

A woman with blonde hair tied up, wearing a purple dress, is seen from behind, looking out a window. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window, creating a soft glow on her hair and the wall. A wooden headboard and a bed with white linens are visible on the right side of the frame.

ANITA SHREVE

By the author of *Testimony*

A Change in Altitude

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Part One

“We’re climbing Mount Kenya. Not this Saturday, but the next.”

Patrick made the announcement as he moved into the guest room of the Big House, the plumbing in their own small cottage currently disabled. Patrick spoke of the climb without fanfare, as he might party in two weeks’ time. They were young, each twenty-eight. They’d been in the country three months.

Despite the heat, Patrick’s shirt still held its creases. James, whose black skin shone blue in the planes of his face, washed their clothes in a bathtub, hung them to dry, and pressed them with an iron that made the fabric hiss. Not even the equator could undo James’s creases.

Patrick set his doctor bag and his briefcase on the floor. He had shaved his beard as a gesture of respect but wore his black hair longer than most.

“Arthur’s arranging it. It takes four days. Porters will carry the provisions.”

When Margaret and Patrick’s toilet in the cottage had ceased to function, they’d temporarily moved in with their landlords, Arthur and Diana, who lived two hundred feet away in the larger house on the property.

“We’ll camp?” Margaret asked.

“There are huts.”

In a few minutes, Margaret would dress for dinner. Under her palm, she could feel the distinctive stitching of the white coverlet. “I’d better buy hiking boots,” she said.

Beyond the casement window, there was birdsong, noisy until early evening, when the day would be snuffed out, at the same hour, every day, summer or winter. In Africa, Margaret often felt dazed, as if something shiny had hurt her eyes.

“Who will go?” she asked.

“Arthur and Diana. You and me. Arthur mentioned another couple, but I forget their names.”

“You can take the days off?”

Patrick shrugged his shoulders, indicating a flexible schedule. He moved to the bed and sat beside Margaret, making a deep V in the soft mattress. Despite the heat, he wore long trousers, another gesture of respect. In Kenya, African men emerged from mud-and-wattle huts in suits to drive matatu or to sell scrap metal or to cut meat. To dress casually was to flaunt the ability to do so, as well as to advertise oneself as an American. Only American and German tourists dressed like children.

“You okay?” Patrick asked.

His eyes were light blue, sensitive to the sun. When outdoors, he always wore dark glasses.

“I’m fine,” Margaret said.

“You seem quiet.”

“How was your day?”

“I was mostly at the hospital. What time is dinner?”

The house ran with the precision of a father’s watch. They had been Diana and Arthur’s guests for five days, a decent plumber apparently difficult to obtain. First a message had to be sent—the plumber didn’t own a telephone—and the problem described. A fee would have to be negotiated, and then transportation sorted. The particular plumber Diana liked was said to be visiting his wife in Limuru. It was unclear when he would return.

Margaret wanted to ask if another plumber could be found, but to do so would be to seem

ungrateful for the hospitality. Patrick and Margaret were, after all, being housed and fed.

“Seven,” Margaret said of dinner.

Patrick asked her if she had ever climbed a mountain. As he did so, he took her hand. He often took Margaret’s hand, in public as well as in private. It meant *I am suddenly thinking of you*.

Though Patrick and Margaret had been together for two years—married five months—entire landscapes of their individual pasts were unknown to the other. Margaret told Patrick that she had once climbed Mount Monadnock, a lesser New England peak. Patrick said that he hadn’t ever climbed a mountain, being a city boy from Chicago.

The smell of boiling horse meat made its way into the bedroom. It was an awful smell, and Margaret was certain she would never get used to it. The meat was for the dogs.

“Do we need, I don’t know, instruction?” Margaret asked.

“I’m sure Arthur will have it all in hand.”

The meat would be something James had purchased at the duka earlier in the day, the blood soaking the *Kenya Morning Tribune* used to wrap it. It would not be any different from the beef Margaret bought for Patrick and herself, the steaks too fresh, not aged, and therefore tough, tasting of animal. “How tall is Mount Kenya?”

“Seventeen thousand feet, give or take.”

“That’s over three miles high.”

“We’re already a mile above sea level just sitting here. And I think we probably gain some altitude driving to the mountain.”

“So Kilimanjaro is higher?” Margaret asked.

“Higher but easier. I think you simply walk to the top. In large circles. It takes a while, but most amateurs can handle it. It’s supposed to be fairly boring.”

Patrick changed out of his brown leather everyday shoes, which were covered with mud. If he left the shoes outside the door in the evening, they would be clean in the morning.

“We don’t walk?”

“We climb. We hike. Parts of it will be rough.”

Margaret imagined Diana’s Land Rover, packed with gear, journeying through the shimmering lime-green tea plantations she’d seen only from a distance.

The guest room seemed to have been designed for a writer or a scholar. Margaret sometimes sat at the heavy carved desk, on which an antique typewriter had been placed. She’d tried it once, wincing at the hard thwacks the keys made, as if something delicate and tentative were being announced with a tattoo.

The desk chair had carved arms and a nearly silver patina. On the walls were photographs of people she could not identify, a wooden shield that had perhaps been used in battle, and a sunburst design of spears. The books were leather-bound and uniform and, to judge from their condition, often read. Margaret imagined an early settler, the books all there were available to him of the printed word in Nairobi, reading and rereading them by lantern light. She sometimes held one in her hands.

On the other side of the room was a skirted dressing table of the sort one used to see in old movies. On its glass surface were cut-crystal jars with silver tops. Perhaps the room had belonged to Diana’s parents when they built the house in the late 1940s. They’d come out from England after the war to try their hand with horses. Margaret picked up a picture of the couple, extravagantly dressed, looking as though they were about to head off to a party at the Muthaiga Country Club. The father’s face was weathered; the mother had a small, sweet smile. Diana, as a child, would constantly have heard that she resembled her father.

Margaret thought about the story of the young Masai who'd been invited by an American benefactor to use his wit and innate intelligence to make a go of it in New York City. Two months after the young man's arrival, he jumped to his death from his tenth-story apartment window. She thought the Masai's heart must have grieved for the Rift Valley or that his senses had been violated by the city's gray geometry. The anecdote was meant to be a cautionary tale, though Margaret was never quite sure what exactly was being cautioned. One shouldn't be taken out of one's environment? Or, if so, might one, at any moment, be subject to dangerous derangement?

