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SAFARI

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“Remember, Charlie? In Hawaii? When we went to the beach at night and it started to rain?” Rolph is talking to his older sister, Charlene, who despises

her real name. But because they're crouched around a bonfire with the other people on the safari, and because Rolph doesn't speak up all that often, and because their father, Lou, sitting behind them on a camp chair, is a record producer whose personal life is of general interest, those near enough to hear are listening closely. "Remember? How Mom and Dad stayed at the table for one more drink—"

"Impossible," their father interjects, with a wink at the elderly bird-watching ladies to his left. Both women wear their binoculars even in the dark, as if hoping to spot birds in the firelit tree overhead.

"Remember, Charlie? How the beach was still warm, and that crazy wind was blowing?"

But Charlie is focussed on her father's legs, which have intertwined behind her with those of his girlfriend, Mindy. Soon Lou and Mindy will bid the group good night and retreat to their tent, where they'll make love on one of its narrow rickety cots, or possibly on the ground. From the adjacent tent, which she and Rolph share, Charlie, who is fourteen, can hear them—not sounds, exactly, but movement. Rolph, at eleven, is too young to notice.

Charlie throws back her head, startling her father. Lou is in his late thirties, his square-jawed surfer's face gone a little draggy under the eyes. "You were married to Mom on that trip," she informs him, her voice distorted by the arching of her neck, which is encircled by a puka-shell choker.

"Yes, Charlie," Lou says. "I'm aware of that."

The bird-watching ladies trade a sad smile. Lou is one of those men whose restless charm has generated a contrail of personal upheaval that is practically visible behind him: two failed marriages and two more kids back home in L.A., who were too young to bring on this three-week safari. The safari is a new business venture

of Lou's old Army buddy Ramsey, with whom he drank and misbehaved, having barely avoided Korea almost twenty years ago.

Rolph pulls at his sister's shoulder. He wants her to remember, to feel it all again: the wind, the endless black ocean, the two of them peering into the dark as if awaiting a signal from their distant, grownup lives. "Remember, Charlie?"

"Yeah," Charlie says, narrowing her eyes. "I do remember that."

The Samburu warriors have arrived—four of them, two holding drums, and a child in the shadows minding a yellow long-horned cow. They came yesterday, too, after the morning game run, when Lou and Mindy were "napping." That was when Charlie exchanged shy glances with the most beautiful warrior, who has scar-tissue designs coiled like railroad tracks over the rigorous architecture of his chest and shoulders and back.

Charlie stands up and moves closer to the warriors: a slender girl in shorts and a raw-cotton shirt with small round buttons made of wood. Her teeth are slightly crooked. When the drummers pat their drums, Charlie's warrior and the other one begin to sing: guttural noises pried from their abdomens. She sways in front of them. During her ten days in Africa, she has begun to act differently—like one of the girls who intimidate her back home. In a cinder-block town that the group visited a few days ago, she drank a muddy-looking concoction in a bar and wound up trading away her silver butterfly earrings (a birthday gift from her father) in a hut belonging to a very young woman whose breasts were leaking milk. She was late returning to the jeeps; Albert, who works for Ramsey, had to go and find her. "Prepare yourself," he warned. "Your dad is having kittens." Charlie didn't care then, and doesn't now; there's a charge for her in simply commanding the fickle beam of her father's attention, feeling his disquiet as she dances, alone, by the fire.

Lou lets go of Mindy's hand and sits up straight. He has an urge to grab his daughter's skinny arm and yank her away from the warriors, but does no such

thing, of course. That would be letting her win.

The warrior smiles at Charlie. He's nineteen, and has lived away from his village since he was ten. But he has sung for enough American tourists to recognize that, in her world, Charlie is a child.

"Son," Lou says, into Rolph's ear, "let's take a walk."

The boy rises from the dust and walks with his father away from the fire. Twelve tents, each sleeping two safari guests, form a circle around it, along with three outhouses and a shower stall, where water warmed on the fire is released from a sack with a rope pull. Out of view are some smaller tents for the staff, and then the black, muttering expanse of the bush, where they've been cautioned never to go.

"Your sister's acting nuts," Lou says, striding into the dark.

"Why?" Rolph asks. He hasn't noticed anything nutty in Charlie's behavior. But his father hears the question differently.

