storm.

He looked familiar.

“Good evening,” she said back. “Come on in and dry yourself off.”

Madeline turned around and took a few short steps to the closet, and in it she picked a towel and a washrag for the man to use on his face. The linens were soft and blue in her hands, and she handed them fondly back to him, still standing as he was in the rain. “Come in, please,” she said again, moving more quickly now to get things the way they should be. The man nodded his head and took his own steps into the front room, where he stopped again and looked darker in the light.

The two of them looked at each other, then: she a woman who’d had a child, and a job and a husband and a house, and he a young man—a stranger—who hadn’t told her anything.

“What is your name?” Madeline said, waiting for the man to speak.

He took another long step toward the window seat where Madeline had been lying. “Josiah,” he said. “My name is Josiah. I’m from around here.” The stranger—Josiah—looked quickly away and then back at Madeline, his smile the same as it had been since he entered. He kept standing and waiting, between the long glass table—and the coffee table picture books, chess set, and mint and chocolate candies that were there—and the window seat, while she came up with something to say.

A white flash came from a window and made shadows of the things in the room.

“Well, Josiah, would you care for anything else?” Now a long roll of thunder shook through the house and the floor, and the white king and queen on the chess set fell over. “Something dry to wear, or something to eat or drink?” Madeline looked away and wondered what John was doing, how he’d felt when the sound had moved through the walls; she thought of the towel he’d push to his ears, of the look on his face, and then she looked back at the stranger. “At least something to eat?” she said again.

“Yes, I would like something to drink,” he said, smiling somewhat less and shifting his face as he did. The rest of his body was still, and Madeline could see all of him in the light of the chandelier.

“What would you like? We have—let’s see—we have beer, Sprite, water, juice, some gin and vodka too—I believe—in the basement. What would you like?”

The man stared straight at her, his hair wet and matted under the wide-brimmed hat, and his mouth closed for the first time. Madeline noticed that he had not taken off his hat, or

that she had not taken it from him, and that his boots were still muddy on his feet; she thought that she might ask him about the boots and hat after he'd told her about his drink.

"Gin," he said. "A glass of gin would do." The man blinked and waited.

Madeline did as she had planned and asked for the stranger's boots and hat, which she took to the end of the hall and the mat that was laid out there. On her way back past the man he was standing entirely erect, flat and ready on his feet, and his hair was tanned and dirty where the brim of the hat had been. She kept walking, toward the stairs at the far side of the kitchen.

Downstairs John was sitting, reading, with the towels rolled up around him and a small trickle of water growing in a corner. The basement was not spare and gray, like the furnace room it had been before they had had the child; it was not empty or ugly the way a basement should be. John was down there too much for that, so now it was painted and carpeted and two long sofas stretched out along the wall. The child's board games, basketballs, and preschool projects were spread out in crates around the floor.

"There's a man upstairs who'd like a drink," Madeline said, waiting for and watching what John would do.

He glanced up quickly, a puzzled look in his eyes: like a man who has just woken up, or who has gotten off a train, but forgets where he was wanting to go. John's hair was blond, much lighter than the stranger's. The wrinkles on his face were wide and deep—so much so that, if he looked toward the light, he appeared bright and pale, but if he

looked just away from it, he appeared dark-skinned, and covered in shadowed lines.

“What do you mean?” he said. “What do you mean there’s a man?”

Madeline explained what had happened upstairs: the knock on the door, the man, his hat, his boots.

John looked back at her directly. “So that means there’s mud on the carpet?” was what he asked.

“Yes.”

There was a pause. A long, loud rumble shook the walls and the ceiling, and John covered both his ears.

“Well why in heavens,” he said finally, “would a man be out at this hour, and in an electric storm, and on our street at that? And Maddie, why have you left him alone?”

John looked at Madeline the way he often did, like he expected more—or maybe less: less impatience, less eagerness, less of a notion of what good can happen in the world. He was not afraid, just organized. But she, Madeline, she was a woman to forget about her shoes, to look out a window or a door and think of what fine and natural things can come without security.

“He looked like he’d had enough,” was all she said.

John sighed. “Well,” he said, “let’s bring him down here first, at least, where it’s safe.”

He paused, thinking. “Well I’ll go get him—you stay down here and find him a drink.”

John got up slowly, rubbed his feet on the ground as if they’d been asleep, and walked

toward and up the stairs; Madeline could see him clench one fist and reach the other into his pocket.

There was something in there, she thought: a tool, an object, a weapon.

Madeline went to the back of the room and reached to the top shelf, where there were three dirty bottles of wine and a larger handle of gin. She took the gin in both hands—it was very heavy, and said something faded on the front—and lowered it from above her head to below her waist, and she found three glasses on the shelf to the side. Everything was dusty and old. Madeline walked to the center of the room and laid the glasses out in a neat circle, in front of the sofas, where she hoped they would sit and drink. She hoped it because it was a thing that didn't happen often.

Madeline heard the sound of the men's feet on the stairs, and then the louder sound of thunder. They both appeared, then, much as they had been, their feet in socks and the looks on their faces the same.

"Thank you for the gin," the man said suddenly, smiling again and pointing at what Madeline had set out.

"You're welcome," she said, and looked at John. She picked up the gin, with both hands, and poured heavily into the three glasses, but it didn't seem to change what was in the handle at all. The two men sat down by her, looking at each other and waiting.

There was a spark of lightning so bright that Madeline saw it from down the stairs, and the sound that followed it did so by just a second. She and John jumped and fidgeted,

and John reached too late for a towel; but the stranger, grinning and halfway through his glass, was still.

“So how’d you get here?” John said somewhat abruptly. His hand was still in his pocket.

The man was silent for a second, took a long drink from his glass, and poured another—using just the one hand—without asking. “Turns out,” he said finally, “Atlanta’s is the international airport. I was in Africa. Now I’m going home.” The man drank another gulp, and winced.

John rolled his eyes. “Okay. But that doesn’t explain—”

“So what did you do in Africa?” Madeline said loudly.

Madeline had had a great grandfather whose cook had had a great grandfather of his own from Africa, and the cook had cooked for her, once, when she was a girl: black eyed peas with relish and meal, and salted tomatoes and okra. The cook, an old man, would speak a strange language when he was with the others, a language of clicks and jumps and magnificent stomach sounds, and Madeline would hide in a corner and listen. She asked the cook about it, once, and he told her it was a language from the islands.

Madeline had wondered how the cook felt about Africa, whether he longed for it or felt nothing at all—and she had asked him about that too. She remembered the look on his face, an angry look, and she remembered he sang her a line of Amazing Grace.

And then the cook told Madeline how the song was written, how there was an English sailor who sold slaves in America, who sailed them across the sea; and how one night

there was wildness in the eyes of the sky and a storm struck the ship and the sailor, he told himself that forever after only grace could save him, and only love in his heart. How he came home from the storm knowing that with love in his heart slavery had got to be wrong: but there was *money* to be made in the American South, and ain't it just southern, the cook told Madeline, to want one thing in your mind and another in your heart.

Now Madeline wondered where the cook's great grandsons and granddaughters could be.

"Would you like to hear about it?" the stranger said suddenly.

John looked completely confused. He was fidgeting in his pocket and hadn't taken a sip from his glass, and there were small beads of sweat shining around his hair. Madeline noticed him open and shut his mouth once and then again, but he said nothing; nothing came out, or nothing was there to say.

"Yes," Madeline said, drinking from the gin. And turning to John: "What else is there to do down here?"

He opened his mouth again, and spoke. "Well, go ahead then." He leaned back slightly into the sofa and looked at the new man, and the three of them sat in silence and in the light of the room while the man cleared his throat and drank.

There was thunder.

Madeline saw John look at the stranger and then at a towel, and do nothing; he did not put it onto his ears.

And then he, the stranger, began to speak: “I used to live in Cape Town,” he said, his face brown but already flush. He drank again, paused, drank again, and wiped his mouth neatly with his sleeve. “And in Cape Town I had a friend.” The man was speaking so slowly and mutedly that it was almost unbearable for Madeline and for John: she because she wanted to know—what would happen, what came next—and he, presumably, because anything could happen, any sad or ugly thing. The three of them, at once, drank from the glasses, looked away or at the ceiling, and swallowed.

The man continued, in more of a drawl: “Let me just say first, this friend of mine was a South African, and South Africans play tricks: on people who’re too serious.” Another pause, another drink. He was speaking more quickly now, because of the gin, and began again: “Like on the airplane, a black steward told me, ‘And for dinner, sir, we have the South African delicacy—monkey brain.’ And I believed him. I thought it did sound African. He just came back with a pasta and laughed.”

John was blinking his eyes as rapidly as Madeline had seen, and both of them were confused and waiting for what was next. In a new silence she looked around the room: at the thin, wet corners of the carpet, the brand new light fixtures and heating vents along the square sides of the ceiling, the color of the walls—a Carolina blue—and the remote controls scattered across a sofa. She and John would watch the news, on weeknights: and learn about the world, from the others who had seen it.

Madeline thought a strange thought.

The things she had, or used, were meant to allow her to *do*, or to do more. But she thought about it. Those things more often told her *not* to do: that if it can't be done here or now, it can't be done at all. That if it can't be done with an object, it can't be done by a man. That actually going toward and meeting something, in a world of tools and go-betweens, was a wrong or impracticable thing.

“What you've also got to understand,” the stranger started, “is that my friend was a Christian.”

Madeline looked to her side at John.

“And Christians are just too nice. That's got to be a trick.” The man smiled as he said it, and wouldn't let John begin to speak. “So I had to figure something was up when she told me, in Cape Town, that if I made it to Victoria Falls by the end of the month, I'd see a lunar rainbow. I'd never heard of a rainbow made by the—.”

A huge crash of thunder shook through the basement, like the whole space—the air and everything in it—was splitting and falling and dulled. There was a whining sound in Madeline's ears when it was done.

But still the man began, again: “That's where the story begins. I wanted to see it, this rainbow.”

John said abruptly, “Madeline could you go check on the windows, make sure they're shut and locked?”

Madeline thought of the open windows, but said there was no need. “I’ve shut most of them,” she said.