Already there seemed to be an inability to adapt. Once, when Patrick and Margaret left town for a long weekend to travel to the Serengeti, they returned to a cottage from which the contents of their bedroom had been emptied. The only thing not touched was Margaret's underwear drawer, in which she had kept their passports. This proved a lesson they'd been taught at the beginning of their stay: keep your valuables in your underwear drawer; no African man would touch a woman's underthings. The police came, looked at the bedroom, pointed to a broken window, and said, Aha. It wasn't an inside job. Did anyone dislike them? Wish them harm? The case was never solved.

Patrick and Margaret bought a new bed and had a lock installed between the bedroom and the living room. They later learned from the inspector that nearly everyone had those sorts of locks; hadn't anyone ever mentioned them to the couple before? It was their third theft in six weeks. Margaret's wallet had been stolen from her straw bag at the market, and one morning, as Patrick had walked out of the cottage on his way to the hospital, he'd found their secondhand Peugeot on cement blocks. All four tires had been taken during the night.

Margaret understood the thieving in a purely intellectual way. The distance between those who were comfortable and those who were not was a precipice an expatriate stood upon, the ground beneath subject at any moment to erosion. In her body, she knew fear; morally, the thieving felt like reparation. She had learned to tuck her purse under her arm and disliked herself for doing it. She tipped James generously for washing their clothes. She was fairly certain this was not the custom, but it made her feel better. James never refused the money.

Patrick wouldn't ask Margaret what she had done that day, the question a prickly one, because she hadn't yet found a job. He didn't seem to mind, but she did. If he *had* asked her, though, she'd have told him that she had walked the dirt roads of Langata with her camera, taking photographs of the askaris in their long greatcoats, their pangas at the ready, or of the signs that read *Mbwa Kali*, Fierce Dog, at the gates of large houses. She also snapped pictures of the delicate falling branches of the jacaranda and of the scarlet-orange-pink bursts of color in the bougainvillea, a plant that grew like a weed and covered stone walls and rooftops. The other doctors at the hospital, she knew, viewed Patrick's residence in Langata, an expatriate haven, as suspect. But Margaret had fallen in love with the cottage in Langata quite by accident.

The Peugeot had stopped along a paved road as she was on her way to view a flat. Arthur, finishing his workday, had slowed down to inquire if she was all right. She might have guessed at his motives—a mixture of protectiveness and perhaps opportunity: a young white woman in a skirt, stranded at the side of the road behind a white Peugeot, newly purchased but decidedly secondhand; perhaps a lemon. The Peugeot had simply ceased to move, giving no warning.

Arthur rolled down his window and called across the front seat, "You all right?"

Margaret walked to the place where he had parked, white face trusting white face. Had he been an African, she wondered later, would she have waved the man away? Arthur would not take no for an answer, and she was grateful for the help. He tried to start the car in case the problem was simply a lack of petrol; Margaret was, after all, a woman. He would call from his house, he said; he was headed

home. He knew of a mechanic who would take care of her. He used those words. *Take care of you.*

Margaret studied the man. He had mud-brown hair and dark eyes, a cleft in his chin, and white teeth inside an easy smile. The bottom half of his face didn't seem to match the top.

In Arthur's Mercedes, Margaret was introduced to the sudden beauty of the manicured gardens and the tall hedges of Langata, a kind of suburb of Nairobi. He turned and stopped at the bottom of a long drive. An askari, greatcoat over his bare legs, hopped up to open Arthur's gate. Arthur never acknowledged the man. The path to the house was lined with jacaranda petals that made a purple carpet to the front door. The two-story home was made of stone with mullioned windows. All around her was a busy foreground of bright blossoms Margaret didn't know the names of. Beyond the garden was a striking expanse of cornflower sky, as saturated a color as she had ever seen. It must have to do, she thought, with the equatorial sun, a distinctive angle of light.

Arthur, offering Margaret a drink, made the appropriate calls. The car was being towed to a garage, where mechanics would repair it. Margaret became aware of her own bare legs, particularly when Arthur's wife, Diana, clearly disconcerted to see a visitor she hadn't been told about, entered the room. The wife took note, she saw, of the drink. Arthur explained, and Margaret was treated to Diana's first smile: a sudden sharp surprise. Margaret called Patrick at the hospital to tell him that they'd been invited to dinner in Langata. She had to make the call with Arthur in the room and so sounded more enthusiastic than she actually felt, perhaps even a little breathless. Margaret could hear Patrick's gentle complaint at the other end.

At dinner the first night, another invitation was extended. A guesthouse on the property was vacant. Arthur named a sum less than the one Patrick and Margaret had been prepared to pay for the flat she'd intended to view. Diana suggested that Margaret and Patrick, who'd taken a bus out from Nairobi, stay the night and view the cottage in the morning, when they would be able to see it in the daylight. In bed that night, Patrick was wary—perhaps he had heard, before Margaret had, the faint tumble of a lock. They held each other tightly on the foreign mattress as if reestablishing themselves as a couple, as if an act of resistance were called for.

In the morning, they viewed the guesthouse, a white stucco cottage with a red tiled roof, surrounded by pink and orange bougainvillea. The cottage had a sitting room with a small table swathed in a vermilion-and-yellow khanga. The kitchen had a Dutch door; the bedroom had a bathroom. The floor was polished wood in an intricate parquet pattern. The walls were white; the windows, mullioned glass. Even in America—or especially in America—Patrick and Margaret had never lived in such a beautiful place. Before the car had given out, they had been living over a nightclub at the Ngong Road Hotel. Prior to that, they had endured a grim stay at the Hotel Nairobi, where the sink and toilet had been encrusted with filth, where cockroaches had fled whenever Margaret had opened the bathroom door. She thought that Patrick must have seen, that morning, her desire for the cottage, and so he gave up his mild political objections.