"Women are crazy," he says. "You could spend a goddam lifetime trying to figure out why."

"Mom's not."

"True," Lou reflects, calmer now. "In fact, your mother's not crazy enough."

The singing and drumbeats fall suddenly away, leaving Lou and Rolph alone under a sharp moon.

"What about Mindy?" Rolph asks. "Is she crazy?"

"Good question," Lou says. "What do you think?"

"She likes to read. She brought a lot of books."

“Did she?”

“I like her,” Rolph says. “But I don’t know if she’s crazy. Or what the right amount is.”

Lou puts his arm around Rolph. If he were an introspective man, he would have understood years ago that his son is the one person in the world who has the power to soothe him. And that, although he expects Rolph to resemble him, what he most enjoys in his son is the many ways in which he is different: quiet, reflective, attuned to the natural world and the pain of others.

“Who cares,” Lou says. “Right?”

“Right,” Rolph says, and the women fall away like the drumbeats, leaving him and his father together, an invincible unit amid the burbling, whispering bush. The sky is crammed with stars. Rolph closes his eyes and opens them again. He is in Africa with his father. He thinks, I’ll remember this night for the rest of my life. And he’s right.

When they finally return to camp, the warriors have gone. Only a few diehards from the Phoenix faction (as Lou calls the safari members who hail from there) are still sitting by the fire, comparing the day’s animal sightings. Rolph creeps into his tent, pulls off his pants, and climbs onto his cot in a T-shirt and underwear. He assumes that Charlie is asleep. When she speaks, he can hear in her voice that she’s been crying.

“Where did you go?” she says.

“**W**hat on earth have you got in that backpack?”

It’s Cora, Lou’s travel agent. She hates Mindy, but Mindy doesn’t take it personally—it’s structural hatred, a term she coined herself and is finding highly useful on

this trip. A single woman in her forties who wears high-collared shirts to conceal the thready sinews of her neck will structurally despise the twenty-three-year-old girlfriend of a powerful male who not only employs said middle-aged female but is paying her way on this trip.

“Anthropology books,” Mindy tells Cora. “I’m in the Ph.D. program at Berkeley.”

“Why don’t you read them?”

“Carsick,” Mindy says, which is plausible, God knows, in the shuddering jeeps, though untrue. She isn’t sure why she hasn’t cracked her Boas or Malinowski or Julian Jaynes, but assumes that she must be acquiring knowledge in other ways that will prove equally fruitful. In bold moments, fuelled by the boiled black coffee that is served each morning in the meal tent, Mindy has even wondered whether her insights on the links between social structure and emotional response amount to more than a rehash of Lévi-Strauss—a refinement, a contemporary application. She’s only in her second year of coursework.

Their jeep is the last in a line of five, nosing along a dirt road through grassland whose apparent brown masks a wide internal spectrum of color: purples, greens, reds. Albert, the surly Englishman who is Ramsey’s second-in-command, is driving. Mindy has managed to avoid Albert’s jeep for several days, but he has developed a reputation for discovering the best animals, so although there’s no game run today—they’re relocating to the hills, where they’ll spend the night in a hotel for the first time this trip—the children begged to ride with him. And keeping Lou’s children happy, or as close to happy as is structurally possible, is part of Mindy’s job.

Structural resentment: The adolescent daughter of a twice-divorced male will be unable to tolerate the presence of his new girlfriend, and will do everything in her limited power to distract him from said girlfriend’s presence, her own nascent sexuality being her chief weapon.

Structural affection: A twice-divorced male's preadolescent son (and favorite child) will embrace and accept his father's new girlfriend because he hasn't yet learned to separate his father's loves and desires from his own. In a sense, he, too, will love and desire her, and she will feel maternal toward him, though she isn't old enough to be his mother.

Structural incompatibility: A powerful twice-divorced male will be unable to acknowledge, much less sanction, the ambitions of a much younger female mate. By definition, their relationship will be temporary.

Structural desire: The much younger temporary female mate of a powerful male will be inexorably drawn to the single male within range who disdains her mate's power.