John looked at the stranger. “I’m sorry for—now what was your name again?” He held both hands in his pockets and winced at a sip of gin.

“Josiah. Call me Josiah,” Josiah said. He pulled down on one of the collars around his neck, scratched at his beard and rolled his head forward and back. He began again, saying, “So I did it. I went to go see it. I waited for a car—and then when they found one (the car hire place), it had no windows, and there was a cup holder taped to the dashboard. So be it, I said. I drove that car up the West Coast, through the fishing towns with their white wash skies and bright white homes, past the fishermen with their cold and cut-up eyes. I drove through fields of wildflowers so long and big you couldn’t see the road, through fields of quiver trees like spiders turned up against the sky. I ran out of gas, and walked for it. I ran out of water, and searched and asked for it. At some point I’d made it to Namibia.”

Josiah, and Madeline also, were drinking while he spoke, sipping now and again and taking a larger drink when a pause in the story required it. John was drinking too, slowly, his hands looser, something sad and new in his eyes. And Madeline was looking back at Josiah, at the square cut of his jaw, at the square white line of his teeth. He was long and wide in his head, his face, his neck.

“In Namibia, you’d see salt flats and triangle dunes of sand, huge silent things that would go on and on until you wanted it to end. The scorpions would run up and down, just

slower than you could, and would pince at the ground because of it. I remember I took out a folding chair that for God knows what reason was left in the car for me, and I rode it down a dune. The sand got everywhere. It was in my eyes, ears, my teeth and nose, and between my toes and socks. I was the smallest thing there, the most beaten and dirty thing. But still I could climb way up the dune, my feet sinking, and say, What else have you got? What more can you throw at me? I'm still here."

Madeline was listening when another bang came sideways through the house, a loud and heavy thing that split the walls with noise. The water in the corners of the room moved along the towels, running a border around the room, under the things against its walls. There were flashlights and batteries, food and water, a clock and scattered tools—but all of it was shaking on the floor, and near the water or wet.

Now John looked over at Madeline and motioned with his head, but she didn't know what it meant. Josiah saw it, the nod of John's head—she could see by the way Josiah looked—but didn't do anything, didn't look at them for anything more. He only said: "Do you think I could use the toilet?"

John looked up, and took his hand out of his pocket and pointed. "It's right over there," he said.

Josiah got up very quickly, pushing his feet against the ground; he walked over to the restroom, went in and closed the door. One or the other sound came from inside, at first, but then it mostly silent.

Looking sideways at her, and with an expression Madeline hadn't seen, John said meaningfully, "Maddie something has to be going on here." He paused. "What if he comes out of there with a knife, a gun? Why is he here, on this road, in our house, in the night—when he said he was in the city? And why in heavens was he there, coming from Africa?"

"Why don't you ask him?" she said directly.

Madeline remembered when she had met John, when he was a younger man, and one who had a boat down by the beach. They were young and tired, then, tired of knowing what was or could be theirs; Madeline remembered their wedding, out on the boat, and the sun stretching so wide before the night. She had looked at him, against the water and the strange blue sea, and thought that maybe *he* was the thing to do, to know, to go to, to achieve: that maybe *he* was the good and wild and complicated thing that she had known, as a girl, out on the same long beach.

"I did. I will." John looked serious, sad, a man who knows himself. "Look, Maddie, I have not—"

"I know," Madeline said. "I love you, John." She remembered, now, when John sang for her; when he brought her a piano, a baby grand and black; when he went to hear music that she knew he didn't like. She remembered when he stood up, said no, and fought, when a man tried to steal their ring.

It was after that that they'd moved, to the smaller township, farther from the city. It was after that fight that they'd built the house, built the windows and front steps and locked-

up doors; it was after that fight that they'd had a child—a son: he'd looked like Josiah—and moved away from the people who could hurt it. The people around Madeline and John, now, were steady people, hushed people, people without ideas about taking and getting and the future. They were not the people from the city, nor the people from the beaches, who cried and sang and shouted when Madeline was a girl.

John said, “I love you t—”

The door to the bathroom ripped open loudly and Josiah stood in a shadow. John and Madeline looked at his hands. He was wiping them on his pants, and smiling. Madeline saw that Josiah was a tall and long-armed man, a man with balance and size, a man you had to look at. She did; and there was nothing in his hands; and he came back to the sofa and drank.

“Josiah,” John started almost immediately, “I don't mean to interrupt you. But I'm wondering what got you out here in a storm in the middle of the night.” He looked at Madeline and nodded, almost proudly.

“I've been used to walking,” was all Josiah said to him.

It was silent for a second; Madeline could feel the gin in her forehead and out at the ends of her fingers.

Then Josiah began again, quickly, talking more than he had before: “And then I was driving north, even past Windhoek—just to see what was there—when I hit a hard rock, and the oil started coming from the oil sump. It was all I could do just to drive back to the main road and wait.”

The three of them, in the room, waited too and drank.

“And if you could have seen it, that night. I was out there by an empty road in the desert in a country with nothing in it, with no lights or cities of men. The sky wasn’t black, it was white. It was white with the stars that were there, blinding because of them; and I smelled the sand and the air and wondered if I’d ever see that again, that sky, the way it was and the way I saw it. If the stars would ever be so big and so *close*, in that or any place. If we could keep a world that valued them, needed them, was obsessed and angered and ravished by them. I’m talking about the stars.”

“So how did you get out of there?” John said more calmly.

Madeline couldn’t look away from Josiah; he was coming into himself, speaking more, moving his face and creating meaning as he did. His words were wet and easy, almost slurred; they sounded like the soft echo of the thunder from the storm. She had to know what he would say.

He answered: “I just had to w—”

All of a sudden, in the basement, everything turned dark.

The power was out.

Madeline couldn’t see anything in the room at all: not the television or the two long sofas, not the carpet or the ceiling or the toys in the child’s crates. The basement was not what it had been, a moment before; it was not colorful; it was black.

Now, almost as suddenly, a light came on from the flashlight John had had by his feet. But still the room was empty—all Madeline could see were the eyes of the two men, and the light as it shone off the gin.

There was nothing to see, to need, to hold onto in that room.

And then Josiah began again, in the basement, and kept going, and going; he wouldn't stop until he was through. John and Madeline were listening. It was dark. "So I walked," he said. "I walked past and saw construction workers camped out by a fire by the road—because the spaces are so vast, in Africa, that you can't go home at night. You don't have a home; home is where you are. I saw warthogs and giraffes, eland and kudu and gemsbok. They were everywhere on the road, running and eating, standing around me, jumping at the smallest sound. And I saw elephants: huge, thick, stomping things that stood around and blocked my way. I was on my feet facing one. It flared out its nostrils. Hormones were running from its ears. And I thought of myself, then, as face to face with something that I couldn't understand, something that I couldn't know or defeat but that was magnificent to me because of it; something standing in front of me that was, *finally*, proportionate to what I could imagine."

Madeline looked at Josiah, as he spoke, or at where he'd been, in the light.

She was feeling the gin, now, in the way she saw and understood his story.

"Then I had to get across the Okavango Delta, in Botswana. I found a man named Kefilwe who would pole me across, in a *mokoro*, a dugout canoe. It would look like he was rowing us straight into the grass, but there would be water there, and lily pads and

flies that stuck to my skin. We went straight across the place, the delta, he knowing where we were headed. I looked at it and smelled it: the water as it shone back what was showing in the sky; the wet flowers and frogs that stunk like they had rotted; the sound of the pole moving through the water but leaving it as it was. The flies bit at me. The sun made shadows of baobab trees that stretched across the land.”

Madeline could feel and see the place. She thought of the sights out across the ocean, and the foolish thoughts she’d had of swimming in it. She thought of John and his fishing boat, and the storm that caught them once—and the feeling of coming to shore. She thought of how far she was from anything.

John, too, looked sweaty, even agitated, in the light there was.

Josiah started again.

“We stopped over, one night, in a town. Kefilwe showed me the ‘big’ tree, that the others in the town said was the biggest to ever grow. We set up tents and drank beer—I remember Kefilwe would pour a sip into his glass at a time—until we were reeling. He went down first. I remember him saying all the wrong things to the women. We talked about women and Mugabe and played pool at a bar in the town.

“The next day was three days before the end of the month, when the rainbow would be. Kefilwe and I got in the back of a pick-up truck and rode to the train station, with the wind flying into our eyes. I was more burned than I’d ever been in Georgia. I looked at Kefilwe and thought that I liked and had learned from the man, and that that was a good thing. We said goodbye. I got on a train that said ‘Victoria Falls by way of Bulawayo.’”

It was dark enough in the room that Madeline could see and hear anything: any strange shape or sound. There were patterns of color floating in front of her face, patterns that weren't there. She could see anything in the room.

She could see him now—Josiah—even in the dark.

“On the train there were men and families spaced ten to a row, and some were squatting in the aisles. When I had to use the toilet, I couldn't. When we stopped for pap and samp, prostitutes would get on, at the back. The women on the train switched between languages, even in the middle of a sentence. And I thought that this adventure of mine was something else for the others, on the train, with me: that for them the train was going home, and that going home at all was wild and improbable. That all of them standing and sitting there had done it before, and would do it again—and would keep going out on that train into the land but only to find a job, a family, a friend.

“But I kept going. I was a day away. We crossed the border, and everyone got off. We waited in a line so long it stretched out into the trees. When I got to the front, the man there asked me for my jacket. There were huge buses, waiting on the tracks, with cows on them: and mattresses strapped to the top. In Zimbabwe the train broke down once—the whole thing was made of wood—and we stopped for cows once, and another time there were monkeys on the track. We kept stopping—but when we did, I could step out on the ground and look up at the sky, that thing that from end to end was so big I thought it would swallow all the land. I saw even in the eyes of the women that it was fine that we were stopped, that it was good to look around and think until you move again.”