The guesthouse was far enough away from Arthur and Diana's house to suggest a measure of autonomy. Diana insisted that the two couples would hardly ever see one another: Arthur worked all the hours of the day as head of sales at Colgate-Palmolive; Diana bred Rhodesian ridgebacks and had little time for people. All this seemed fine. Or Margaret made it so.

That afternoon, James had taken a photograph of Margaret and Patrick. The picture was of Margaret in a chair just beyond the Dutch door of their new cottage in Africa. She had on a white sundress. Her skin was a deep red—Indian red, her mother used to call it. Margaret's hair was

dishwater blond, though dishwater didn't really resemble her hair color, a light brown with hints of brass. Her skin seemed painted on and shiny.

Behind her, Patrick was standing in a short-sleeved white shirt with a tie. He had a healthy-looking tan and hair that might or might not have been washed in several days. In the picture, it looked lank. His face was in shadow, sunglasses shading his eyes.

James was serious when working Margaret's Nikon, but he grinned as he handed the camera back to her.

At the Big House, James cooked the meals, set the table, served the food, cleared the dishes away and then washed them. Patrick and Margaret didn't have servants. Only recently had Diana sent James over to the cottage to wash their clothes. Though Margaret had been advised early on to hire someone to do the chore, the task seemed too intimate to farm out. She had tried to wash the clothes in the bathtub, but she hadn't been able to get all the soap out. When Patrick developed a rash around his neck, Margaret capitulated. She cooked and served their dinners, however, and Patrick did the dishes. It seemed a straw victory. Not to employ a servant was to deny an African a job.

At dinner on the evening of that first mention of the climb, Arthur, his wet hair still grooved from his comb, spoke of hypoxia.

"The lungs fill up with blood," he said, setting Patrick and Margaret straight. "Typically four or five people a year die climbing Mount Kenya. Usually it's the fit German climbers who hop off the plane in Nairobi, head straight for the mountain, and practically run up it. They often get into trouble because they haven't allowed their bodies to acclimate to the height and the thinner air. The slower you climb and the longer it takes, the better off you are."

"I should do really well, then," Margaret said.

Arthur ignored the joke. "As we climb, we'll come across park rangers. They'll be in pairs, and they'll go right up to your face. They'll fire a series of questions at you: What's the date? What time is it? Where do you live? And if you can't fire answers back at them, they'll each take an elbow and run you straight down the mountain whether you want to go or not. It's the only cure."

Margaret was thinking that Arthur, by nature, wasn't an alarmist. Though he could be condescending—she sometimes thought he viewed condescension as a minor sport—he and Patrick had had lively discussions that had lasted late into the night. Patrick would not concede a point if he had facts to back it up.

"We'll leave Nairobi midmorning," Arthur continued. He had on a white shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, a striped tie. He had a pallor that seemed unusual in Africa, a perpetual five o'clock shadow emerging from his skin.

Diana had on a blue cotton sundress. Her skin had the patina of an outdoorswoman. She had recently cut her bright blond hair, a practical gesture that lent her a gamine look.

"We'll take the Thika Road and have a comfortable night, I should think, at the lodge in Naro Moru," Arthur said. "Then we'll make our way to Park Gate, where we'll leave the Land Rover. At the gate, we hire the guide and the porters who will carry the food and gear. They're meant to be very good, by the way. Then it's straight up to Point Lenana. It's one of the steepest and fastest ways up, but an amateur can make it. It'll take four days, three nights, not including our stay at the lodge."

The meal was lamb with mint sauce. The table was elaborately set in the English mode. Beneath Margaret's place was a mat depicting Westminster Abbey. Patrick had St. Paul's. Each diner had his own silver saltcellar and tiny spoon. Arthur was generous with the wine, which he poured into cut-

crystal goblets. The dinner plates might have been Wedgwood or Staffordshire. The ones in the cottage were mismatched and had chips in them.

Two children appeared from behind a door. Edward and Philippa, nine and seven, were being raised by an ayah named Adhiambo. The children came and went in school uniforms as if they lived in Kent and not just one road removed from a forest with antelope and lions and buffalo. Diana believed in bringing up children the British way, without excessive praise.

Adhiambo stepped from behind the door as well. She had a red head scarf over her hair and a pink sweater that might once have been part of a twinset. Her hips were wide, but she was young. Twenty-three, twenty-four, Margaret thought, though she was hopeless at decoding African ages. Adhiambo had a deep scar on her chin and a shy smile that revealed a row of gapped teeth. In her eyes, though, there was something Margaret couldn't identify—something resilient or simply persistent.

“Say good night to Mummy,” Adhiambo said to the children.

In their pajamas, they went to their mother for hugs and kisses that looked real and needy, small blots on a stoic ledger. Arthur demanded kisses and hugs as well. Margaret knew this already to be the evening ritual. Philippa looked like her father, with her long brown hair; Edward, a towhead, resembled Diana before the weathering. At first, Margaret had found the gender mismatch disconcerting. Diana mentioned riding; Arthur, tennis. Within minutes, the children and their ayah were gone.

“Bring gaiters for the vertical bog,” Arthur continued. “Hats and gloves and parkas for the cold.”

“What bog?” Patrick asked.

“Bog.” Arthur seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for words. He held his arms wide. “You know... mud.”

“Sunglasses to avoid snow blindness,” Diana added. She seemed distracted by activity in the kitchen. Earlier, she had gotten up from the table. James and Adhiambo weren't the only servants. There were several men who worked in the kennels, as well as the askari at the gate. “And be sure to break in your boots.”

Patrick shot a glance at Margaret.

“I don't have boots,” she said. “I'm going to buy some tomorrow.”

Arthur calculated. “You've got ten, eleven days. That should be sufficient if you work at breaking them in. Wear two pairs of socks.”

“I might have boots that will fit you,” Diana offered, stealing a glance at Margaret's feet in her sandals. She frowned. “Maybe not.”

Margaret saw, in the doorway, James patiently waiting to clear the plates.

After-dinner drinks were offered in a room Diana called the drawing room. Margaret had a brandy while trying to describe to Arthur a “rusty nail,” Scotch laced with Drambuie. Diana sat across from Margaret on an oversize chintz sofa and appeared to be impatient *to get going*, though going where Margaret wasn't certain. It seemed Diana's natural state. She lived not for the moment but for the one anticipated. Diana wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty. Margaret had guessed Arthur and Diana to be in their early to midthirties.