Albert drives with one elbow out the window. He has been a largely silent presence on this safari, eating quickly in the meal tent, providing terse answers to people's questions ("Where do you live?" "Mombasa." "How long have you been in Africa?" "Eight years." "What brought you here?" "This and that"). He rarely joins the group around the fire after dinner. On a trip to the outhouse one night, Mindy glimpsed him at the other fire, near the staff tents, drinking a beer and laughing with the Kikuyu drivers. With the tour group, he rarely smiles. Whenever his eyes happen to graze Mindy's, she senses that he feels shame on her behalf: because of her prettiness; because she sleeps with Lou; because she keeps telling herself that this trip constitutes anthropological research into group dynamics and ethnographic enclaves, when really what she's after is luxury, adventure, and a break from her four insomniac roommates.

Next to Albert, in the shotgun seat, Chronos is ranting about animals. He's the bassist for the Mat Hatters, one of the groups that Lou produces, and has come on the trip as Lou's guest, along with the Hatters' guitarist and a girlfriend each. These four are locked in a visceral animal-sighting competition. (*Structural fixation:* A collective, contextually induced obsession that becomes a temporary

locus of greed, competition, and envy.) They challenge one another nightly over who saw more and at what range, invoking witnesses from their respective jeeps and promising definitive proof when they develop their film, back home.

Behind Albert sits Cora, the travel agent, and beside her, gazing out his window, is Dean, a blond actor whose genius for stating the obvious—"It's hot," or "The sun is setting," or "There aren't many trees"—is a staple source of amusement for Mindy. Dean is starring in a movie whose soundtrack Lou is helping to create; the presumption seems to be that its release will bring Dean immediate and stratospheric fame. In the seat behind him, Rolph and Charlie are showing their *Mad* magazine to Mildred, one of the bird-watching ladies. She or her companion, Fiona, can usually be found near Lou, who flirts with them tirelessly and needles them to take him bird-watching. His indulgence of these women in their seventies (strangers to him before this trip) intrigues Mindy; she can find no structural reason for it.

In the last row, beside Mindy, Lou opens the large aluminum case where his new camera is partitioned in its foam padding, like a dismantled rifle, and thrusts his torso from the open roof, ignoring the rule to stay seated while the jeep is moving. Albert swerves suddenly, and Lou is knocked back down, camera smacking his forehead. He swears at Albert, but the words are lost in the jeep's wobbly jostle through tall grass. After a minute or two of chaotic driving, they emerge a few feet from a pride of lions. Everyone gawks in startled silence—it's the closest they've been to any animal on this trip. The motor is still running, Albert's hand tentatively on the wheel, but the lions appear so relaxed, so indifferent, that he kills the engine. In the ticking motor silence they can hear the lions breathe: two females, one male, three cubs. The cubs and one of the females are gorging on a bloody zebra carcass. The others are dozing.

“They’re eating,” Dean says.

Chronos’s hands shake as he spools film into his camera. “Fuck,” he keeps muttering. “Fuck.”

Albert lights a cigarette—forbidden in the brush—and waits, as indifferent to the scene as if he had paused outside a rest room.

“Can we stand?” the children ask. “Is it safe?”

“I’m sure as hell going to,” Lou says.

Lou, Charlie, Rolph, Chronos, and Dean all climb onto their seats and jam their upper halves through the open roof. Mindy is now effectively alone inside the jeep with Albert, Cora, and Mildred, who peers at the lions through her bird-watching binoculars.

“How did you know?” Mindy asks, after a silence.

Albert swivels around to look at her down the length of the jeep. He has unruly hair and a soft brown mustache. There is a suggestion of humor in his face. “Just a guess.”

“From half a mile away?”

“He probably has a sixth sense,” Cora says, “after so many years here.”

Albert turns back around and blows smoke through his open window.

“Did you see something?” Mindy says, persisting.

She doesn’t expect Albert to turn again, but he does, leaning over the back of his seat, his eyes meeting hers between the children’s bare legs. Mindy feels a jolt of

attraction roughly akin to having someone seize her intestines and twist. She understands now that it's mutual; she sees this in Albert's face.

"Broken bushes," he says. "Like something got chased. It could have been nothing."

Cora, sensing her exclusion, sighs wearily. "Can someone come down so I can look, too?" she calls to those above the roof.