“Then I woke up. The conductor was over me, tapping me hard on the head and saying, ‘Victoria Falls, Victoria Falls. *Mosi oa tunya.*’ I shot right up and was running: off the train, down the tracks, through the station, through the town (lit up against the night), into the park, past the gate, and under the trees: running and running, at the end of all those days. And I saw it. I saw the falls. I saw the rainbow. And all the water bouncing from it was crashing on my head, a storm of water and rain, and I could barely see through it. But it was there. The light and sound of it. It was the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Madeline, in the basement, in the storm, hadn’t thought of anything for an hour but what he was saying: the way the words came out of his mouth, the way they sounded, what they meant. It was light in the room; the power had come back on. She hadn’t noticed. Around her, again, were the things she recognized from the basement: the lights and tools and pictures.

Josiah got up suddenly.

“I should be going,” he said. The collars on his shirts were frayed and wrinkled. He moved very quickly to the stairs and stumbled up them on his heels. Madeline and John rose, too, and looked at each other, almost alarmed. Josiah was drunk. He’d needed a face to tell a story to. They followed him up the stairs slowly, through the kitchen, and saw that he had already put on his black and filthy boots, and had opened the door to the rain. He was moving almost absurdly quickly, and not smiling.

And then he, Josiah, turned around for a moment and muttered “thank you,” and he turned out into the storm and left. It was raining and thundering less, now, the storm was,

but still Madeline could see Josiah's hat turn wet and black with his first few steps. She watched him closely, from where she was at the door: he took a step through the yard, into the road, and grew smaller as he went. The thunder was far away, and the water was flooding along the road.

And then he was gone.

Madeline imagined, for a moment, one of those cold and rainy nights on the beach, when she could look out across the ocean and see nothing at all. It was too gray, too cloudy; there was too much between her and what she could possibly see. And on those nights she'd like it when she finally saw a light; she'd like it when she stood under the light and could see. Things were clearer where you could see.

Madeline turned and closed the door, turned to John in the long and brutal night.

A Consequence

I took a pill for malaria last week; now I am in the jungle. It said “Mefliam” on the box; the doctor said it was Mefloquine. I remember being there with him, and thinking about my options. It was a travel clinic in a mall, polished and furnished, and I waited in a room with strangers. There were strange plants—red, green, plastic—like I knew I’d see in the jungle, and magazines on a table. I sat and read one magazine and waited for my name to be called.

So, I was excited.

When I was with the doctor, he said I could switch to Malarone, but it would cost R1000. There were no known side effects of Malarone. “Did I have a history of depression?” he asked me. “No, I said, “not that I know of!” I looked at him and he looked at me, then he shrugged and started writing on a pad. My total would be R9, he said. I saw him check his phone, smile when he saw a message.

Now I am in the jungle.

Yesterday was my birthday. We—the guides and I—went to King’s Camp, to a grand balcony outside a hotel in the jungle. I could see the yellow and black of the sun go down in a line over the baobab, over the bush. There was water, and the outline of a wild animal. It looked like a view to which I could go, a place that could hold me and excite me and that never ended. We sat and drank our gin and tonic until the night fell over the forest, and I couldn’t see anything at all.

The next morning I couldn't feel my head. It started on a boat. We took a cruise to see above the falls. I felt my legs lurch. I felt myself slide and sputter; I stopped working for a second. Or was it a fraction of a second. And then I was working again. Then. I felt myself falling in place, with the sky on top of me. The water wasn't there. I couldn't. I couldn't—I could not—. Breathe.

“You don't look good,” a man said.

“I think I need some water.”

After an hour I still couldn't breathe and I was still falling. I thought my heart was stopped. They held me up and I started shaking from head to foot, dying (was I?), and they rowed me from the boat to the shore and drove me from there to a clinic. It was a shabby place. Outside it said: “We treat you, but God heals you.” We went inside.

I remember it; it was white. The door, the curtain, the bed, the sink, the plaster, the wires, the tubes, the needles, the floor. It was all white. A nurse came in and stabbed me in the arm with one of her white needles. She gave me porridge and a piece of bread. A doctor came in and asked me all his questions and kept saying, “That's good. That's good.”

They watched me crawl under a blanket, and for a moment I could hear them whispering.

“There's nothing wrong with him,” one said.

Chasing Mr. Schwartz

When Mandy Louis-Amony stepped off the train at West 72nd Street and Broadway, he had come an exceedingly long way. He had come from 42nd Street, where he got off the Broadway line and onto the 7th Avenue; he had come, an hour earlier, from Flatbush, Brooklyn, where he lived by the old Ebbets Field, with his grandmother and niece; he had come, nine years ago, from Miami—and a year before that, from Port-Au-Prince.

He was late to work.

Mandy worked at the West 74th Street Home, at 74th and Amsterdam, where he somewhat resentfully spent his afternoons with a man named Mr. Schwartz. The man was 84, and couldn't remember anything. Mandy, most days, introduced himself to Mr. Schwartz; helped him with his pills; checked his blood sugar and pricked him with his insulin; watched CNN with him and ranted, too, if the Japanese or Germans were in the news.

Today it was the early afternoon, just before the sun drops below the city, and the train had shown up late. Mandy walked swiftly through the station and, near the gate, began to jog. There was graffiti on the walls, names and markers—

And then he came out into the city, and saw and felt the light of it: like the world had gotten larger. The city was noisy in the morning, noisier in the evening and night, always noisier than it had been, recently.

Mandy was almost running, now.

At the senior home, on the other side of Sherman Square—past a deli, a tabbouleh shop, and the Baseball Center NYC—Mandy slowed down slightly and flattened out his hair. He looked up at the building, the way it rose almost diagonally up and over him, and thought of the first building he'd seen; he'd thought of the number of people behind its windows and walls. Mandy walked up to the door and opened it.

When he was almost at the elevator a woman's voice startled him: "Wait—Mandy!" it said, dramatically.

Mandy turned back.

The Korean woman at the front desk was on the phone but waving eagerly for him to come over toward her. When he did, she muttered "hold on" into the phone and dropped it roughly on the counter. "Mr. Schwartz hit me in the face." She paused for effect, and looked more excited than angry or sad. "Mandy, he ran right out the front door."

"What?"

The woman behind the desk paused again and nodded rapidly, her eyes wide, silently saying "incredible, right?" She opened her mouth and said out loud, "It was about an hour ago. He asked me if he could go home to where he lived, and when I said *this* was where he lived, he slapped me in the face and walked out." She kept nodding, and with one hand felt the skin below her eye. "And everyone was down here for lunch!"

Mandy didn't know how to respond. Mr. Schwartz had tried this before—asked to go home—but it was never during the day. He was worse in the evenings, when the sun

went down and the new shift of nurses came in. Then, he would become a vicious man, when more often he was a gentleman; he would alarm everyone with stories of his baseball feats in Brooklyn and his three-story house in Romania.

Mandy stood and considered where Mr. Schwartz had gone: around the block, perhaps, or to the Shark Bar across the street—or had he somehow set out for where he used to live? That was in Brooklyn, too, although Mandy wasn't entirely sure where; Mr. Schwartz was born there, to an Eastern European family, and had been a tailor and a Dodgers fan for most of his life.

It meant something, to Mr. Schwartz, to move to the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Mandy sighed at the woman behind the desk. “So what do we do?” he said. His English was better than it had ever been, and his accent was almost gone; but still she leaned over the desk and made like she had to listen intently.

She shrugged. “Call the police?” The woman seemed much less interested in the whole thing than she'd been just a moment ago. She was filing her nails.

Mandy looked at the woman and said, “Yes, fine, but the police, they won't know how to deal with him.” He sighed again—not too thrilled that he had to deal with this—and walked away from the counter to the door. He asked the doorman: “Excuse me, eh, sir. Did you see where the man, Mr. Schwartz, went?”

The doorman didn't move his head at all, and looked at Mandy from a corner of his eye. He was tall, and black, the way Mandy was. “Now how would I know that?” he said. “Right. He went right. That's all I've got for you.”

The doorman went on looking straight.

Mandy turned back to the woman and told her to call the police.

While she was on the phone he took out his own phone and called Mr. Schwartz's daughter. Mandy did not particularly like the daughter: she had moved to New Jersey, and now repeated herself too often because of it. She'd ask him questions, when she visited—long, meaningful, good questions—but then ask him others before he'd finished.

But she paid him well and that was why he'd come. She hadn't accused him—broadly, mostly baselessly—of stealing, abusing or worse, the way a previous boss had done.

She was not pleased, now, when he told her what had happened.

“Should I do something, or just, eh, stay for them to come?” Mandy said of the police, after she'd cursed at the receiver and said “this is not good!” several times in a row.

“I just can't come right now,” she said. “I'm at work, and think of the traffic—look, I just can't come right now.” Mandy heard Mr. Schwartz's daughter breathe out once and then again, without breathing in. She sounded almost intentionally aggravated: “I just can't come into the city now. Take care of this. I'll call you in an hour.”

When she hung up the phone Mandy went back, a third time, to the woman working behind the desk; he asked her what the police had said.

“They'll be looking for him,” was all she said, looking at her nails.

Mandy thought of the size of the city. He thought, irritated with the conclusion he was coming to, about the cops in their cars driving importantly around Manhattan: asking joggers and hookers if they'd seen a man who was going home.

It was 2 o'clock. Mandy was scheduled to work until 9:00. Then he'd ride the train to Brooklyn, sleeping for much of the way; he'd eat what his grandmother had prepared for him, wet and runny but warm; he'd ask his niece about school, and put her to sleep; and then he'd go to his night shift, at a nursing home in Canarsie. He'd worry about her, his niece. She had lived in Brooklyn since she was one. The Census said she wasn't American. If he could afford it, she wasn't allowed in college.

Mandy could go home right now and sleep.

He concluded that he should at least try to look for Mr. Schwartz—although, if he was candid with himself, he mostly didn't care.

*

After inquiring at the Shark Bar and the deli—"Are you fucking serious?" he'd been asked, and, "You're looking for a bald Jew in New York?"—and then stopping for a drink, Mandy thought about where an old man would want to go. He knew that whenever Mr. Schwartz's daughter came into the city, she'd take Mr. Schwartz to Times Square: but he wasn't sure, whenever that happened, if it was her idea or his.

Mandy thought he'd try looking there, now.

Back across Sherman Square, past the maintenance workers eating lunch; back into the 72nd Street Station and down the tunnel of stairs; back through the ticket gate with a ticket he'd bought at the machine; back onto the 7th Avenue Line South and back to 42nd and Broadway—and Mandy was at Times Square. He came up into it, like his eyes had more to see.

