The Darling

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Extract

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I



AFTER MANY YEARS of believing that I never dream of anything, I dreamed of Africa. It happened on a late-August night here at the farm in Keene Valley, about as far from Africa as I have been able to situate myself. I couldn't recall the dream's story, although I knew that it was in Africa, the country of Liberia, and my home in Monrovia, and that somehow the chimps had played a role, for there were round, brown, masklike faces still afloat in my mind when I awoke, safe in my bed in this old house in the middle of the Adirondack Mountains, and found myself overflowing with the knowledge that I would soon return there.

It wasn't a conscious decision to return. More a presentiment is all it was, a foreboding perhaps, advancing from the blackest part of my mind at the same rate as the images of Liberia drifted there and broke and dissolved in those dark waters where I've stored most of my memories of Africa. Memories of Africa and of the terrible years before. When you have kept as many secrets as I have for as long as I have, you end up keeping them from yourself as well. So, yes, into my cache of forgotten memories of Liberia and the years that led me there—that's where the dream went. As if it were someone else's secret and were meant to be kept from me, especially.

And in its place was this knowledge that I would soon be going back—foreknowledge, really, because I didn't make the decision until later that day, when Anthea and I had finished killing the chickens and were wrapping them in paper and plastic bags for delivery and pickup.

It was at the end of summer, the beginning of an early autumn, and though barely a year ago, it feels like a decade, so much was altered in that year. The decade here: now, *that* seems like a few days and nights is all, because nothing except the same thing has happened here day after day, season after season, year after year. No new or old returning lovers, no marriages or divorces, no births or deaths, at least among the humans. Just the farm and the world that nourishes and sustains it. Timeless, it has seemed.

The farm is a commercial operation, inasmuch as I sell most of what I grow, but in truth it's more like an old-fashioned family farm, and to run it I've had to give over my personal clock. I've had to abandon all my urban ways of measuring time and replace them with the farm's clock, which is marked off by the needs and demands of livestock and the crops, by the requirements of soil and the surge and flux of weather. It's no wonder that farmers in the old days were obsessed with the motions of the planets and the waxing and waning of the moon, as if their farms were the bodies of women. I sometimes think it's because I *am* a woman—or maybe it's merely because I lived all those years in Liberia, adapted to African time—that I was able to adapt so easily to the pace and patterns and rhythmic repetitions of nature's clock and calendar.

It was *as usual*, then, on that August morning, with the darkness just beginning to pull back from the broad river valley to the forests and the mountains looming behind the house, that I woke at five-thirty and came downstairs wearing my flannel nightgown and slippers against the pre-dawn chill, with the dogs clattering behind me, checked the temperature by the moon-faced thermometer outside the kitchen window (still no frost,

which was good, because we'd neglected to cover the tomatoes), and put the dogs out.

I made coffee for Anthea, who comes in at six and says she can't do a thing until after her second cup, and the other girls, who come in at seven. I lingered for a few moments in the kitchen while the coffee brewed, enjoying the dark smell of it. I never drink coffee, having been raised on tea, a habit I took from my father as soon as he'd let me, but I do love the smell of it when it's brewing and buy organic Colombian beans from a mail-order catalogue and grind them freshly for each pot, just for the aroma.

For a few moments, as I always do, I stood by the window and watched the dogs. They are Border collies, father and daughter, Baylor and Winnie, and when they have done their business, the first thing they do every morning is patrol the property, reclaiming their territory and making sure that during the night nothing untoward has happened. Usually I watch them work and think of them as working for me. But this morning they looked weirdly different to me, as if during the night one of us, they or I, had changed allegiances. They looked like ghost dogs, moving swiftly across the side yard in the gray pre-dawn light, disappearing into shadows cast by the house and oak trees, darting low to the ground into the garage, then reappearing and moving on. Today they worked for no one but themselves; that's how I saw them. Their gait was halfway between a trot and a run—fast, effortless, smooth, and silent, their ears cocked forward, plumed tails straight back—and they seemed more like small wolves than carefully trained and utterly domesticated herding animals.