“How did you two meet?” Margaret asked.

Arthur, at the drinks table, answered without hesitation, as if repeating a marital legend. “We met at a party in London. Within five minutes, we'd worked out that each of us secretly yearned to go to Africa. In Diana's case, to return to Kenya, where she'd been raised. In my case, to get as far away

from bloody London as possible.”

Margaret noted that neither Arthur nor Diana looked at the other while Arthur told his brief story. Perhaps Diana wasn't listening. Perhaps she rued confessing that yearning.

Arthur raised his glass. All present raised theirs as well, though a toast had hardly been offered. Arthur, also, seemed a man on the move, having to harness an energy too great for the occasion.

On the marital balance sheet, Margaret guessed that Diana thought herself from better stock than Arthur. Margaret wondered if this counted for a lot. In her own marriage, Patrick was third-generation Irish, his distinctive gene pool noted for its fondness for medicine, the pointed chin, the black hair that didn't gray until well into the sixties, and the surprise of the pale-blue eyes. Beauty depended upon how these features had been arranged, and Patrick seemed to have gotten a goodly share. Patrick's father, a gynecologist, still had a brogue, a lovely accent that put all of his patients at ease.

As for Margaret, she came from a middle-class, suburb-north-of-Boston, Unitarian background with some history. A distant relative of hers had been commissioned as an officer during the American Revolution. Her mother had a plaque attesting to this fact hanging behind her bedroom door, though she was a rabid Democrat and had been since FDR.

Arthur turned his attention to Patrick. “So what's going to happen to all of us when Kenyatta dies?”

“I'm very surprised we haven't had this conversation already,” Patrick answered.

The British seemed to have an unquestioning sense of legitimacy in Kenya. Americans did not. Margaret guessed the difference to be Vietnam.

Idly, while Kenyatta was being dispensed with, Margaret counted seventeen different patterns on the various fabrics and dishware. She looked around her at the room: the windows were casements, like those in Margaret's cottage, but there the resemblance between the two buildings ended. The furniture in the drawing room had carved legs and ornate surfaces, mass as well as decoration.

“Who's the other couple?” Margaret asked.

“On the climb? Saartje and Willem van Buskirk. I didn't tell you?” Diana seemed puzzled at this omission.

“He's part of the Hilton Group,” Arthur said. No mention was made of what Saartje did. “We'll have them over this week for a planning session. You'll like them. No-nonsense. Very down-to-earth. I should think Willem has done Mount Kenya before.”

“I don't remember that,” Diana said.

“He used to climb in Switzerland before they went out to Bombay.”

Diana nodded, and Margaret worried about the pace of the climb if one of their party was experienced.

“In addition to the hypoxia,” Arthur continued, “almost everyone gets AMS of some form or another. Acute mountain sickness. Headache. Fatigue. Vomiting. Dizziness.”

“This is supposed to be fun?” Margaret asked.

“I'm telling you all this because we're going to have to diagnose each other,” Arthur said, a touch sternly. “Watch for signs.”

Margaret nodded, suitably chastened.

“The huts fit between ten and thirty,” Arthur went on. “One usually sleeps on cots. There are latrines, if you want to call them that. Not a trip for the squeamish.”

“The Kikuyu think the mountain is sacred,” Patrick offered, and Margaret was glad for the respite from the images of misery. “Their god Ngai is said to reside there. They call the mountain Kirinyaga

Margaret had been taking a photograph of a physician, a man who had recently set up a series of free clinics for babies and toddlers to receive vaccinations and medical care in Roxbury, Boston's poorest neighborhood, not least because it was almost entirely black. Her paper, a Boston alternative weekly, had given Margaret the assignment that morning. She was having trouble presenting the doctor in a flattering pose: his glasses were magnifying lenses, and the overhead hospital light was too bright. Finally getting enough shots to ensure at least one her editor could use, Margaret realized that there was another doctor standing in the doorway, watching the shoot. When Margaret asked her subject where she might get a Tab and a sandwich, the man in the doorway answered first. "Come with me," he said. "I'll take you to the cafeteria. I'm headed that way myself."

Margaret packed up her equipment while the two physicians conferred about a matter she wasn't privy to. Then she followed the second doctor out the door and along a hospital corridor. "Patrick," the man said, turning and putting out his hand.

"Margaret," she said.

Patrick told Margaret over tuna on rye that he was completing a fellowship in equatorial medicine. He'd become interested in tropical diseases in medical school and had visited Africa twice. She thought he was a beautiful man, and she was fascinated by the unusual planes of his long face. Perhaps, she thought, she had fallen in love with those planes before she'd fallen in love with the man. Before coming to Africa, Margaret had photographed his face at least a hundred times. At first, Patrick was intrigued, then merely patient, and then mildly annoyed, as one might be with a child who wants to play the same game again and again.

When Patrick asked Margaret if she wanted to go to Kenya with him, she said yes with enthusiasm. Her job at the alternative paper wasn't progressing, and she was tired of photographing congressional meetings and folksingers in Cambridge coffeehouses. Patrick had attached himself to Nairobi Hospital, which he could use as a resource for as long as he wanted in exchange for conducting free clinics around the country when asked to do so.

Margaret and Patrick were hastily wed in a backyard in Cambridge. Margaret wore a long white cotton dress and wound her hair into a French twist. After the ceremony, they and their guests drank champagne on plastic deck chairs and an ornate sofa brought outside for the occasion. Patrick and Margaret sat in the sofa's plush center, fending off witty barbs and occasionally gazing at the stars.

At a good-bye dinner at her parents' house the night before Patrick and she were to fly out of Logan to Nairobi, Margaret couldn't imagine how she could go a year without seeing either them or her twelve-year-old brother, Timmy, born sixteen years after Margaret—a happy accident, her mother had explained. She pleaded with them to come visit her in Africa. No one in the family had ever used the word *love* before, though the connection among them was fierce.

On the plane, Margaret was mildly homesick. During the flight across the alien continent, the sun rising, her face pressed to the window, her breath fogging her vision, Patrick held her hand. If he was apprehensive, he didn't say so.