"Coming," Lou says, but Chronos is faster, ducking back into the front seat and then leaning out his window. Cora rises in her big print skirt. Mindy's face pounds with blood. Her own window, like Albert's, is on the jeep's left side, facing away from the lions. Mindy watches him wet his fingers and snuff out his cigarette. They sit in silence, hands dangling separately from their windows, a warm breeze stirring the hair on their arms, ignoring the most spectacular animal sighting of the safari.

"You're driving me crazy," Albert says, very softly. The sound seems to travel out his window and back in through Mindy's, like one of those whispering tubes. "You must know that."

"I didn't," she murmurs back.

"Well, you are."

"My hands are tied."

"Forever?"

She smiles. "Please. An interlude."

"Then?"

"Grad school. Berkeley."

Albert chuckles. Mindy isn't sure what the chuckle means—is it funny that she's in graduate school, or that Berkeley and Mombasa, where he lives, are irreconcilable locations?

“Chronos, you crazy fuck, get back in here.”

It's Lou's voice, from overhead. But Mindy feels sluggish, almost drugged, and reacts only when she hears the change in Albert's voice. “No,” he hisses. “No! Back in the jeep.”

Chronos is skulking among the lions, holding his camera close to the faces of the sleeping male and female, taking pictures.

“Walk backward,” Albert says, with hushed urgency. “Backward, Chronos, gently.”

Movement comes from a direction that no one is expecting: the lioness gnawing at the zebra. She vaults at Chronos in an agile, gravity-defying spring that anyone with a house cat would recognize. She lands on his head, flattening him instantly. There are screams, a gunshot, and those overhead tumble back into their seats so violently that at first Mindy thinks they've been shot. But it's the lioness; Albert has killed her with a rifle he'd secreted somewhere, maybe under his seat. The other lions have scattered; all that's left is the zebra carcass and the body of the lioness, Chronos's legs splayed beneath her.

Albert, Lou, Dean, and Cora bolt from the jeep. Mindy starts to follow, but Lou pushes her back, and she realizes that he wants her to stay with his children. She leans over the back of their seat and puts an arm around each of them. As they stare through the open windows, a wave of nausea rolls through Mindy; she feels in danger of passing out. Mildred is still in her spot beside the children, and it occurs to Mindy, vaguely, that the elderly bird-watcher was inside the jeep the whole time that she and Albert were talking.

“Is Chronos dead?” Rolph asks flatly.

“I’m sure he’s not,” Mindy says.

“Why isn’t he moving?”

“The lion is on top of him. See, they’re pulling her off. He’s probably fine under there.”

“There’s blood on the lion’s mouth,” Charlie says.

“That’s from the zebra. Remember, she was eating the zebra?” It takes enormous effort to keep her teeth from chattering, but Mindy knows that she must hide her terror from the children—her belief that whatever turns out to have happened is her fault.

They wait in pulsing isolation, surrounded by the hot, blank day. Mildred rests a knobby hand on Mindy’s shoulder, and Mindy feels her eyes fill with tears. “He’ll be fine,” the old woman says gently. “You watch.”

By the time the group assembles in the bar of the mountain hotel after dinner, everyone seems to have gained something. Chronos has won a blistering victory over his bandmate and both girlfriends, at the cost of thirty-two stitches on his left cheek that you could argue are also a gain (he’s a rock star, after all) and several huge antibiotic pills administered by an English surgeon with hooded eyes and beery breath—an old friend of Albert’s, whom he unearthed in a cinder-block town about an hour away from the lions.

Albert has gained the status of a hero, though you wouldn’t know it to look at him. He gulps a bourbon and mutters his responses to the giddy queries of the Phoenix faction. No one has yet confronted him on the damning basics: Why were you in the bush? How did you get so close to the lions? Why didn’t you stop Chronos from getting out of the jeep? But Albert knows that Ramsey, his boss, will ask these questions, and that they will likely lead to his being fired: the latest in a

series of failures brought on by what his mother, back in Minehead, calls his “self-destructive tendencies.”

The passengers in Albert’s jeep have gained a story that they’ll tell for the rest of their lives. They are witnesses, to be questioned endlessly about what they saw and heard and felt. A gang of children, including Rolph, Charlie, a set of eight-year-old twin boys from Phoenix, and Louise, a chubby twelve-year-old, leave the bar and stampede along a slatted path to a blind beside a watering hole: a wooden hut full of long benches with a slot they can peek through, invisible to the animals. It’s dark inside. They rush to the slot, but no animals are drinking at the moment.