For a moment they scared me. I saw the primeval wildness in them, their radical independence and selfishness, the ferocity of their strictly canine needs. Perhaps it was the thin, silvery half-light and that I viewed them mostly in silhouette as they zigged and zagged across the yard, and when they'd checked the garage, an open shed, actually, where I park the pickup truck and my

Honda, they moved on to the barn and from there to the henhouse, where the rooster crowed, and then loped all the way to the pond in the front field, where they woke the ducks and geese, never stopping, running in tandem, a pair of single-minded predators sifting their territory at peak efficiency.

In their mix of wildness and control, they were beautiful. In their silence and indistinct, shape-changing fluidity, they frightened me. Five minutes ago they had been under my control, curled in my bed, crowding me to one side of it like a pair of human children. And now they were wild dogs, the kind of beasts the ancient people glimpsed slipping through the brush at dawn between the campsite and the forest.

They had not changed overnight, of course. But maybe, because of my dream of Africa and the chimps, *I* had, and the dogs were sensing it, as if I had somehow betrayed them. Then when Anthea drove in along the lane from the road, headlights bobbing like heavy fruit on a tree as her beat-up Jimmie pickup passed along the ruts, the dogs ran to her truck as they do every day, and when she stepped out they greeted her with their usual yipping commotion and followed her to the side porch. But when they entered the kitchen behind her, they slipped quickly into the living room, then furtively circled through the dining room to the kitchen again and made for the door and scratched at it to be let back out.

Anthea yanked off her cap and ruffled her auburn curls with one hand and watched the dogs. She screwed up her face and said, "What's with them doggies?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe something spooked them."

She opened the door, and the dogs bolted across the yard and out of sight. "Must be you that's spooking them, Hannah." She laughed and filled her mug with coffee, sighed heavily, and sat down at the table.

"Maybe it's the moon. I had strange dreams all night. You?"

"Nope. Slept like a hibernated bear. Full moon's not for another three days anyhow." Anthea is impish and winking, a

large woman, strong; if she were a man you'd call her burly. She has a broad, flat face the shape and color of a raspberry, a peasant face, some might say, and probably a lot of the summer people have. But if you look, you can tell at once that she's good humored and hard working and possesses an abundance of mother wit. Everything about her expresses intelligent energy.

She's a local, and I, of course, am not. When I first bought the place from her aunt and uncle and learned at the closing that Anthea had run the farm by herself for years, I knew that I would need her at least as much as her invalided uncle and bedridden aunt had, and I hired her on the spot to be my manager. Besides, I felt sorry for her and angry on her behalf. Her aunt and uncle, having elected to move to the village and live at the Neighborhood House, an assisted-living home for elderlies, had put the farm up for sale without consulting her. She told me that she drove home one afternoon from picking up their weekly groceries at the Stop & Shop in Lake Placid and saw a For Sale sign posted where the lane left the road, and another stuck in the middle of the front yard.

Anthea should have inherited the farm. Or her uncle should have somehow arranged for her to buy it from them. Her parents died when she was a child, and her uncle and aunt had raised her as their own. But she was an unmarried woman in love with a married woman from the next town, and the affair was widely known, probably known even by the woman's alcoholic husband, a house painter who rarely worked but was liked and looked after in the town because of his sweet nature and their three small children.

Her aunt and uncle went straight from the closing at the realtor's office to the Neighborhood House. When they are dead, whatever's left, if anything, of the nearly one hundred thirty thousand dollars I gave them for the farm will likely go to Anthea. But it won't let her buy the place. Not even if I were willing to sell it. The farm is worth three times now what it went for in 1991. I may feel sorry for Anthea and angry on her behalf,

but I wouldn't sell her the farm at a discount. The truth is, I'm not very generous and don't mind saying so.

The other girls, Frieda, Nan, and Cat, arrived at their usual times, Frieda and Nan together at seven roaring up on Nan's motorcycle, and Cat, drifting in ten minutes later like a petal falling from a daisy, strolling blithely down the lane as if wondering what to do with this lovely, end-of-summer day opening up ahead of her, when she knew very well that Anthea and I had her day all laid out for her. Cat's a third-generation hippie, in her late teens, a dreamy throwback to the sixties, her grandparents' era. My era. Catalonia's her real name, given to her at birth by her parents, Raven and Rain, who got their names in adulthood from a Bengali guru on a New Mexico commune, Cat told me. Her woozy, laid-back affect and language are the same as her parents' and grandparents', but she's replaced their form of soft, open-ended rebellion with a post-hippie, puritanical adherence to abstinence. She's a drug-free, home-schooled, vegan virgin from Vermont, childlike and winsome on the surface, but inside tight as a fist. Cat's the type of girl thirty years ago I would have tried to recruit for Weatherman. Cat is a girl you can picture nowadays becoming a born-again Christian fundamentalist, dark and judgmental. She's the kind of girl I once was.