Mandy liked Times Square, almost ashamedly. He did not aim to be just an American: but he liked the curving, scrolling neon. He liked the way it shone off specks in the sidewalk, like the ground was made of sparks. He liked the languages of tourists, and the way their foreignness made him feel; he liked their flashbulbs and the width of the street, the marquees and the soft drink vendors and kitsch. He thought that there was something gorgeous, and good, about ambition—that arrogance was what conferred upon people their dreams.

Mandy saw a marquee for the “Great American Songbook.” He wondered if they played *kompa*.

After he had stood for a moment Mandy began walking around the pedestrian triangle and looking at who was sitting in the chairs. There were few old men. He found one and, from behind, tapped the man on the shoulder. “Mr. Schwartz,” he said, like a sort of a question. The man turned around and was just as old as Mandy had thought.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” the man said.

“Sorry.”

Mandy walked to his right and tapped another man on the shoulder, a police officer leaning against his bicycle. He waited.

“Yeah,” the police officer asked, without quite indicating that it was a question.

Mandy started: “Excuse me, eh, sir. Have you heard of this man, Mr. Schwartz, who has been missing from us?” He lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes to confirm that he was serious.

The police officer stared for a second, started smiling, and then put his hands on his knees and coughed until he was laughing. “Not my problem, man,” he said, and kept laughing with his back now turned from Mandy.

Mandy stood there for a second and held the expression on his face.

He looked around.

Mandy decided to ignore it, the police officer, and to keep looking for Mr. Schwartz: as if to spite the police officer, and the others who’d said he shouldn’t. He wanted to prove that it was possible.

Mandy thought about Mr. Schwartz, and where he would go.

If he, Mr. Schwartz, were in Times Square, he would drop a dollar in a musician’s cup, wait for a song to finish, and then say: “Don’t take any wooden nickels.” If a tourist tripped on a crack in the sidewalk, he would help the tourist up and say: “Did you enjoy your trip?” He, Mr. Schwartz, would point to a 1986 Chevrolet Caprice, turn to Mandy,

and say: “They just came out with that model,” and then say the same later of a 1972 Volkswagen Beetle.

But where would he *go*? To Brooklyn?

But Mandy didn’t know where in Brooklyn, and neither did Mr. Schwartz.

Mandy remembered talking to Mr. Schwartz once about sitting in Bryant Park and looking at the public library. They’d been watching the Mets game.

Mandy decided to go to Bryant Park; it was just a few blocks away.

*

At Bryant Park a Puerto Rican woman on a bench said she’d talked to Mr. Schwartz. “How the fuck would—,” she said first, and then, “Oh wait, I *do* think I know who you’re talking about.” She was somehow chewing gum and eating sashimi at the same time.

Mandy asked her to explain.

“Yeah, there was an old guy walking around here, like a half hour ago. He kept pointing to himself and telling everyone that the jacket he was wearing wasn’t *actually* his jacket.” She looked down and took a bite of sushi from her tray. “Yeah. Then he came up to me and asked, ‘Have you seen my mother? I’m looking for my mother.’”

Mandy breathed in. He was thrilled, and surprised at himself for it. It was good to hear about a man who talked like Mr. Schwartz. “His mother is dead,” Mandy said, although he wasn’t sure why he had to clarify. “Did you see where he went?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

The woman was eating so rapidly that Mandy didn't know how she still had food, if she had been there for a half hour. She made a claw with her right hand and gathered the top of her hair, then took out a hair band and tied it. “Is there anything else?” she said, ignoring his last question. “Because I kind of have places to be.”

Mandy looked at the woman for a second, then turned around and left. When he'd made it to the other side of the park, the woman was still on the bench.

He asked several more people about the old man but nobody had much to say.

Mandy knew that, if Mr. Schwartz was at the New York Public Library, he would go to Grand Central Terminal. It was so close—and Mandy had heard Mr. Schwartz speak of the place before.

So he stopped for a drink and then went.

He left the park; he walked five blocks; he went through the doors and under the flag; he came into the terminal. There were stars on the ceiling, and the place was so big that it could hold a thousand people, and be silent. It could swallow and silence that much noise; it could make you think you were dreaming.

You could get lost there. That's what dreaming could do.

Mandy thought, then—as people moved around him—of his home in Port-Au-Prince. He remembered when his grandmother had left, running from Baby Doc. She still was

running. He had stayed. He remembered the French ballads and Méringues that the workers would sing to women, the Vodou and *mascarón* dance and the women laughing in the streets, the singers in Black Power shirts and denim, impersonating peasants.

He remembered the good that can come from a place, the smell of his father's sweat. He remembered the bad—the Vodou on the Duvaliers' flags, the agribusinesses and American assembly lines, taking from men and the land.

He thought that it was good to remember both. It was good to know where you've been.

He looked around.

Then, all of a sudden, Mandy—standing as he was in a stream of little league players from the Bronx, coming off a train, and French diplomats and Nigerians selling watches—realized where Mr. Schwartz must be.

*

It was 5:00, now. Mr. Schwartz's daughter had never called. Mandy rushed outside and jumped in a taxi, counting his money first, and told the driver where to go. The driver wasn't Arab. He asked Mandy to repeat himself.

“Brooklyn,” Mandy said. “I have seven dollars. Will it be enough?”

The driver laughed. “No it won't. I can take you as far as the bridge, maybe.” He turned his shoulder and looked back for Mandy's answer, though he didn't exactly seem to care.

“Fine,” Mandy said. “I will walk across.”

The driver pulled out from the curb.

There was a TV in the backseat, mounted into the bulletproof glass. Mandy had never seen that before, and watched the advertisements that were playing. It made him feel nauseous; he had to crack open a window and look away.

Outside in the city things were different on every block. They were driving quickly, or as quickly as they could at rush hour. They drove south on Park Avenue, past tall hotels and gilded iron gates; past Madison Square and Gramercy Park; into the Village, where a man in a cape was dancing by himself. He had a dog without a leash. Mandy saw a parks officer and wanted to warn the man to run.

Then they drove onto Broadway, past a grand piano sitting on a sidewalk; past Soho and the Italian restaurants lined up 10 or 12 to a block; past Chinatown, and the stands of fish heads and rotten produce and the men in knitted caps. Then to City Hall.

At the ramp to the Brooklyn Bridge Mandy got out and gave the driver what he had in his wallet. He said thank you. He started walking, and as he went he could see Midtown to his left and Downtown to his right—the Bay and Staten Island behind it.

The sun was going down.

On the bridge in the evening light Mandy thought about what Mr. Schwartz had told him, on one of Mandy’s first days, before Mr. Schwartz had forgotten. They’d been watching the Mets, one night, when Mr. Schwartz had walked over to a window, looked out to the

street and said, “Peter Stuyvesant wouldn’t even let the Jews have a cemetery, did you know that? When my mother was young, they burned her house to the ground. And me—when I walked to secondary school, in this country, they’d throw rocks at my head. I’d bleed and my yarmulke would fall in the road. But then I was a tailor. And now this, young man”—he’d turned to Mandy—“is the greatest Jewish city in the world. We’ve played baseball here. We’ve met our friends. We’ve played baseball in the lights of Brooklyn.”

Mandy was almost running, now, across the bridge.

Halfway across when the sun was near the water—shining in white streaks that led out into the sea—a bicyclist brushed past Mandy to his left and almost knocked him off his feet. The man on the bike lifted his arms, turned his head and shouted, “This side of the Bridge is for fucking cyclists!”

And then in unison a chorus of other voices, from the right side of the path, shouted back:

“Go to Hell! Oh fuck you! Leave him alone! Go cycle up a tree!”

Mandy grinned.

He was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge. He was walking east.

*

Then, in Brooklyn, Mandy found Mr. Schwartz. Mr. Schwartz was where Mandy thought he would be: at Commodore Barry Park, by the Navy Yard, where boys played

baseball under the lights. He, Mr. Schwartz, was sitting on a dugout bench: with his chin cradled in his hand, the other hand reaching for and holding to a link of the dugout fence.

Mandy sat next to him.

He didn't say anything.

Now, on the field, a small, skinny boy—smaller than the others—had just walked up to the plate, and was taking a few practice swings with his left foot out of the box. He stared at the pitcher and the pitcher stared back.

Somewhat incongruously Mr. Schwartz called out: “Flunk now, to avoid the June Rush!”

A few of the boys looked over at him, and then back. The pitcher threw a strike; the boy at the plate stepped out of the box and fixed his helmet. There were two outs—the shortstop called it out—and a runner on first. Another strike, then two balls. The outfielders swatted at flies, and the infield smelled like clay.

Mr. Schwartz turned to Mandy. “I remember it here. I played here. I was *here*.”

And then the boy at the plate, as small and fragile as he was, hit a ball straight into the sun, out into the sundown sky and the tall lights that were shining broadly into it. They, all of them, could see the ball fly up and into the air, toward the Navy Yard and the ships with sails and masts. It landed deep in the right-center gap.

The runner from first sprinted from second to third and then toward home. Mandy and Mr. Schwartz were standing on the bench, now, shouting at the boy to run, and the throw came in from right field, and the boy dove headfirst into the dust, and the catcher reached

for the ball, and the runner brushed the plate, and he was safe. He was safe. Mandy and Mr. Schwartz were screaming from the bench. They were the only people watching. The boy was safe at the plate.

Mandy looked out across the field, past the ships from the cities of the world, and the Brooklyn Bridge and the shadow of New York, across the bay and toward the sun. He had looked in that direction before.

He turned his back to it and looked straight at his friend. “*Venez avec moi,*” he said. “Come stay with us for tonight. We have a home in Brooklyn.”

A City in Africa

(Did you know that Johannesburg is the largest city in the world not situated on a river or a coast? It is a city on the Witwatersrand, a city of earth and mines, a city of gold.)