From the plane, she saw all the places she had read about in preparation for the trip: the Nile River, long and brown; Lake Turkana, once Lake Rudolf; the Rift Valley, vast and barren and unearthly; and then suddenly the Ngong Hills and the plateau on which Nairobi had been settled. In the distance, Margaret could see, rising above the clouds, Mount Kenya, and even, to the south, Mount Kilimanjaro. Before the plane set down, Patrick presented her with a silver ring, a small diamond at i

center, something he hadn't been able to manage before the wedding. They landed on Margaret's birthday.

On the morning after the Mount Kenya climb had been proposed, an iridescent peacock greeted Margaret at Diana's front door. The bird, seen so close, seemed otherworldly, fraudulent. The peacock eyed her with indifference. What must it think, she wondered, of her own dull plumage?

Overhead, a jacaranda tree had again laid down its royal carpet. The air felt cool and rinsed. Margaret had on a belted white cotton jacket over a yellow cotton dress. She would have to take the jacket off at ten a.m. At noon, she would want to be indoors. By three, she'd be fantasizing about a cold swim at the InterContinental. The jacket would go back on at six thirty, and by eleven, Patrick and she would be sleeping beneath a pair of down comforters. It was all a matter of altitude, Patrick had once explained.

Margaret inhaled the scent of burning leaves as she made her way to the car Patrick had left for her. He had taken the bus into town more than an hour earlier. The Peugeot was parked beside the cottage with the still-defunct plumbing. Margaret slid into the front seat, the floor tinged here and there with red marum. She set her straw bag on the passenger seat to her left. When she'd first arrived in the country, it had taken her nearly a week of trial runs to feel even mildly confident about driving on the left side of the road.

The scent of the smoke she'd brought with her into the Peugeot made her lean back and close her eyes. She wondered if Matthew, the gardener, burned marijuana leaves with the debris, as if the ganja were no more valuable than twigs. Absurd, Margaret thought, though she was fairly sure that something soporific was in the smoke. She inhaled deeply. The scent was both nostalgic and exotic.

A knock at her window startled her. Arthur, in suit and tie, motioned for her to roll down the window.

"The Mercedes won't start. I've called for a mechanic. I need a ride to the office. I have to leave the Rover for Diana to get the kids and so forth."

There could be no thought of refusing him.

"Get in. One good deed deserves another."

Margaret moved her straw bag. Arthur slid in, putting his arm across the back of his seat, a proprietary gesture that caused him to have to face Margaret. Arthur reestablishing the alpha male. She knew with certainty that if Patrick entered a car with a woman not his wife behind the wheel, there would be no proprietary arm. Patrick, unlike Arthur, would face pleasantly straight ahead.

They passed the duka and its gathering of African men in pressed shirts and pants, most smoking, many laughing. The men, Margaret knew, worked as servants and were meeting for a morning break after having done the shopping for the day. Most would have been up since four thirty, preparing meals for dogs and families. Were the Africans in the area mostly Luo, like James? She would have to ask. Already Margaret understood that though the country was deeply misogynistic and acutely aware of class as defined by money, the true animosity that kept man from man or woman from woman was tribal. Turkana, Nandi, Kalenjin, Kisii, Kipsikis, Kikuyu, Luo, Masai, and others. In Africa, a native man with dark skin was identified by tribe.

"I think it's fair to say you haven't mastered the roundabout yet," Arthur commented, eyebrow raised, as Margaret stopped for a matatu, listing and overloaded, moving into their lane.

"They're counterintuitive."

"To Americans. You call them something else."

“Rotaries.”

“I think you need more practice.”

“Thank you for noticing.”

He made a *pshaw* sound that was distinctly British and couldn't be spelled. It meant *Don't be silly. Don't be ridiculous. Don't be so touchy.*

“Where can I drop you?” Margaret asked.

“At Mather House. I hope Diana told you that Saartje and Willem are coming to dinner tonight? We're meant to discuss the climb.”

Arthur gestured toward the road Margaret should take.

“She did, and I'm on my way to buy boots.”

“You'll conquer Mount Kenya.”

Margaret was taken aback. “I don't think I'm capable of conquering anything, least of all a mountain. In any event, I didn't come here to conquer.”

“Where are you from?”

She glanced briefly in his direction. He was studying her, as she had suspected.

“I grew up in a small town north of Boston. Went to college near Boston. Been living in Boston ever since.”

“Why Boston?”

“It's close to my family, and it's a city.”

“You're not for the rural areas, then.”

Margaret laughed. “I guess not.”

“Never been to Boston,” he said in that accent of his that suggested a manufacturing town in the north of England. “Spent a lot of time in Arizona, though.”

“Arizona?”

“Diana's parents moved there about ten years ago. They have a kind of mini-estate—I suppose you'd call it a ranch—just outside Phoenix. Diana's father plays golf. They went for his health. The climate. He's developing emphysema. Still smokes a pack a day. Prides himself on having cut down from three.”

Once again, Margaret glanced in Arthur's direction. He was staring out his window. There was about him a quality of smugness that might attract a European woman but might put off an American.

She had conquered her third roundabout in twenty minutes when Arthur gestured. “It's just there.”

She entered a circular driveway on the outskirts of the city that led to an office complex. It resembled a school built in the 1960s—concrete and utilitarian, without any attempt at charm. “Well Arthur seemed reluctant to leave the car. “You're off to buy boots.”

“Yes.”

“Go to Sir Henry's.” Arthur took a small notepad from an inner pocket of his jacket. He wrote down the address and handed her the slip of paper. “Ask for Tommy. He'll take care of you. Tell him Arthur sent you.”

There it was again. *Take care of you.*

“That's it?” Margaret asked. “Just *Arthur*?”

“He'll know who it is.”