But Anthea and I and the other girls love Cat and can't help protecting her—mostly from ourselves, as it turns out, and our rough edges and indulgences. None of us is drug free, virginal, or even a part-time vegetarian. We smoke, drink beer after work and stronger stuff often till bedtime, and eat meat whenever possible.

I hadn't meant to hire an all-female workforce and don't hold to it on principle. It evolved naturally, first with Anthea, who knew who in town was looking for work—which turned out to be pretty exclusively women and girls. It was early summer when I moved in, and all the men and boys who wanted to work already had jobs, most of them seasonal, and weren't interested in organic gardening or raising free-range chickens or renovating long-neglected apple orchards—women's work. And they cer-

tainly weren't eager to take orders from two women, one of them a skinny, white-haired, rich bitch *from away*, as they say here, who didn't know what she was doing anyhow, the other a tough-mouthed lesbian from town who knew all their dirty little secrets. So we hired local high-school girls, out-of-work nurses, college dropouts living temporarily with their parents, young mothers whose husbands had left them and weren't paying child support, and sometimes off-season winter athletes, like Frieda and Nan, ski bums and ice climbers who spend the six snow-and-ice-free months up here in the mountains.

The place is called Shadowbrook Farm, a name I'd never have given it myself—a little too poetic or, if taken another way, morbid, almost gothic—but it came with the property. And since it was still known locally as Shadowbrook Farm and reflected the physical fact of the wide, year-round brook meandering through the fluttery shadows cast by the groves of birches and other hardwoods at the far end of the broad front meadow, I saw no reason to change the name. The brook—it's really a river, the Ausable River—is the most picturesque aspect of the old farm, which is otherwise a simple, nineteenth-century colonial house with a wide front porch; the three tipped outbuildings we use for storing vehicles, farm machinery, hay, and feed; a tool shed; and the henhouse and sheepfold that Anthea and I built ourselves that first summer.

Strangely, more than anything else about the farm, more than the land or the buildings or the animals and crops, I feel the river is mine. My permanent, personal property. Yet, unlike everything else here, the river continuously changes. It talks to me: I've heard voices coming from it. The voices of children, usually. I hear them from the porch, from the kitchen, and from my bedroom upstairs at the front of the house, at all times of day and night in all seasons, even with the windows closed—long conversations and sometimes songs whose words I can almost make out, as if there were a playground out there on the far side of the field and the children were calling to one another

or to me in a language other than English or were singing another country's nursery rhymes and songs.

I don't know if it's because it's all women, but over the years everyone I've hired has seemed to enjoy working here. It's hard work, and I can be demanding, I know, and edgy, moody, and not all that communicative or personal, although I like to think I'm democratic and fair-minded and, when it comes to expectations, reasonable. But I'm not easily intimate, haven't been for years. Maybe never. And while I think of Anthea, for instance, as a close friend, perhaps the closest friend I have in this town or anywhere, a woman who tells me everything she knows about herself, the truth is I don't really return the confidence or offer her much information about myself, especially my past. I've given her only the bits and pieces that I've given everyone else in this town since the day I first arrived here eleven years ago, a suddenly wealthy woman who had inherited from her recently deceased mother, the widow of her famous father, an estate worth half a million dollars after taxes and the copyrights to the famous father's five best-selling books. No one locally knows the details, of course, although it was obvious from the beginning to everyone that I was a woman of means.

Keene Valley is a small town, a village, and because I couldn't really keep it a secret and didn't want to anyhow, everyone knew or soon learned from my lawyer, from the realtor who handled my purchase of the farm, or from Anthea—to whom I had to confide a few things, after all, or I'd look like I had something dangerous to hide—that before coming here to the North-country I had lived for many years in West Africa, in a country called the Republic of Liberia.

Wherever *that* is. Someplace out there in the jungle was close enough.