A friend told me once—or rather: reminded me—that making it to work is not a certainty. Especially in Africa, he said, “The commute is part of a day’s work, an excitement in itself.” In my own line of work, I meet people from all around the world—from the United States, often, where a man’s car is safe and solid; where a highway is a bridge over everything, past the poor people and out of sight; where a trip to the office is not something in itself but really is just a bore. But here, in Africa, a thing could always happen. The road could fall apart right in front of you. The water you drank just hours ago could bring you to your knees in pain. Your car might be hijacked. It might break down. Or, it might go right off the road: off the road and into a world that’s waiting.

The thing is, though, in my line of work, the commute *is* the work. I drive all day. I am a tour guide, and I live in Johannesburg; the men and women and children I know from the United States, or Europe, I know because I have driven them around my city. I am a tour guide, a white man in a black man’s city. I drive and then I watch. And so I wonder, when will I be treated to the moment of my friend’s imagining? When will I finally meet my city—meet it in the way that happens when something finally happens, when driving to work becomes what it is: an act of having to live? I live in awe and anticipation of this moment. It will be the moment when I see Africa and I see it not through the clear and eventless lens of a windshield. I am excited to do this seeing—to know my city and the men of my city in a way that I have not and cannot in this country.

*

(Did you know that Soweto means Southwestern Townships?)

For now I will keep showing people to people through glass. It's what I've been doing for fifteen years—and I'd have been doing it longer too but there was a time, of course, when it was of little use to be a tour guide in South Africa.

I was a teacher, then: I taught the English language and the history of the Republic. I am English myself, and an Englishman from South Africa has two passports, one here and one in England. I still have it, my English passport, and sometimes I use it too. The British in Africa are like a man who never leaves his first job—he takes it, first, looking for a quick buck, then lingers and lingers and before long he is a very old man and dying. The Afrikaners, though, think they'll never leave, never die.

I was just with Europeans last week. I had arranged to take a group of friends from Norway into Orlando, in Soweto, the largest township in the country. The Norwegians had some trouble with prepositions:

“Will you take us on Soweto?” one asked.

“What street has Nelson Mandela lived in?” asked another.

“For how long have you been staying inside Johannesburg?”

“All my long life, my friend,” I told them, though one doesn't much speak about the past. We were on the N3, headed west from the airport. The road was under construction

there, in advance of the World Cup—but, in fact, that road has always been under construction, workers and cones just lingering there, for something to happen.

From inside my minibus—“I’ll be in the big red van,” I tell those who are looking for me—the Norwegians had pushed their bags and sweaters and camera cases (Europeans and their property!) back into the boot. I tried to help, but I have a bad knee. It’s a good thing I don’t get out of the minibus much; I can hardly stand up and walk, let alone shift a gear. I am old. I feel it in my knees and in the pain behind my eyes. I wear glasses, too.

“Where do you stay and is it safe?”

That’s the question I always have to answer. It is the central question.

“I live in Sandton, actually not too far from your hotel. I think you will see that it’s safe—there’s CCTV cameras everywhere, and you see when—.” I caught myself. Speaking nonracially in the new South Africa is a project of everyday vigilance, but I mostly succeed. I took a quick breath and continued: “I think you’ll find that whatever you’ve heard about Jozi—another thing you’ll learn is that we speak about our city like a friend—but anyway what you’ve heard about Jozi is mostly a made-up bit. Africa doesn’t have skyscrapers, Africa can’t host the World Cup, S.A. is only Cape Town—and Johannesburg is the car-jacking capital of the world. I’ve heard it all, probably. But I think you’ve seen even just since you landed that it’s a made-up bit. Can you see our skyscrapers, my friend?—There they are, look at them through the windshield.”

I pointed straight ahead over the construction and there it was, a city in Africa, the TeleCom building standing highest with a soccer ball at the top. Soccer this, Soccer that:

you couldn't walk an hour in the bush without finding a soccer ball that said FIFA on it. FIFA 2010. From the TeleCom building over I could see the bridge onto the railroad tracks, the top of Park Station, into Hillbrow, and the sun was setting. Joburg is an electric city. I saw the red and gray gold of the sun shine out over the great Africa's sky and onto the glass and gold of the city: it is an electric and a beautiful city.

The one Norwegian, a girl who had introduced herself as Camilla (the other two: Nina and a young man named Gaute, pronounced GOW-tuh), asked it again, the central question. "But is it true," she said, "about the carjackings as you say? Our friend she is Norwegian too and she is going" (I figured out soon enough that this was a story about the past) "she is going downtown Johannesburg in hostel. She has expensive camera but she does not want to leave it in hostel, of course, because there are so many others staying there. So she takes it with her outside and it is right away that a man with a knife and gun comes to her and says to give the camera. So I'm wondering about this one." She looked at me the way white people not from Africa always do. She (or they) looked honest, sure, but not so honest as to think about what their own cities are like—what their own lives have to do with the man in the street in Jozi with a fist and a knife and a gun.

"Is it? Well everyone does seem to have a personal story about it. I don't mean to suggest this about yours, but I find that in many cases the story is not actually about a friend; it's about a friend of a friend, or a friend of a friend of a friend, and that's how fear is. You hear something like that and then"—imagine! can you?—"it's you in the street on a dark corner with a dark man holding a knife to your throat. Then there's the stories about the black men with money"—how'd they get that?; that doesn't seem

likely!“and those stories are paired with the first sort and the whole thing gets built up just now.” I paused for a moment, looked at Camilla and back at the road, and went on. “What I try to tell my customers is that I live in this city and I’m fine. I drive around all day and I’ve never gotten hijacked in 60 years. It’s a city of pride and patience—don’t think all you’ll find is minstrels and thieves.”

The Norwegians were young and maybe didn’t follow all of it, but Camilla was listening.

She pressed me to say more: “What is it, this minstrels and thieves?” she asked.

I looked back at her, craning my neck all the way this time. All three were blond, attractive, if not blindingly attractive in the way that you think of the blond and the Scandinavian set. Each looked excited to be off of the plane, in Africa, and ready for the night to come: the night and the bold, loud, enterprising things that young people do then. I knew the look, that off-the-plane look. It was different here in Africa than what I imagined it to be at the other airports of the world. Here it was more like a “I’m off the spaceship and on another planet” kind of look. It was a look I often hoped for; it meant that I had listeners, compliant listeners, in need of advice.

“You must think of it this way, my friend.” I gestured. “The British’ve been here for a very long time. We battled the Zulu Warriors. We battled the Afrikaners. This country is hard on people; it’s not new, that there’s violence. It’s not just us. I see it as going to work, and maybe something will happen on my way there, maybe not. Maybe you will get your camera stolen. But that’s part of what’s thrilling about living here.” I gestured again, a sort of an editorial gesture. “Maybe not thrilling, I guess, but different. I’m a

liberal.” I paused and felt for the pain in my knee. “It hasn’t happened for me just yet. I haven’t had a day where I had to get out of my car. But maybe it will, and that’s OK.” I looked back again and the three Norwegians looked to be impressed or confused or maybe didn’t care. I wasn’t sure. The two girls were nodding their two heads one after the other.

Gaute said something too: “Why is this? You are okay that this person will hurt you?”

“I am okay with the idea that he could,” was what I said back, but wasn’t pleased with it.

We drove the next stretch of the N3 in silence.

At one point I asked: “Did you know that the movie ‘Tsotsi’ comes from the word *tsotsi*, for ‘gangster,’ which came from gangsters wearing ‘zootsuits’?” Nobody answered me; Gaute was chewing on something. It was like talking to myself. I rubbed my glasses.

I was in Orlando five minutes later. There—I pointed—was Desmond Tutu’s house. There! was the stadium where the students were marching, before the Soweto Uprising. And there was the minibus terminal, all the buses queued up there with women coming from work. Nina took her camera and shot a picture of a squatter camp (tin roofs! cardboard shacks! burning tires!). I saw it all there too, again, all those men and those women living so close to me. All of them there, speaking in isiZulu and isiXhosa and Sesotho, laughing at each other, eating that awful pap and samp and that chakalaka stew, speaking more in a way that I could not understand, and drinking, drinking, drinking—and I wanted a drink and to get out and sit and have a drink there too.

Soon we were at Sandton at the hotel. I helped the Norwegians as far as I could, and watched them wander to their rooms, keys in hand.

*

(Did you know that KFC is the most popular restaurant in South Africa?)

The next day, I was late to pick up some Americans. “T.I.A.,” I told them. “This is Africa. Things run on a different schedule.”

I met the Americans at their hotel way out in the country. That was just like Americans: stay far away from people. Keep the poor people under walled bridges, give them their own part of town. Put everyone in groups. Don’t risk meeting someone in the street—use the internet for that. At least I had the chance to meet someone.

“What are your names?” I asked them, reaching for a hand to shake.

It was a family; the father answered with a lisp: “This is my wife Anne.” He pointed. His wife was a magnificent woman, holding her two sons’ hands and looking distant. Her hair was a light brown, turning into gray, but her face was smooth and centered on the mouth. It looked like one that I could get to know. “My name is Matt, and these are our sons Mattson and Greg: say hi to our new tour guide, guys!” He winked and said to me jokingly: “They’ll be sleeping before you know it—that jet lag!”

“Is it? That’d be a shame—” (turning to the boys, one maybe seven and the other ten years old) “—you mustn’t go to sleep just now. Today we’ll see a roller coaster and a mine that’s full of gold!”

The boys looked wary. One started to speak: “Hey mister, what’s your na—?”

“Boys did you know that the driver sits on the right in Africa?” I turned and put them in the back of the minibus, limped slowly into the driver’s seat (on the right), and shifted into first. We would have a ways to go before I’d be back in the city again.

Along the way I tried to point one or two things out to the boys. “There,” I said, pointing out the side window. “You see those houses, bru? They are building those in time for the World Cup. Are you excited about the World Cup, Mattson and Greg?” I smiled the smile I save for children. It’s a knowing smile. Anyway the boys looked tired. I turned to the father: “That’s the public housing that’s meant to make S.A. look good when all the soccer fans arrive. The thing is that they only made the good houses along the highway, for people to see. The ones behind those are the same, shacks without clean water and one electrical outlet for every 200 people. You believe that, my friend?”

Matt nodded. “Fascinating,” he lisped. “And why all the Coca-Cola advertisements?”

I was less interested, and shrugged my shoulders over the wheel. “More preparation for the World Cup, I’d say. Although many of those have been there since I can remember.”