“Did you actually see the lion?” Louise asks, with wonder.

“Lion_ess_,” Rolph says. “There were two, plus a lion. And three cubs.”

“She means the one that got shot,” Charlie says, impatiently. “Obviously we saw it. We were inches away!”

“Feet,” Rolph says, correcting her.

“Feet are *made* out of inches,” Charlie says. “We saw everything.”

Rolph has already started to hate these conversations—the panting excitement behind them, the way Charlie seems to revel in it. A thought has been troubling him. “I wonder what will happen to the cubs,” he says. “The lioness who got shot must have been their mom—she was eating with them.”

“Not necessarily,” Charlie says.

“But if she was.”

“Maybe the dad will take care of them,” Charlie says, doubtfully. The other children are quiet, considering the question.

“Lions tend to raise their cubs communally”—a voice comes from the far end of the blind. Mildred and Fiona were already there or have just arrived; being old and female, they’re easily missed. “The pride will likely take care of them,” Fiona says, “even if the one killed was their mother.”

“Which it might not have been,” Charlie adds.

“Which it might not have been,” Mildred agrees.

It doesn’t occur to the children to ask Mildred, who was also in the jeep, what she saw.

“I’m going back,” Rolph tells his sister.

He follows the path up to the hotel. His father and Mindy are still in the smoky bar; the strange, celebratory feeling unnerves Rolph. His mind bends again and again to the jeep, but his memories are a muddle: the lioness springing; a jerk of impact from the gun; Chronos moaning during the drive to the doctor, blood collecting in an actual puddle under his head on the floor of the jeep, like in a comic book. All of it is suffused with the feel of Mindy holding him from behind, her cheek against his head, her smell: not bready, like his mom’s, but salty, bitter almost—a smell that seems akin to that of the lions themselves.

He stands by his father, who pauses in the middle of an Army story he’s telling with Ramsey. “You tired, son?”

“Want me to walk you upstairs?” Mindy asks, and Rolph nods: he does want that.

The blue, mosquito-y night pushes in from the hotel windows. Outside the bar, Rolph is suddenly less tired. Mindy collects his key from the front desk, then says, “Let’s go out on the porch.”

They step outside. Dark as it is, the silhouettes of mountains against the sky are even darker. Rolph can dimly hear the voices of the other children, down in the

blind. He's relieved to have escaped them. He stands with Mindy at the edge of the porch and looks at the mountains. Rolph senses her waiting for something and he waits, too, his heart stamping.

There is a cough farther down the porch. Rolph sees the orange tip of a cigarette move in the dark, and Albert comes toward them with a creak of boots. "Hello there," he says to Rolph. He doesn't speak to Mindy, and Rolph decides that the one hello must be for both of them.

"Hello," he greets Albert.

"What are you up to?" Albert asks.

Rolph turns to Mindy. "What are we up to?"

"Enjoying the night," she says, still facing the mountains, but her voice is tense.

"We should go up," she tells Rolph, and walks abruptly back inside. Rolph is troubled by her rudeness. "Are you coming?" he asks Albert.

"Why not?"

As the three of them ascend the stairs, Rolph feels an odd pressure to make conversation. "Is your room up here, too?" he asks.

"Down the hall," Albert says. "Room 3."

Mindy unlocks the door to Rolph's room and steps in, leaving Albert in the hall. Rolph is suddenly angry with her.

"Want to see my room?" he asks Albert. "Mine and Charlie's?"

Mindy emits a single syllable of laughter—the way his mother laughs when things have annoyed her to the point of absurdity. Albert steps into his room. It's plain,

with wooden furniture and dusty flowered curtains, but after ten nights in tents it feels lavish.

“Very nice,” Albert says. Mindy crosses her arms and stares out the window. There is a feeling in the room that Rolph can’t identify. He’s angry with Mindy and thinks that Albert must be, too. *Women are crazy*. Mindy’s body is slender and elastic; she could slip through a keyhole, or under a door. Her thin purple sweater rises and falls quickly as she breathes. Rolph is surprised by how angry he is.

Albert taps a cigarette from his pack, but doesn’t light it. It is unfiltered, tobacco emerging from both ends. “Well,” he says. “Good night, you two.”