TEN DAYS LATER, I rode overland in the dark, traveling northwest from Côte d'Ivoire into Liberia and down to the

coast from the Nimba highlands, most of the time hidden under a tarpaulin in the back of a truckload of milled boards. At first and for several hours, I rode up front beside the trucker. I had crossed the border illegally, but with no more difficulty than if I'd been a crate of Chinese rifles or a case of Johnny Walker whiskey. In West Africa, if you're carrying enough U.S. cash, nearly any legal technicality can be erased. It had been a quick, hundred-dollar arrangement made with the driver of the truck, a slim, middle-aged Lebanese from Monrovia, a man with yellow eyes who licked his lips a lot and smiled like a lizard. His name was Mamoud. He owned the truck and was able to buy gas for it and bribe the guards at the borders—obviously an intelligent man thriving in evil times, and was dangerous therefore. I'd been passed on to Mamoud by the driver of the bush taxi I'd hired at the Abidjan airport to take me as far as Danane, a few kilometers east of the Liberian border. I hadn't known it, but they were a team, the taxi driver and the trucker. Everyone in West Africa eventually turns out to be a member of a team.

At this particular crossing I was only smuggled goods, contraband, but at Robertsfield Airport in Monrovia or at one of the more carefully patrolled crossings, I'd have been a potential enemy of the state, stopped for certain and turned around and sent back to Côte d'Ivoire or possibly arrested and jailed. Which is why I had flown from JFK into Abidjan, on a Côte d'Ivoire tourist visa with no entry visa for Liberia. There had been no point in my even applying for one, and no reason to fly directly from Abidjan to Monrovia—quite the opposite, if I wanted to get into Liberia at all. Although the war was officially long over, the man who'd begun it, Charles Taylor—with whom I had once enjoyed a long-time personal relationship, let me say that much, and I will eventually tell you about that, too—was now president, elected by people who had voted for him to stop him from killing them. His enemies, the few who had come out of the war alive, had scattered into the jungles and across the borders into Sierra Leone or Guinea and had

regrouped or, like me, had made their way to North America and Europe, where they plotted the death of the president and their own eventual return.

We had no problems at the border crossing, where Mamoud was evidently known and liked and must have had outstanding favors owed him. The soldiers simply waved him through, even with an unknown white woman sitting beside him. *Mamoud's French girlfren', prob'ly. Dem Lebaneses got a taste for dem skinny ol' white ladies.* Laughter all around.

And then I was back in Liberia once again, passing darkened daub-and-wattle huts with conical thatched roofs and clusters of small cinder-block houses with roofs of corrugated tin and bare front porches and swept dirt yards and, alongside the road, a barefoot man or boy walking, suddenly splashed by the glare of the headlights, refusing to show his face or turn, just stepping off the road a foot or two, then disappearing into the blackness behind. Inside the roadside huts and houses I saw now and then a candle burning or the low, orange glow of a kerosene lantern, and here and there, close to the door, the red coals of a charcoal fire pit, and I caught for a second the smell of roasted meat and a glimpse of the ghostly figure of a woman tending the fire, her back to the road. It was all immediately familiar to me and comforting, and yet at the same time new and exotic, as if this were my first sight of the place and people and I had not lived here among them for many years. It was as if I had only read about them in novels and from that had vividly imagined them, and now they were actually before me, fitting that imagined template exactly, but with a sharpness and clarity that subtly altered everything and made it fresh and new.

It was the same anxious, edgy mingling of the known and unknown that greeted me when I made my first journey into the American South nearly forty years ago, when I was a college girl using her summer vacation to register black voters in Mississippi and Louisiana. I was an innocent, idealistic, Yankee girl whose vision of the South had arisen dripping with magnolia-scented

decay and the thrill of racial violence from deep readings of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. A newly minted rebel, fresh faced and romantic, I rode the bus south that summer with hundreds like me into Mississippi, confident that we were about to cleanse our parents' racist, oppressive world by means of idealism and simple hard work.

Up to that point, my most radical act had been to attend Brandeis instead of Smith, and I had done that solely to please my father and to avoid granting my mother's unspoken wish that I follow her example. I'd never been out of New England, except for a high-school civics class trip to Washington, D.C., and a flight to Philadelphia for an admissions interview at Swarthmore, my second choice for college after Brandeis and my father's first choice. But I had gazed overlong into those Southern novels and stories, and for many weeks that first summer in the South they provided the reflecting pool in which I saw where I was and the black and white people who lived there. Eventually, of course, literature got displaced by reality, as it invariably does, but for a while my everyday life had the clarity, intensity, and certitude of fiction.