* * *

Askaris stood guard in front of the shops on Kimathi Street. Margaret tipped a parking boy eight shillings, the equivalent of a dollar, to watch her car. She passed a Scandinavian store in which an African man was polishing silver. A sign in the window read *50 Shillings* but seemed unattached to any object. Next to the Scandinavian shop was a store called Crystal Ice Cream. The special that day was a serving of vegetarian Samosas. A man hawked and spit on the sidewalk, and Margaret had to maneuver around the glob. Farther along, another man was selling curios. She stopped merely to be polite but found a small gold-colored teapot and wondered to whom she might give it. At the bank stood a flank of askaris with drawn pangas and what looked to be ferocious guard dogs on leashes. Margaret noted that the many Africans who wanted to get into the bank passed the dogs with excessive caution.

She glanced at the scrap of paper Arthur had given her. Sir Henry's, she calculated, must be at the other end of Kimathi. She crossed the street and strolled, looking for the address. When she came to the intersection of Kenyatta and Kimathi, she saw men lying on the grass divider, some asleep. Barely avoiding them, other men in white shirts and ties were watering the grass and the bases of the palms. She walked by a gentleman in a white kaffiyeh, followed by several women in the long black bui-bui that covered them head to toe, their faces veiled. Margaret could not imagine the discomfort the noonday equatorial heat might cause beneath that thick fabric.

In front of a shop called the Village, she eyed a simple four-bead necklace. The asking price was two hundred shillings. In the reflection from the window, she could see a tall, thin Masai with large holes in his ears pass behind her. He wore only a red blanket and carried a spear. Beyond him was a white teenager in a lime-green T-shirt pausing on a motorcycle at a light. The light turned, and she sped off.

An African woman at the charity sweepstakes booth barked in English and reminded Margaret of auctioneers in America. When the woman leaned back, Margaret saw that she was pregnant. Behind her was a Woolworth's in which one could buy cooking pans, secondhand books, used tires, and Cuisinarts. Margaret went inside and bought a guidebook to Mount Kenya. As she left the store with her purchase, she saw a mother and her three children sitting on the sidewalk with their backs to the wall. The woman was in the same dress she'd worn every time Margaret had seen her. The baby, who had on a dirty shirt and nothing else, stood up, squatted, and shat on the sidewalk. Beside the woman was a tin cup with a few shillings in it. Margaret still held her change in her hand and dropped it into the tin. "*Asante sana,*" the woman said with little energy. Before, when Margaret had passed by and put something in the cup, the beggar had put her hands together as if in prayer, repeating "*asante sana*" until Margaret was out of earshot. Patrick had warned her never to give money to the beggars, that by doing so, one could stir up a mob scene, other beggars rushing toward the point of donation.

An unexpected thirst caused Margaret to make a detour and cross the street to the New Stanley Hotel, a tall, white building filled with tourists. She noted cameras, safari jackets, binoculars, maps. As families waited for the zebra-striped minibuses to arrive, she heard English from the tourists, Swahili from the porters. In one family, the father, an older man of about fifty, counted the number of film canisters he had in his pockets. His wife had on a polyester blouse. The couple had two sons, one a teenager who looked bored already. The other, a boy of about ten or eleven, was dancing up and down, eager to see the lions.

In another familial grouping, a Midwestern woman was worrying her teeth with a toothpick. She said she was in a tizzy from the effort of trying to pack the contents of her four suitcases into two, the limit while on safari.

"I'm still not calmed down," she said.

“What day is the inaugural address this year?” the man next to her asked.

“The inaugural address?”

“Jimmy Carter? In America?”

“How should I know?”

Another man set a suitcase among the others to be collected.

“I just brought this tiny suitcase,” he said. “What you see me in is what I’ll be wearing for three days.”

What Margaret saw him in was a pair of blue sneakers, brown-and-white patterned trousers, and a red polo shirt with white piping.

“I hear there’s more ivory there,” he said.

More than where? Margaret wondered.

She had a tall glass of iced tea at the Thorn Tree Café. She couldn’t remember when iced tea had ever tasted so good. She fingered the mint and read the notes tacked onto the message board beside her. *Shenaz, I am needing my washing machine back. Peter Shandling, if you get this message, please call Mark at New Stanley House. Needed: Cocktail waitresses for Swiss embassy party on the 19th. Ask for Roger at the InterContinental.*

At the Thorn Tree Café, an African woman was not allowed to sit at a table without a man. If she did, she would be asked to leave. It didn’t matter if the woman was a banker or an editor or owned her own shop and felt as desperate as Margaret had for a tall glass of iced tea. If the woman was an African, it was assumed she was a prostitute.

A dark man in an embroidered kaffiyeh wore a jacket with a Nehru collar. Margaret was having trouble observing the man because he was openly staring at her.

From where she was seated, Margaret heard five languages she could identify: English, Swahili, Urdu, German, and French. She thought there must have been at least four or five others just beyond her hearing and comprehension.

Margaret examined the menu. The prices were impressive. Didn’t the tourists realize they were being fleeced?

At the next table, a foursome explained their dining instructions in exaggerated detail to the waiter, as if he might not understand English. When the waiter left, a woman at the table rolled her eyes.

At Margaret’s left, two African students spoke in excellent, if accented, English. She missed most of the conversation but heard something that unnerved her. The government had rounded up fifty students at the university, one of them said. The students had been massacred and tossed into a mass grave.

Margaret was stunned. Was this a rumor, or was it true? If it was true, why didn’t Patrick and she and everyone else know about it? Why wasn’t it on the front page of the newspapers? Margaret sat still and listened for more, but the students had gone silent. Possibly one of them had seen her cock her ear in their direction. Maybe the other had cautioned silence.

* * *

Margaret searched for the boot shop and twice missed it, its discreet sign not intended to lure customers. She entered through a polished wooden door and took off her sunglasses. She guessed the enterprise to be as close to a bespoke shop as one could find in Nairobi. The men behind the counters

and on the small floor were white. She saw immediately that women's clothes were displayed as well as men's. She wouldn't mention Arthur's name, even though, at dinner, she might have to say she had and had therefore received excellent service.

Margaret was allowed to browse before being accosted. In the end, she had to ask for help. She needed hiking boots, she explained. She was to climb the mountain in ten days' time and wanted something sturdy but flexible so that her feet wouldn't hurt. The slender young salesman snapped his fingers. An African associate brought out a device meant to measure her foot. She took her sandal off, exposing dust-covered skin.

"May I have a cloth?" Margaret asked.