Rolph had imagined Mindy tucking him into bed, her arm around him as it was in the jeep. Now this seems out of the question. He can’t change into his pajamas with Mindy there; he doesn’t even want her to *see* his pajamas, which have small blue elves all over them. “I’m fine,” he tells her, hearing the coldness in his voice. “You can go back.”

“O.K.,” she says. She turns down his bed, plumps the pillow, adjusts the open window. Rolph senses her finding reasons not to leave the room.

“Your dad and I will be just next door,” Mindy says. “You know that, right?”

“Duh,” he mutters. Then, chastened, he says, “I know.”

Five days later, they take a long, very old train overnight to Mombasa. Every few minutes, it slows down just enough for people to leap from the doors, bundles clutched to their chests, and for others to scramble on. Lou’s group and the Phoenix faction install themselves in the cramped bar car, which they share with African men in suits and bowler hats. Charlie is allowed to drink one beer, but she sneaks two more with the help of handsome Dean, who stands beside her

narrow barstool. “You’re sunburned,” he says, pressing a finger to Charlie’s cheek. “The African sun is strong.”

“True,” Charlie says, grinning as she swigs her beer. Now that Mindy has pointed out Dean’s platitudes, Charlie finds him hilarious.

“You have to wear sunscreen,” he says.

“I know—I did.”

“Once isn’t enough. You have to reapply.”

Charlie catches Mindy’s eye and succumbs to giggles. Her father moves close.

“What’s so funny?”

“Life,” Charlie says, leaning against him.

“*Life!*” Lou snorts. “How old are you?”

He hugs her to him. When Charlie was little, he did this all the time, but as she grows older it happens less. Her father is warm, almost hot, his heartbeat like someone banging on a heavy door.

“Ow,” Lou says. “Your quill is stabbing me.” It’s a black-and-white porcupine quill—she found it in the hills and uses it to pin up her long hair. Her father slides it

out, and the tangled golden mass of Charlie's hair collapses onto her shoulders like a shattered window. She's aware of Dean watching.

"I like this," Lou says, squinting at the quill's translucent point. "It's a dangerous weapon."

"Weapons are necessary," Dean says.

By the next afternoon, the safari-goers have settled into a hotel a half hour up the coast from Mombasa. On a white beach traversed by knobby-chested men selling beads and gourds, Mildred and Fiona gamely appear in floral-print swimsuits, binoculars still at their necks. The livid Medusa tattoo on Chronos's chest is less startling than his small potbelly—a disillusioning trait he shares with a number of the men, though not Lou, who is lean, a little ropy, tanned from occasional surfing. He walks toward the cream-colored sea with his arm around Mindy, who looks even better than expected (and expectations were high) in her sparkling blue bikini.

After a swim, Lou goes in search of spears and snorkeling gear, resisting the temptation to follow Mindy back to their room, though clearly she'd like him to. She's gone bananas in the sack since they left the tents—hungry for it now, pawing Lou's clothes off at odd moments, ready to start again when he's barely finished. He feels tenderly toward Mindy, now that the trip is winding down. She's studying at Berkeley, and Lou has never travelled for a woman. It's doubtful that he'll lay eyes on her again.

Rolph and Charlie are reading in the sand under a palm tree when Lou gets back with the snorkeling equipment, but Rolph puts aside "The Hobbit" without protest and stands. Charlie ignores them, and Lou wonders momentarily if he should have included her. He and Rolph walk to the edge of the sea and pull on their masks and flippers, hanging their spears from belts at their sides. Rolph looks

thin; he needs more exercise. He's timid in the water. His mother is a reader and a gardener, and Lou is constantly having to fight her influence. He wishes that Rolph could live with him, but his lawyer just shakes his head whenever he mentions it. The fish are beautiful, easy targets, nibbling at coral. Lou has speared seven by the time he realizes that Rolph hasn't killed a single one.

"What's the problem, son?" he asks, when they surface.

"I just like watching them," Rolph says.

They've drifted toward a spit of rocks extending into the sea. Carefully they climb from the water. The tide pools throng with starfish and urchins and sea cucumbers; Rolph crouches, poring over them. Lou's fish hang from a netted bag at his waist. From the beach, Mindy is watching them through Fiona's binoculars. She waves, and Lou and Rolph wave back.