A FEW MILES WEST of the town of Ganta, the road bends perilously close to the Guinea border, where, as I knew from the newspapers at home, there had been sporadic fighting in the last year between small bands of regular and irregular soldiers from the two neighboring countries—the usual jockeying for control of the Nimba diamond traffic. Even the *New York Times* seemed to know about that, which had surprised me. It was here, in the middle of a long stretch between rural villages, that Mamoud abruptly pulled over and parked the truck by the side of the road.

He told me to get out and bring my backpack, and I thought, *Damn him! Damn the man. He knows who I am, or he's just figured it out and he's got evil on his mind.* Back at the border, just as we

crossed, he had insisted on learning my last name. When I said it, Sundiata, Woodrow's well-known last name, he didn't react. But I knew at once that I should have said only what it read on my passport, Musgrave, my father's last name. Mamoud had merely smiled and then said nothing for the entire two hours after.

The old, all-too-familiar, Liberian paranoia came rushing over me. It's in the air you breathe here. It's like a virus. You can't escape or defeat it. It hits you suddenly, like when you've had a close call. At first you feel foolish for not having been more frightened and warily suspicious, and you promise yourself that it won't happen again, it had better not, because next time you may not be so lucky. From then on, you assume that everyone is lying, everyone wants to hurt you, to steal from you, and may even want to kill you.

I got slowly down from the truck, slung my pack onto my back, and made ready to bolt. On the near side the jungle came up tight to the road, but on the far side of the road I saw a field of high sawtooth grass and knew that if I got there before him, he'd have trouble catching me in the dark. I had no idea what I'd do after he gave up the chase and drove on. *If* he gave up and drove on. I was three hundred kilometers from the city of Monrovia, a white American woman afoot and alone. Never mind that there was probably a standing warrant for my arrest and the U.S. embassy would do nothing to protect me. All my chits with the Americans had been spent a decade ago. And never mind that there would probably be rumors of a reward offered by Charles Taylor personally, making me a target of opportunity for any Liberian with a knife or machete to slice my throat or take off my head. Liberia is a small country, and in any village, even out here in Nimba, my corpse could be exchanged for a boom box or maybe a motorbike and passed along in a farther exchange and then another, the price going up with each transaction, until finally what was left of my body, maybe just

my head with its telltale hair, got dropped at the gate of the Executive Mansion in Monrovia.

Beyond all that, even if I was just being paranoid in that Liberian way, and none of it were true, and there was no warrant, no reward, and in the passage of time and the blur of alcohol and drugs and the intoxication of having ruled his tiny country with absolute power for so many years, Charles had forgotten me altogether, I was nonetheless a white woman alone, a sexual curiosity, spoilage, perhaps, at my advanced age, but with a little use still left to the madmen and crazed boys here in the madhouse.

For the first time since leaving my farm in the Adirondacks, I wondered if somewhere along the way—going back to those early days in Mississippi and Louisiana and coming forward to the afternoon at the farm when I suddenly announced to Anthea that I was returning to Liberia to learn what had happened to my sons—I wondered if I had lost my mind. Not figuratively, but literally. I thought, *I could be a madwoman.* And I wondered if I was standing there in the dark by the side of a narrow, unpaved road in the eastern hills of Liberia because somewhere back there, without knowing it, I'd lost touch with reality. Lost it in small bits, a single molecule of sanity at a time in a slow, invisible, irreversible process of erosion, and couldn't notice it while it was happening, couldn't take its measure, until now, when it was too late.

On the driver's side of the truck, Mamoud was hurriedly unfolding a stiff, old tarpaulin and spreading it over the lumber and tying it down at the corners. He worked his way around to my side, and I darted four or five steps away from him, ready to make my escape. I looked toward the front of the truck, searching for a rock, a brick, something to injure him with.

Mamoud said, "Checkpoints be comin' up now, missy. Dem won't bother me none, but mebbe best f' you t' hide back here." He held up the corner of the tarp and indicated with a nod a hollowed-out area the size of a coffin in the middle of the cargo.