I looked in the rearview mirror and in the backseat the boys were sleeping. Their hair was a light gold just like their mother’s, and she was still holding them. A seven thousand rand plane ticket and I could tell already the three of them weren’t going to say much or stay awake much. Beside them Matt was looking out the window more intently, as the bush went by.

I turned on the radio. It was always fuzzy out in the country, but I could still hear it: it was Tinariwen, a band all the way from Algeria, I think, and it sounded foreign and strange. I liked it, though: it was a big music for big open places, a guitar clanging across a continent. The music of Africa is made out of the space that exists here, the size and gravity of the land, and what the land can do. I liked to think that it was what I heard in American music—the sound of wide open land, that you could walk to the end of but you could never really know the thing of it. You could never really find it; there were too many teeth and storms and alien sounds that you would never understand. I had my Miles Davis and Miriam Makeba records, Levon Helm, the Band, and Brenda Fassie, Hugh Masekela and Billie Holiday. I could hear Africa and the sound of space in the call of a Lady's voice.

The Americans didn't seem to listen to radio. Matt was still looking out the window. I'm sure he saw the waves and thumbs-ups of the Coloured people in the country turn into stares as we drove into the city.

I wonder what the waves and stares are about, whether the men and women behind them are thinking about me in the same way I'm thinking about them.

Am I an attraction? Am I an amusement? Am I an intruder? I adjusted my glasses.

I spoke softly back to Matt, not wanting to wake the others. "Just now, we will be getting gradually into the city. The suburb off to our left is where Nelson Mandela lives. I'd take you all there but you can't really get close to him anymore—there's a guard tower and a huge wall and cameras out on every side of the house. You'd think he'd want to be

rid of all that!” I laughed. Matt nodded. “No, I shouldn’t make light of it—I’m a liberal.”

“Boy would it be a blast to see Nelson Mandela,” he said, his mouth struggling with the words. “The kids would just love that I bet.”

I turned my hand over on itself in a gesture of agreement, on the one hand, and incredulity, on the other. “They’d like that, eh my friend?” But seeing him—meeting him?—was impossible. You couldn’t get over the wire and the walls. “Let’s get into the city first and see what we have the time for.”

I kept in the right lane mostly and the city started to spread out in the distance. It would be awhile before we got there, with the roads all littered with cones. Matt was sitting straighter back in the window seat and I thought I might ask him about his home.

“We’re from California,” he said, as if that said it all, and asked me back, “You?”

“I’m from here. I’ve always been here. I haven’t done much.” I looked ahead at my driving. Americans didn’t know that there’s certain questions you don’t ask a white man in South Africa. I was feeling like Matt wasn’t understanding me. My knees were in pain. “I must tell you a story, my friend.” I paused, and gathered myself in the pause. “You know about Robben Island?”

“Yep, where Nelson Mandela was.” He laughed and pointed: “Before he moved in over there!”

“Right, my friend, and where Robert Sobukwe was too. He wa—”

“Who’s that?”

“He was the head of the Pan-Africanist Congress; Mandela was the ANC. While they were in there, it was a rule that prisoners must only speak to visitors in Afrikaans. Sobukwe’s mother would visit him and every time she would cry—because of the glass panel, standing there between her and her son. She would cry; she could not tell him about her day, or how much she missed him, because she did not understand the language. And Sobukwe tried to tell her once—he because he was kept in isolation—‘Mother, I’m forgetting how to speak.’ It was the two of them, and they couldn’t speak, because of the glass and the language and the fact of what made them into people of one kind or another. Prisoners, and visitors. Are you following me, my friend?”

“I believe so.” Matt looked like he was learning. It was the look I liked. “I think so.”

“So even now you read about language dying, because of English. And you read about black workers having to learn Afrikaans to pass Matric. exams, then having to commute two hours each way, every day, to get to work. They’re up at four in the morning, home at midnight, standing on the bus—and it’s because things are still done in our language. It’s done at our place of work, at our request. It’s because we still live so far apart. I’d like it to not be that way. Maybe I have to start waking up at four in the morning, swatting at the flies, saying goodbye to my mother, walking out in the cold, before I can make it not be like that. Maybe I must learn a language. For now I haven’t.”

Matt was lost: “I think the boys will need some lunch when we get to the Apartheid Museum. That airplane food!” “Museum” he said like it was charcoal on his tongue.

We drove another 20 minutes and then the skyscrapers were spinning shadows on the seats. Matt was looking out the window, and I was thinking, gripping to the wheel, thinking—and I was getting excited to be in the city again.

The cones were giving way to workers, and pedestrians, and people.

And then we were there—lights! music!—Hillbrow. There! was the market, and the bakkies circling for passengers, and the sheep’s heads and biltong and cabbage. There! was a Kenyan shouting and selling boerewors rolls with onions, and There! were ten Nigerians kicking a soccer ball in the street. We saw Angolans, Setswana, Zimbabweans, Mozambiquans, Malawians, Sudanese. There was a tsotsi with a knife, and There was a brand new bus clamoring down the street, and There a prostitute pulling on a dagga joint, and There! the tallest building in Africa, painted in a thousand colors.

“Did you know that Hillbrow is the most densely populated urban center in the world?” I asked Matt when we had driven through and were gone.

“No. Will there be any stuff about Hillbrow at the Apartheid Museum?”

Matt looked me in the eye, then turned to his wife and tapped her until she woke.

“I’m sure there will be,” I said, sadly, and I dropped them beside the ticket booth.

*

(Did you know that the second largest population in South Africa is Indian?)

A day after I got to know the Americans for a day, itself a day after the Norwegians had wandered off into the night (the stories I have to tell are a day long only), I was driving.

I saw the windshield, and still the city, and still the waiting. Everything was in the rearview mirror, and I could feel my glasses slide on sweat down my face. I was squinting. Today I had to rush downtown to pick up some Indians, and Indians usually don't—

I slammed on the brakes. Another driver had cut in front of me on the road.

I sped up, and now I was right behind him. He looked over his shoulder—I could see it in his rearview mirror—and then I swerved out to the right of him to get a look at his face. If there was one thing I'd change about my city, it always was the driving, and now I was going to teach a lesson. I pulled out in the right lane and sped by him: to demonstrate my anger, the way a teacher does with a change in the level of his voice. Maybe the man would look back at me and see. Maybe he would follow me to where I was going, and get out and yell at me. Or maybe I'd yell at him, and we'd be face to face and up on the soles of our four feet. I knew what I would say—I would sa—

And then I heard it: slap, smack, blood and flesh on the windshield.

—I had run over a man—

There he was, a black man. He was lying in the street in a strange shape—lying and bleeding and very still. One of his arms was sticking up at a right angle to the ground. The other wasn't attached to his body at all. It was three metres away. I saw him try to move; he couldn't; he couldn't scream. He was lying and bleeding and then I saw that he was dead.

I got out. I stood in the middle of the street.

At once there were men and women from the city crowding around me. Cars were stopped even on the other side of the street, and I could see people staring down at me from their windows. To my left a man shouted “What’s happened?!” and to my right, a woman said something more loudly that I couldn’t understand. It was a crowd now, a crowd of blank faces, a crowd moving and shaking as more people came and went. There was a man across the road in front of an auto shop, holding a tire iron, his face black and his eyes empty. I got back in the minibus and stared straight ahead.

The police arrived, and an ambulance. There were too many people, now, to see the body; but I could still see the arm, and I could see a medic walk slowly over to it and stoop down to pick it up. He looked angry, or sad, in his eyes. I imagined all the body parts and dying men he had probably seen, and still I saw an anger: at the arm, at having to pick it up. The medic took the arm in both his hands and he walked back to the ambulance. In front of him was a stretcher, and on it I guessed that the other men had placed the body. There was nothing more to be seen of it.

Then a police officer got out of the police truck—it looked like it came from a museum, that truck—and pulled a rope tight across the men shouting in the street. There were more, now, maybe a hundred, and there were women yelling too. I couldn’t understand it, their chants, their slow and dark chants with a man clapping his hands on the beat. But there was a rope there now—my door was shut.

The police officer came up to me. He was wearing a gun.

He made a gesture that I should roll down my side window. “Please step out of the vehicle,” I heard him say next, still motioning with his hand.

“What is your name, sir?”

“It’s—my name is Kimberley Walton.” I was back outside, standing. I looked at the police officer. He was black and looking at me straight in the eye, feeling me, seeing inside of me. I could feel his eyes in me: he didn’t look like he had anything to learn. On his badge it said: “Mandla Mthunzi” (where did I know the word from?). His face was flat and his voice was all the same pitch—like a note on a guitar that can’t make it to the next. Behind him, on the police truck, I saw the stamp JBPD, and beside that was the flag, on a gun, not gold or orange but striped with the colors of the sun.

“Could you tell me what happened, sir?”

“I—I was driving. I was going to pick up my clients—I’m a tour guide, you see, and—”

“Sir, could you tell me what happened?”

“I wasn’t—I didn’t see—and—.” I didn’t know what to say.

“Were you looking at what was in front of you?”

“Well I always—”

Someone from the crowd threw a piece of glass—a shattered piece, from the accident—toward where we were standing. I could hear a cheer go up among the men behind the rope, and then another shard came flying close over the top of my head. I stooped and looked for protection from the police officer—in his eyes, or in the tall and wide stature

of his body. I saw that I could shelter myself in his shadow, that I wasn't even visible at all to the crowd if I stood behind him. It didn't matter, though. I saw his head pivot and his eyes pace over the crowd; he shouted something in Zulu; the crowd quieted.

He turned back to me, as if nothing had happened. "Do you know how fast you were driving? I have a witness's report that you were not within the posted limit, perhaps not even within your lane." He looked at me, looked down, jotted something into his notebook and then looked back up. He waited.

"I can't say, sir. I was hurrying, yes, but I didn't intend—"

The police officer winced.

He looked at my feet and then slowly up toward my eyes. I watched his gun while he turned around to face the crowd behind the rope, then pivoted again back toward me. And he almost smiled: "You didn't intend?" he asked me.

"Of course not. I'm a decent man."

"I'm sure you are."

He paused.