"Dad," Rolph asks, lifting a tiny green crab from a tide pool, "what do you think about Mindy?"

"Mindy's great. Why?"

The crab splays its little claws; Lou notes with approval that his son knows how to hold it safely. Rolph squints up at him. "You know. Is she the right amount of crazy?"

Lou gives a hoot of laughter. He'd forgotten the earlier conversation, but Rolph forgets nothing—a quality that delights his father. "She's crazy enough. But crazy isn't everything."

"I think she's rude," Rolph says.

"Rude to *you*?"

"No. To Albert."

Lou turns to his son, cocking his head. “Albert?”

Rolph releases the crab and begins to tell the story. He remembers each thing—the porch, the stairs, “Room 3”—realizing as he speaks how much he has wanted to tell his father this, as punishment to Mindy. Lou listens keenly, without interrupting. But as Rolph goes on he senses the story landing heavily, in a way he doesn’t understand. When he finishes talking, his father takes a long breath and lets it out. He looks back at the beach. It’s nearly sunset, and people are shaking the fine white sand from their towels and packing up for the day. The hotel has a disco, and the group plans to go dancing there after dinner.

“When exactly did this happen?” Lou asks.

“The same day as the lions—that night.” Rolph waits a moment, then asks, “Why do you think she was rude like that?”

“Women are cunts,” his father says. “That’s why.”

Rolph gapes at him. His father is angry, a muscle jumping in his jaw, and without warning Rolph is angry, too: assailed by a deep, sickening rage that stirs in him very occasionally—most often when he and Charlie come back from a riotous weekend around their father’s pool, rock stars jamming on the roof, guacamole and big pots of chili, to find their mother alone in her bungalow, drinking peppermint tea. Rage at this man who casts everyone aside.

“They are not—” He can’t make himself repeat the word.

“They are,” Lou says tightly. “Pretty soon you’ll know it for sure.”

Rolph turns away from his father. There is nowhere to go, so he jumps into the sea and begins slowly paddling his way back toward the shore. The sun is low, the water choppy and full of shadows. Rolph imagines sharks just under his feet, but he doesn’t turn or look back. He keeps swimming toward that white sand,

knowing instinctively that his struggle to stay afloat is the most exquisite torture he can concoct for his father—knowing also that, if he sinks, Lou will jump in instantly and save him.

That night, Rolph and Charlie are allowed to have wine at dinner. Rolph dislikes the sour taste, but enjoys the swimmy blur it makes of his surroundings: the giant beaklike flowers all over the dining room; his father's speared fish cooked by the chef with olives and tomatoes; Mindy in a shimmery green dress. His father's arm is around her. He isn't angry anymore, so neither is Rolph.

Lou has spent the past hour in bed, fucking Mindy senseless. Now he keeps one hand on her slim thigh, reaching under her hem, waiting for that cloudy look she gets. Lou is a man who cannot tolerate defeat—can't *perceive* it as anything but a spur to his own inevitable victory. He doesn't give a shit about Albert—Albert is invisible, Albert is nothing. (In fact, Albert has left the group and returned to his Mombasa apartment.) What matters now is that *Mindy* understand this.

He refills Mildred's and Fiona's wineglasses until their cheeks are patchy and flushed. "You still haven't taken me bird-watching," he chides them. "I keep asking, but it never happens."

"We could go tomorrow," Mildred says. "There are some coastal birds we're hoping to see."

"Is that a promise?"

"A solemn promise."

"Come on," Charlie whispers to Rolph. "Let's go outside."

They slip from the crowded dining room and skitter onto the silvery beach. The palm trees make a slapping, rainy sound, but the air is dry.

“It’s like Hawaii,” Rolph says, wanting it to be true. The ingredients are there: the dark, the beach, his sister. But it doesn’t feel the same.

“Without the rain,” Charlie says.

“Without Mom,” Rolph says.

“I think Dad’s going to marry Mindy,” Charlie says.

“No way! He doesn’t love her.”

“So? He can still marry her.”

They sink onto the sand, still faintly warm, radiating a lunar glow. The ghost sea tumbles against it.

“She’s not so bad,” Charlie says.

“I don’t like her. And why are you the world’s expert?”