It seemed not to be an unusual request. Two cotton cloths, one damp and one dry, were presented to her on a brass tray. After she washed, the African disappeared and the British salesman gently took her right foot and placed it in the measuring device. His hand on her heel and sole felt soothing. He asked her to stand up, and he recorded her size, a number she didn't understand. She was asked to sit and did so. When the man returned, he had a pair of silk socks that he gently pulled over Margaret's feet. It felt like a brief massage, and already she was wondering if she might not need another pair of shoes. The lambskin lining of the boots caressed her leg to midcalf. Patiently, the salesman tightened and tied the laces. The procedure was repeated with the second boot.

"I think you should walk around the store now," the salesman suggested. "Take your time. The fit of the boots is critical on such a climb."

Margaret walked the narrow aisles of the shop as if floating. She doubted she had ever owned a more comfortable pair of boots, or even shoes. Once, she bent down to touch the soft leather, and when she stood up, the salesman smiled.

"They're wonderful," Margaret said.

"They're sturdy in the soles and around your ankles. You could easily climb Mount Kenya in those."

Margaret gave a slight nod.

"You don't want to make the climb, do you?"

She was surprised. "No."

"You've been talked into it."

"Kind of."

"You'll do fine. It will be hell, but it will end, and you'll have done it, and you'll never have to do it again."

"How did you know that I didn't want to do the climb?"

"Women often come into the shop needing hiking boots. They all more or less have the same expression on their faces."

"And what would that be?"

"Fear."

He took off the boots and then the socks, and Margaret's feet felt as though they'd been plunged into cold water. When she reached the counter, the salesman handed her a piece of engraved letterhead with the price discreetly written in pencil. Why pencil? Was Margaret meant to bargain? The sum made her swallow, but she had no hesitation as she wrote the check. Patrick would understand.

The salesman concluded the transaction, coming around the counter with the package in which the boots had been neatly wrapped and tied.

"It has been a pleasure serving you," he said with a slight bow.

"Thank you."

“Are you a tourist?”

“My husband is with Nairobi Hospital.”

The salesman smiled. “Then I hope either you or your husband will return to our shop.”

“I think we might.”

Margaret was almost out the door when she decided.

“Is your name Tommy?”

The salesman looked surprised but answered, “Yes.”

“Arthur sent me,” she said.

Margaret returned to Crystal Ice Cream and ordered a pair of vegetarian Samosas and a Fanta. When the Samosas were handed to her on a paper plate, she took her food to a small table with a red Formica top. Next to her were two Asian men—Pakistani or Indian—who were sucking the marrow out of chicken bones and then eating the bones themselves.

Margaret took her plate back to the counter and asked for a bowl of ice cream. As she sat again at her table, one of the Asian men looked over. She wondered if it was odd to see a grown woman eating ice cream. In a city with so many different cultures, it might take years to learn the proper mores. As she slipped the banana-coconut onto her tongue, she knew there wasn't a chance of cream in the icy concoction. The name *Crystal* took on new meaning.

Margaret walked back to the place where she had left her car and was startled to note that there was no Peugeot where it was supposed to be. She thought she must be disoriented and examined each of the twenty vehicles parked along the side street. The boy to whom Margaret had paid eight shillings to watch her car was sitting on a fence—in her sight but ignoring her.

“Excuse me,” Margaret said in English. “Aren't you the boy I paid to watch my car?”

The boy seemed not to have heard her. She repeated the request in Swahili. “*Nataka gari, tafadhali.*”

“No, miss,” he said quickly. “No, miss.”

Margaret examined his face, his small body, his bare chest. She couldn't say for certain that he was the boy, though she trusted her instincts. “I want my car,” she said calmly.

Again, he appeared not to understand her. Impatient now, Margaret repeated the sentence in Swahili.

“No, miss,” the boy said, shaking his head. “No, miss.”

Margaret thought she saw something of fright in the boy's eyes and made the statement again, this time in a slightly louder voice. An older and taller boy, muscled and fingering a baton, emerged from an unmarked doorway.

“You have problem, miss?” the larger boy asked. He had on a white undershirt and a pair of dark-blue trousers and seemed to possess an unexplained authority.

Margaret felt her hands go cold.

“Yes,” she said as calmly as she could. “Around ten o'clock this morning, I parked my car, a white Peugeot, just here, and I asked this boy to watch it. I gave him eight shillings to do so.”

The older boy spoke to the younger boy in a language Margaret didn't understand. The older boy turned toward her with exaggerated politeness.

“No, miss. Though I do not doubt that you believe you are correct, you are much mistaken. There has been no white Peugeot of your description on this street all morning. My brother is extremely certain.”

The taller boy took a step toward Margaret. Would he hit a white woman?

“This is infuriating,” she said, her heart beating as if she were already climbing Mount Kenya. “I know what I did. I need that car. What’s the point of paying eight shillings to someone to watch the car if it’s not going to be here when I return?”

The street was empty. Margaret knew the older boy had seen her glance around. He turned toward the younger boy and argued with him in an angry voice. The young boy looked down at the sidewalk, seemingly repentant.

“My brother is very sorry to be infuriating you. I apologize for him since he is too stupid to do so himself. But I urge you on to find your white Peugeot, a kind of automobile which has not been seen on this street since before five o’clock this morning.”

Margaret knew he wouldn’t tell her what had happened to the car. She didn’t have enough money in her straw bag for that kind of information.

She stood her ground for a minute, maybe two, and then walked away. She knew that they were smiling and that the minute she rounded the corner, they would put their hands over their mouths and laugh.

Margaret meant to go directly to the police station. But first she investigated all the side streets off Kimathi in case she hadn’t been paying attention when she had parked the car. She found two white Peugeots, but neither of them was hers. She thought about what might turn out to be an hours-long rigmarole at the police station and felt exhausted. She walked on until she reached the New Stanley Hotel. She went into the Thorn Tree Café and used the telephone attached to the message board. She bent her head to the pole, the flat of a tack making a small dent in her forehead. She called Patrick at the hospital.

“The car’s been stolen,” she said.