And then he started to speak again, even more flatly this time, more slowly and evenly: "There are many decent men in this city. There are many more who don't intend for anyone to die. You probably haven't intended much of anything in a very long time. Did you know, Mr. Walton, that it's a crime whether you intend it or not?"

"I'm a decent—I'm a lib—"

“Mr. Walton, how old are you?”

“Well, I’m not sure why that’s—”

“How old are you?”

He didn’t let me give an answer.

“You know what, we’re going to take you to the station first.” He put his notebook in his pocket and touched his gun, again, then turned flatly on his feet and walked back out into the crowd.

And that was that, he’d said: I was going to the station.

I could feel the weight of my body in my head. I followed the police officer to the truck—I wondered again if the Americans had seen that truck, in the museum—and waiting there I saw them, the crowd and the men and women watching. The medics and men in uniform were beginning to form a line in front of the people gathered. The police officer made a final gesture with his hand and shouted another sentence in Zulu; after that the chants began to quiet; the people began to disperse.

I kept following. While I walked, the crowd walked too, away from me. The crowd—maybe there were tourists somewhere out there. Maybe parents and friends; or maybe it was street touts and tsotsis watching me, or lawyers and doctors and immigrants. Some were in the front yelling. Some were wearing skirts. I wondered if the men listened to the same music as I did, or if the women used the right prepositions, or if the dead man was running across the street to get somewhere.

I didn't know it, and I didn't know him. And there the city, black and gold like a gold palette—and I could paint anything on it, and it would slip away and shine.

(Did you know that Nelson Mandela said: “No-one knows a nation until he has been inside its jails”?)

After awhile in that truck I could see Constitution Hill out the window. My glasses weren't working, but I saw it like I always see it, in the thin and the high shadow of the Telecom building, stone steps leading broadly up to the court. There was the Old Fort used by the British in the Anglo-Boer War. There was Prison No. Four, where Mahatma Gandhi was held. There was the Bill of Rights for the new South Africa, written high on the wall in 11 official languages. There! was the place where I was headed.

Then as the truck climbed the hill I saw the city.

It was always there, behind the hill—the way a fist inheres in a hand.

I saw it from a truck's window. I saw it, in front of me—and it was the shebeens and the marketplace at Hillbrow; the Congolese girls walking in pairs down the side streets and the alleys in Berea; the shanties and the rough music pulsing in chords out of young men's mouths in Yeoville and the projects; the people of a continent running around balls in fields under the last of an afternoon's sun with their faces not turned to mine. I saw it, Egoli, a city of gold and the sun.

On a Blue Ridge Highway

I used to go down to Alexis, North Carolina, where my father is from, and spend Christmas or Thanksgiving or any other good meal with my grandmother. She would sit in the parlor room—sit between quilts and dominoes and the collected Reader's Digest—and tell me things, about the way her life had happened, and the way she wished it had. I can see her in my head, sometimes, her hair in a permanent and the rest of her in a three-piece neon green sweat suit, talking to me.

My Aunt Elva—I remember my grandmother saying this, about her aunt, waving her arms meaningfully and saying it just like this—*My Aunt Elva had* a job, if you had want to call it that. Well, she worked at the textile mill, way we all did. But then when she came too old for that, she fixed the laundry, fixed up my uncle's shirts, taught piano, and the like. But I tell you she put more of her into it than I'd say you'd might imagine.

I can hear that voice in my head, in the parlor room.

Every now and then, while she spoke, a truck carrying wood or clay would roll down the road outside her house, back into the woods when it passed. Those pine used to be a mile high, to my eyes, swaying out there and spinning shadows on the earth. It was red clay, the earth, red and brown and thick with worms and beetles. My father and I used to pick green beans, peel them, then go back for the okra, then dig up the garden for worms. We would take the worms and climb the hill behind Grandmother's house—his house, too, as a child—and find the creek that flowed there. We would fling the worms in to the fish, and give to the land, and take from it later when we could.

Alexis was a place with forest, with a lake, a car dump, a gas station and a few cars sitting at the pump. I'd think there was no-one at all for miles, and then I would go with Grandmother down the road to the fish camp—and the parking lot would have a hundred trucks and bikes. Inside I'd see a hundred people, and flounder, and hush puppies, and I'd smell the burning fat. A lady would come up and say to Grandmother, How are you tonight Miss Ruth? And Grandmother would stand close, take her arm, and tell her something that had happened, that day or the one before.

The voice in the parlor room says next: *My Aunt Elva* was the kind to take a thing to heart. Law, she took a thing to heart. Mother said once 'Whisk cleans a stain'—and Elva, I recall, she heard Mother said 'whiskey,' so she left for downtown set to do what she had to, and she found Wayne Howell—who we all know now has walked out on Bertha—and she asked for moonshine. Asks Larry Wayne Howell for moonshine and suppose he gets some for her and I declare she brings it back and burns a hole right through my uncle's shirt because it, you know, it was a potion. And she was just ruined by the whole thing of it, for the discomfiture of it, for the ruin of a shirt he liked to wear on a Sunday, but law the story just tickles me some! She did often—I declare, Josh, do you hear those squirrels at all? I know if it'd save my life one of them is right this minute trying to get in here by a window.

Josh, if you won't do it, I reckon—

And then I remember her standing up and pausing, waiting for her balance, and then walking to the closet and opening it. She pushed at the coats and took a Carom set out and pushed it. And then she had in her hands a shotgun and a shell, and she folded it in

half and put the shell in the shotgun. I saw her walk to the door and out the door and then fire at the roof, and the sound of squirrel feet went scattering across the tin. It was silent after that.

*

That was 20 years ago, if I'm remembering right. Now I'm a carpenter, and I still live in Chicago, where I was born and went to school. Grandmother has Parkinson's disease and I may see her once or twice more before she dies. That's just the fact of the matter and I'd wish it away if I could.

So my girlfriend said to me, before this past winter, Why don't we go down to see her?

This girlfriend—Sophia—is small and brown (her mother is Malaysian Indian and her father is white), with hair that falls unevenly on her back. She loves to dance, at the tequilerias in Humboldt Park and to the music of the street accordionists on Sacramento Street in La Villita. We go to Logan Square and the Apollo to dance, too, or outside at Montclare where the European men sit under lawn umbrellas and watch. Her hair turns sweaty, sticky, black when she dances. She looks at me and then she looks back.

Sometimes she lies down and cries, and won't tell me why, and waits and thrashes in the sheets and seems bothered with me for caring. Sometimes she says to me things I'd rather she did not say. Sometimes, even, she reminds me of Grandmother: but smaller, stranger, a woman who might not stay.

But she is beautiful and kind and I can talk to her, for hours, even for days.

So I said, slowly, When would you want to go?

Whenever, she said, blinking.

I don't know—

Josh, you tell me about her but when's the last time you went?

I don't know. It's just seeing—

I paused and looked out the window of our apartment. Down the street the college boys would walk in pairs to the bars and drink, and the girls would come later in groups. I saw them there, every weekend, with their phones and the pace to their step. Behind the bars Hyde Park opened out into a grid of stores and homes, and people would flood everywhere, with things to buy, places to be. Behind that the city shone taller by the lake—the Sears and Hancock rising to the sky and fighting it.

I said, Maybe I'll just go by myself. I don't know if you need to meet her.

Sophia blushed and looked away. She looked back, more calmly, and said, I took you to see my parents.

I don't think they liked me that—.

They loved you. They said it themselves.

Sophia stared at me and waited.

I looked back out the window, to where the buildings cast shadows on the street. It could be beautiful, in the afternoon. I said, Okay. Let's go soon if we're going to.

*

In late October, when the sky was gray, I called my father and said, Sophia and I are driving to Alexis.

He wished me luck and sighed.

The road to Alexis is an empty one. We drove it through Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, the mountains getting taller and bluer as we passed. When we were on the parkway in the mountains I pulled out at every overlook and said to her, to Sophia, *Have you seen a place like this before?* And she said to me, every time, *Yes, I have, baby, in Colorado and in France*, and she smiled and kept reading what she had in her hands. I saw North Carolina from a distance, from every overlook, the land a blue and white shadow rising to the sky and meeting it. I saw through the sunlight to where the sun was falling, over McRae Peak and Grandfather Mountain. When I stood on a stone I saw Charlotte, or a rise in the land where Charlotte could be. Alexis was near to there.

Well do you think your grandmother will like me? she said in the car.

Why?

I mean—

Sophia paused and looked at me and then at the side-view mirror. She said, I don't look like most of the people in North Carolina.

I looked down the road to where it crossed a viaduct, the leaves on the trees turning red and orange and gray. I said, Well you don't look like most of the people in Chicago, strictly speaking.

You know what I mean.

I said, thinking, Well there's more Vietnamese on the Mississippi Gulf Coast than white people, did you know that? There's more Mexicans in the state of North Carolina than New York City.

Well they must be some other place, she said, and looked out at the hills.

I kept driving and after awhile we saw the Alexis sign. Things looked different. By Lake Norman there was a smoke stack and a row of brick condos with docks that stretched out into the water. I could see the nails in the planks on the docks, a foot apart and put there by a gun. The sun bounced off the water and off the sails of the boats.

In the town you could pay for gas with a card, and the stop light was blinking yellow. You could drive right through the place and not say a thing to anyone, never learn a name, never have to. We saw the old pile of cars, but it looked different. There was a bank, a fence, a girl walking next to it with a dog on a leash and a mouthful of gum.

It made me think about what I thought about Chicago.

In Chicago we'd ask, *How was your day?*, about only the one day. The answers would be short and nothing would be remembered, not really, not tomorrow. We had fences, banks and property, but in the having of them we forgot that a man made each, that something

else besides us and our property causes us and our property to be. And we forgot the opposite, too—that the things we make and use are made by and meant for us, that our products ought not replace us. In Chicago, we had no recipes, no rituals, no myths, not at least the kind that teach a man what to be loyal to.

So I said to Sophia, When I was little, you'd see skiers on the lake but not much else. There wasn't a CVS. There wasn't a need for one.

People didn't need medicine? she said.

People had their own.

Sophia rolled her eyes at me and blushed. I'm not sure why, why she blushed.

She smiled, saying, I love you.