Charlie shrugs. “I know Dad.”

Charlie doesn’t yet know herself. Four years from now, at eighteen, she’ll join a cult across the Mexican border whose charismatic leader promotes a diet of raw eggs; she’ll nearly die from salmonella poisoning before Lou rescues her. A cocaine habit will require partial reconstruction of her nose, changing her appearance, and a series of feckless, domineering men will leave her solitary in her late twenties, trying to broker peace between Rolph and Lou, who will have stopped speaking.

But Charlie *does* know her father. He’ll marry Mindy because that’s what winning means, and because Mindy’s eagerness to finish this odd episode and return to her studies will last until precisely the moment when she unlocks the door to her

Berkeley apartment and walks into the smell of simmering lentils: one of the cheap stews that she and her roommates survive on. She'll collapse onto the swaybacked couch they found on the sidewalk and unpack her many books, realizing that in the weeks of lugging them through Africa she has read virtually nothing. And when the phone rings her heart will flip.

Structural dissatisfaction: Returning to circumstances that once pleased you, after having experienced a more thrilling or opulent way of life, and finding that you can no longer tolerate them.

Suddenly, Rolph and Charlie are galloping up the beach, drawn by the pulse of light and music from the open-air disco. They run barefoot into the crowd, trailing powdery sand onto a translucent dance floor overlaid on lozenges of flashing color. The shuddering bass line seems to interfere with Rolph's heartbeat.

"C'mon," Charlie says. "Let's dance."

She begins to undulate in front of him—the way the new Charlie is planning to dance when she gets home. But Rolph is embarrassed; he can't dance that way. The rest of the group surrounds them. Louise, the twelve-year-old, is dancing with Dean, the actor. Ramsey flings his arms around one of the Phoenix-faction moms. Lou and Mindy dance close together, their whole bodies touching, but Mindy is thinking of Albert, as she will, periodically, after marrying Lou and having two daughters, Lou's fifth and sixth children, in quick succession, as if sprinting against the inevitable drift of his attention. On paper he'll be penniless, and Mindy will end up working as a travel agent to support her little girls. For a time, her life will be joyless; the girls will seem to cry too much, and she'll think longingly of this trip to Africa as the last perfect moment of her life, when she still had a choice, when she was free and unencumbered. She'll dream senselessly, futilely, of Albert, wondering what he is doing at particular moments, and how her life would have turned out if she'd run away with him as he suggested, half joking, when she visited him in Room 3. Later, of course, she'll recognize "Albert" as nothing more

than a focus of regret for her own immaturity and disastrous choices. When both her children are in high school, she'll finally resume her studies, complete her Ph.D. at U.C.L.A., and begin an academic career at forty-five, spending long periods doing social-structures field work in the Brazilian rain forest. Her youngest daughter will go to work for Lou, become his protégée, and inherit his business.

"Look," Charlie tells Rolph, over the music. "The bird-watchers are watching us."

Mildred and Fiona are sitting on chairs beside the dance floor, waving in their long print dresses. It's the first time the children have seen them without binoculars.

"Maybe we remind them of birds," Charlie says.

"Or maybe when there are no birds they watch people," Rolph says.

"Come on, Rolphus," Charlie says. "Dance with me."

She takes hold of his hands. As they move together, Rolph feels his self-consciousness miraculously fade, as if he were growing up right there on the dance floor, becoming a boy who dances with girls like his sister. Charlie feels it, too. In fact, this particular memory is one she'll return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight: her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance. But the woman who remembers won't be Charlie; after Rolph dies, she'll revert to her real name—Charlene—unlatching herself forever from the girl who danced with her brother in Africa. Charlene will cut her hair short and go to law school. When she gives birth to a son, she'll want to name him Rolph, but her parents will still be too shattered for her to do this. So she'll call him that privately, just in her mind, and years later she'll stand with her mother among a crowd of cheering parents beside a field, watching him play, a dreamy look on his face as he glances at the sky.

“Charlie!” Rolph says. “Guess what I just figured out.”

Charlie leans toward her brother, who is grinning with his news. He cups both hands into her hair to be heard above the thudding beat. His warm, sweet breath fills her ear.

“I don’t think those ladies were ever watching birds,” Rolph says. ♦

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