“It’s not supposed to be like this,” Patrick insisted, fists hard on his thighs. He sat across from Margaret at a table at the Thorn Tree. She knew he meant that the thieving wasn’t part of his participation in Kenya, his hope for Kenya. That it had happened to them—and four times—hurt him. Patrick’s anguish, which was real enough, had turned his skin blotchy. They were drinking Tuskers, which were not delivering on promised consolation.

Patrick raised his eyes to hers. “You all right?” he asked. Earlier, when he’d made his way to her table, she’d stood and embraced him, and he hadn’t let her go until she’d stopped shaking.

“I am now. I’m just wondering what they’d have done if I hadn’t backed off.”

Patrick took in a sharp suck of air.

“I just dread the red tape at the police station,” Margaret said, trying to change the subject. “You must have gone through it with the tires.”

Patrick nodded. “I’ll call Arthur from here. He’ll give you a ride home.”

“He can’t,” she said. “I gave him a ride in.”

“You gave Arthur a ride to town?”

“His car wasn’t working. Diana needed the Land Rover for the kids.”

Patrick took a long pull on the Tusker. “What do you think of Arthur?”

Margaret was surprised by the question. It seemed literally to be out of order, something they might have discussed in fifteen minutes’ time. She assembled her answer, unsure of Patrick’s reason for asking.

“He’s smug and a bit arrogant. I can’t tell if he’s like that around us because we—I—am a naive American. Though I suspect that’s his nature. Sometimes I think he means well, and sometimes I think we’re a kind of plaything for him—a dog’s squeaky toy.”

“But the fact is,” said Patrick, “this country needs the Arthurs of this world in order to stay afloat. They need his company’s capital, too. It’s common knowledge that when Kenyatta goes, the tourism will collapse. They’re desperate for some kind of industry—not just coffee or the distribution of crafts.”

“So you like Arthur,” Margaret said, somewhat amazed that her husband could so quickly make a cost-benefit analysis of a human being. She wondered if he had ever done the same with her but then dismissed the idea.

“I reserve judgment on pretty much everyone until he or she has done something egregious.”

“What about Diana?” Margaret asked.

“Diana’s elitist and deeply preoccupied.”

“With what?”

“Her dogs.”

Margaret laughed. She took a sip of Tusker and leaned back into her chair. The café was half full, the expats having the edge.

“Come back with me to the hospital,” Patrick said, opening his wallet. “We’ll get you a ride from there, and then I’ll tackle the police.”

She glanced at a nearby table and saw what looked to be a student drinking a cup of tea and reading a textbook. She thought about the rumor she’d overheard just hours earlier. She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Patrick, do you know anything about fifty students being massacred and thrown into an unmarked grave?”

Patrick’s body went still, as if each muscle were shutting down, one by one. “Where did you hear that?” he whispered.

“Here. I overheard two students talking at the table next to me.”

Patrick moved closer. “What else did you hear?”

“Why?” She studied Patrick’s face. “It’s true, isn’t it?”

He looked away.

Margaret reached out and grabbed his arm. She felt something like aftershocks on the surface of his skin.

“Why hasn’t it been reported in the press?”

Patrick was silent for a time. “No newspaper in this country would print that story.”

“Why not?”

“The press, Margaret, is controlled by the government. Anyone who printed something like that would be out of a job and probably arrested.”

“Couldn’t we get the story out, then?” she asked, having no clear idea of what she was suggesting. “Feed it to the *New York Times*? Or anyone? I mean... this... this is huge, isn’t it? Fifty students in a mass grave?”

“We’d immediately be deported. Or worse.” He did not define the *worse*. “I have only hearsay myself, and I can’t reveal who told me, for obvious reasons.”

“It doesn’t feel right,” Margaret said, shaking her head. “This is crazy.”

“It feels crazy if you’re an American on American soil. It’s easier to understand if you’re sitting at a café in Nairobi.”

Margaret wondered if that was true. “Isn’t it worth it to be deported in order to bring this thing to

light?" she asked. "Why were they killed?"

"They're rumored to be part of a student group protesting the arrest of the novelist Thomas Oulu. He's being held without benefit of trial."

"Why?"

"For writing material the government considers seditious."

"These protesters, they're just kids, though."

Patrick looked off and then leaned in close to her. "If I say one word to the *Evening Standard*, just to use that as an example, I can't be sure the editor won't pass this information on to someone in the government. In fact, he'd almost have to if he was even considering investigating the story. And if he did, I would be arrested, and possibly you, too. And I'm guessing it wouldn't take them too long to work out who my source was. That man would be arrested, possibly executed. His family would almost certainly suffer reprisals. But let's say I don't do that. Let's say I leave this country voluntarily and go directly to the *New York Times*. They, too, are going to want my source—a source I can't give them. And if they miraculously decide to pursue this story anyway and assign someone to investigate will anyone with certain knowledge speak to an American reporter? Fear of family reprisals keeps most Kenyans mute."

"Maybe you underestimate the skills of good reporters."

"Do I?"

"When did you know?"

The student at the next table glanced up at Margaret.

"About a week ago," Patrick said, again keeping his voice to a whisper.

"And you didn't tell me?" she asked.

"I don't think I'd have told you until I knew it was true. And maybe not even then. I wish I didn't know."

"How can you live with this knowledge?"

Patrick spoke fast. "The same way I can live with the knowledge that the Mathari slum is a hellhole, that it's not an uncommon occurrence for a panga gang to stop a vehicle at night and mache all the passengers, and that ruthless corruption from the top down will get significantly worse when Kenyatta dies."

"And yet you were eager to come here. For what?"

"To do my bit? To selfishly study something of great interest to me? To further my career?"

"You do it to save lives," Margaret said.

"I hope so."

She smiled.

"You all set?" he asked.

Margaret gathered up her straw bag and the package of boots she had bought earlier. Patrick stood and left some shillings on the table.

As she and Patrick left the café and passed through the lobby, she slid her hand up under his rolled shirtsleeve. It felt safer there.

Arthur seemed mildly amused. Diana was appalled. A cloud had burst and was sending down a drenching rain so dense and thick Margaret couldn't see a single thing beyond the windows. They were sitting in a small room off the drawing room that hadn't yet been identified. Tea had been brought in by James, and Diana was pouring. Margaret noted that her own hands were trembling and

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