I love you too baby, I said, without a pause.

When we got to the nursing home I pulled up and got out of the car and stretched. We had been driving for 15 hours, although I'd stopped in each of them. The nursing home was concrete in the front and brick along the sides, with a driveway by the side of it and a gate to let us in. At the door it said "SelfHelp Home" and we pressed a buzzer, mounted on the brick on a knotted hemlock two-by-four. The door clicked and opened.

Inside there was a desk and mural on the wall—a broad, purple and brown mural stretching across the entire room. Sam Cooke and Billy Graham were standing awkwardly in a corner of it, Tammy Wynette and Elvis at the other end. In between somebody had painted a huge swamp sumac, a pot of petunias and the lunch counter at

Woolworth's. Ella Baker and Julian Bond were sitting on a bench under a tree, in the center of the wall and staring out from it.

We signed our names in on a sheet at the desk.

Do you know where we might find Ruth Bradshaw? I said to the woman behind it.

Why, she's just now taking her lunch, the woman said. She didn't look up but smiled anyway.

My grandmother was sitting alone at a table in a sweat suit with the sun shining on it from a window. I could see outside to where the road curved over the hill, and past that the lake and a trace of smoke rising up and from it. Inside the room a man was shouting HELP ME, HELP ME, why won't anybody help me?, and he did it at a regular period of a minute or maybe less. Another man was talking loudly to himself about macaroni. Grandmother was sitting and trying to swallow.

Grandmother. I said, and bent down to hold her. *You remember when I told you about Sophia?*

Grandmother was trying to swallow and there was foam around her lips. She tried to smile and I could hear her whisper, *I'll be. She's—*

Sophia couldn't hear it and she said, I've heard so much about you Ruth. I love Josh very much and I know he loves you too.

What are they feeding you in here? I said, and looked at Grandmother's plate. There was some applesauce, some cottage cheese and a piece of white pie mashed into a gel. She was holding to a juice box with her hand.

Sophia said, too loudly, Josh tells me you used to make pimento and cheese sandwiches. I don't think I've ever heard of that!

And deviled eggs, I said, And fried okra and oyster stew. You used to put American cheese and ketchup in your soup, didn't you, Grandmother? I smiled with all my face and stared at the way she was eating.

I could see a ball of the food resting in her throat, unable to move. Her hands were shaking gently—not up and down, but back and forth, like a see-saw, not a hammer. Every now and then she tensed one arm or the other to bring it to her mouth. She could not, and because of it her eyes narrowed in anger at the fact of having tried. The ball just sat there in her throat.

There was a pause.

Grandmother hadn't answered me, and I wasn't sure if I should keep asking—I didn't aim to be the man making her speechless. But I saw it in her eyes that she was trying.

Sophia blinked and looked away, something new in her eyes.

I sat still, too, for another moment, and looked back at Sophia and then out a window.

Looking at the sun and at the long blue lake I remembered the way Grandmother used to stand close to a person when she was talking, touch the person's arm with hers; the way

she would get up and move demonstratively around the house, searching for a thing; the way she walked to that closet and loaded that gun and shot it as if it was the only thing to do.

I thought of a Christmas Eve when I was a boy, when Grandmother flipped biscuits in the palm of her hand, carefully, easily—and then ate them. I remembered that my father and all my brothers were there, my mother before she left, and Uncle Calvin and Aunt Dot, and we lined up dominoes when the dinner was done. Grandmother sat at the piano and played “I’ll Fly Away,” in the key of F. She told stories and she laughed, and in the doing of it she told us *yes*, this has happened before and it might be good to know that.

I remember she told us, about the biscuits: I sure can cook bread that melts faster than the butter on it! *Don’t you remember that, Josh*—she was looking straight at me—*when Dock Bradshaw would sit at this same supper table and tell everyone that the cornbread was frightful, ‘unfit to eat,’ he said, just so no-one would eat it and he could sit there by his self and eat it due to its being s’good in the first place! And my*, do you remember the way he used to *or-ate*! I declare he used to sit there and law he would just go on and on and—

At the SelfHelp Home Grandmother was locked. Only her eyes were moving. I could see the muscles in her neck strain against the weight of trying, and the veins were showing there. I reached out and took Grandmother’s hand. It was small and the veins rose from it—I could feel the skin shaking, and the blood under my palm, moving, pulsing, keeping beat. It was frail, a blue sort of thing, her hand was, and strong enough to hold me.

I knew that Grandmother could come out of it, the locking and foaming and shaking, for a moment here and there. I knew it because I had seen it. I had seen her fly into motion and *emerge*, the way grace comes out of a man, or furniture out of wood.

The man at the next table was breathing fine and moving well but still he would shout, HELP ME, help!, why is nobody helping? The nurses were in a corner laughing about something, eating their lunch, and the woman behind the counter was sleeping. I looked back up at the brown and blue mural on the wall, at the eyes staring out from it, and I squeezed Grandmother's hand and said, Squeeze back if you want to take a drive.

She squeezed back harder than a vice.

*

In the car on the road Grandmother was in the back seat. She still wasn't moving, and the foam was building around her lips. Sophia sat up front with the folded-up wheelchair between us. I said, then, So what did you think about that place?

Sophia looked back at Grandmother before saying, I didn't like it.

I know. The screaming, the shouting. The oxygen tanks and the soap dispensers. The—

And there was a Confederate Flag in the window.

I said, Oh. Oh, that. You know for some people that's about remembering.

Sophia blushed and frowned. She paused and looked back at Grandmother for a second.

Then she started: You know that's bullshit. I'm tired of you telling me that.

I laughed and looked at Grandmother. Remembering's not just the one thing.

But that is exactly the problem with that flag, baby, and yo—

And then all of a sudden Grandmother was moving, wildly, simply, her arms bent and supple again, her mouth untwisted and chewing through her lips. She pulled in her seat and flung her arms against the leather. It was as if she was trying to move as much as she could, when she could, and because of it she was twisting her neck and grinding her knees and laughing.

It gets worse and it gets better, she said. Seems as if I'll just be thinking, My, I've been fixed up—when it happens again and I can't hardly move an arm or leg 't'all. Anyway—

Grandmother, I interrupted, Have you said hello to Sophia?

Why, Hello, Sophia, you may just be the most beautiful girl I ever have seen.

Grandmother smiled and stared at Sophia. Her eyes shone, like light through trees.

Sophia blushed. She looked at me sideways, with a question in her smile, and said, Thank you Ruth, you're so nice. Josh tells me the same but it means more coming from you.

They both winked at me. Grandmother said, Well I'd say you can't hold it against a man that he talks a sight too much. It don't mean that he don't mean it.

Sophia laughed as loudly as I've heard her do, looked at me and then out toward the mountains. I could tell she was thinking more than she'd say. And then she said, smiling less, worried, Well what do you think about it, about what Josh said this time?

Sophia breathed in and breathed out.

Grandmother laughed and looked out at the sky and at a wood shop beside the road. She grinned, slowly, surely, and then turned straight to me.

You know I know, she said, *a slew of boys* that put up that flag and don't even speak to they own mothers? Don't even sing, don't know who Muddy Waters is? Couldn't tell you about Stagger Lee or Betty and Dupree, couldn't say nothing of Huey Long or Eudora Welty, don't know that black eyed peas are lucky. Shoot, don't know that black eyed peas're from Africa, or Kudzu from Asia.

And then when Grandmother said *kudzu* she looked straight at Sophia in the front seat and said:

And that's remembering? Well I'll be.

She smiled and touched Sophia on the shoulder.

The wind was humming on a window.

We drove in silence for a few miles, and I could see Sophia thinking. Grandmother was smiling, shaking slightly, smiling at the two of us and trying at times to speak. She went in and out of clenching her muscles against the seat, in and out of closing her eyelids tightly on her cheeks. Once she shut only the one eye, and I didn't know if she meant it or not, if it was a wink or not, and who the wink was for. She looked out the window to where the smoke from her church was rising.

Grandmother's old house was down the road from Alexis where the road rose back to the hills. When she saw it she gave a sort of a sideways smile, flashing her eyes side to side and laughing. She looked at me like she always had, like a woman with something true to say and the kindness to want to say it. And she looked at Sophia and gave that same look, and was almost saying the thing when her face changed and the words went away with it.

Grandmother couldn't speak again. But she'd speak again soon.

Her eyes stayed on the house, and on the sun that was shining behind it.

Someone else was living in that house now, a young man, a renter. I saw that he'd cut down a section of the pine out behind the house and put up a basketball hoop. When I saw it I checked to see whether Grandmother was breathing deeply—she was, and she was still smiling—and told Sophia to wait a minute and stopped the car. I got out and walked out by myself, across that red clay and the stubble grass where I'd played now and again as a boy. I walked out into the pine that were still standing and thought I might walk up by the creek to the top of the hill.

There were thorns and brush and some new, small, young pine planted at the start of the trail. I walked through it and found the creek at the place where my father and I had stopped, once, ready to hurl our worms. We used to hunt, and hike, and build fires in those woods. I found the place where my uncle and I had built a shack, just for its own sake, as a way of teaching me how to saw. We had piled the wood high in the shack and made from it what we could.

The creek was cold and blue and the water was high from a storm. I kept walking.

Toward the top of the hill I could see the sun shine through the pine for a moment, and the leaves were breaking beneath my feet. For a moment I could see across the mountains. I kept walking. The creek flowed clearer and calmer the higher I went, and I stopped to take a drink. The water was cold on my mouth, cold around my fingers. I thought for a second that I should stop and turn around, go back soon, because Grandmother and Sophia were waiting.

But then when I stood at the top of the hill I thought that that was okay. I stood on a rock and looked out over it, the mountains and the lake and Grandmother's house, standing there in smoke, and I thought that it was okay, that I'd leave them there awhile, together. They'd talk, if she could, the way we all talk and eat and make and imagine, if and because we can. The way we all *act* and don't stop doing it either because there's only the one thing that can stop us, or only the one thing that should. I thought of what Grandmother had told me, once, in the parlor room in the house: *Ain't nothing's dying*, she'd said to me smirking, *Long as there's things being born*.

I stood on a new rock and looked north along the long sharp line of the mountains, north toward home.

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