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The Camel Bookmobile

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Published by Orion

Extract

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February 1989—*Mididima, North-Eastern Province, Kenya*

Scar Boy

The child, wide-legged on the ground, licked dust off his fist and tried to pretend he was tasting camel milk. Nearby, his father spoke to a thorny acacia while his older brother hurled rocks at a termite mound. Neither paid him any attention, but this didn't change the fact that for the child, the three of them existed as a single entity. It was as if he drank dust, beseeched a tree, and threw stones all at once. He took this oneness for granted. Separate was a concept he was too young to recognize. Nor did he know of change, or fear, or the punishment of drought. All of life still felt predictable, and forever, and safe.

Now, for instance, this child-father-brother unit was enveloped in the reliable collapse of day, when the breeze stiffened, color drained from the sky, and shadows tinted three sets of cheeks simultaneously. The child welcomed this phase. The texture of the graying light transformed faces. It made people, he would later think, resemble charcoal portraits.

Something disturbed this particular dusk, though, tugging his attention away from the intimate comfort of his tongue on his skin and the dust's piquant flavor. Out of the

gloom of nearby bushes rose a rigid, narrow object, standing frozen but quivering. This was odd. Everything in his experience either walked or dashed or flew or was blown by the wind or planted in the ground—in other words, it plainly moved or, less frequently, it didn't. What could he make of this harsh immobile shuddering, this tense and stubborn suggestion of flexibility? He crawled closer, then sat back to look again.

From this perspective, he spotted another object, small and round against the other's long narrowness. It was the color of a flame.

In fact, there were two.

Aha, he thought with satisfaction, the puzzle starting to shift into place. Eyes. Eyes, of course, moved and stayed still at once and could flicker like firelight. So the object must be human. Or maybe animal. Or maybe an ancestral ghost.

Whatever it was, he understood from somewhere, an inherited memory or intuition, that he needed all of himself to meet it. So he called to his other parts, his father-brother. "Here I am," he said, a gentle reminder. Even as he spoke, he didn't look away from the eyes and the rigid tail, and so he saw the object begin to grow larger. And then it lunged. It joined him, as if it too wanted to be part of the son-father-brother entity.

He was unaware of pain. Instead, the moment seemed unreal and confusing, like drifting off to sleep in the midst of one of his father's sung tales and losing track of the story. What had already happened? What was happening still? He would have to ask his father in the morning.

Only one part remained distinct: the sound that would echo in his mind until death. The wet, high-pitched ripping of his three-year-old flesh as the spotted hyena, never a kind beast and now mad with hunger, dove onto his leg, chomped at his waist, and then reached his face and gnawed, grunting with pleasure.

Later he would hear how his father turned, killed the beast with a miraculously aimed knife, scooped his son into his arms, and began running, the child's blood weeping down the father's arms. He would learn that all this took less than five meditative breaths—but he would never quite believe it. In his memory, the crunching of bone and tearing of flesh stretched over a decade of sundowns and sunups, disrupting all patterns, making everything separate and fearful and dusty and fleeting forever.

Part One

Mosquitoes' lives may be ephemeral, their deaths almost always brutal. But during their transitory span, absolutely nothing will stand in the way of their two formidable guiding desires: to soak up human lifeblood, and to reproduce.

—*A Mosquito's Life,* J. R. Churin, 1929

December 2002—*Brooklyn, New York*

The American

Fiona Sweeney shoved a pair of rolled-up jeans into the corner of her purple duffel bag. Outside her bedroom window, a siren's wail sliced through the white noise of a wet snowfall. Those eerie man-made moans were part of New York City's wallpaper, a signal of trouble commonplace enough to pass unnoticed. But Fi registered this one, maybe because she knew she wouldn't be hearing sirens for a while.

She turned her attention back to her bag, which still had space. What else should she take? Lifting a framed snapshot, she examined her mother as a young woman, wading into a stream, wearing rubber boots and carrying a fishing pole. Fi cherished the photograph; in real life, she'd never known her mother to be that carefree. The mother Fi had known wouldn't want to go to Africa. In fact, she wouldn't want Fi to go. Fi put the picture facedown and scanned the room, her attention drawn to a worn volume of Irish poetry by her bedside. She tucked it in.

"How about the netting?" Chris called from the living room where he sat with Devi.

"Already in," Fi answered.

"And repellent?" asked Devi.

"Yes, yes." Fi waved her hand as though shooing away a gnat—a gesture that Chris and Devi couldn't see from the other room. "Should have kept my mouth shut," she murmured.

Early on in her research about Kenya, she'd discovered that the country's annual death toll from malaria was in the tens of thousands. She had pills; she had repellents; logically, she knew she'd be fine. Still, a figure that high jolted her. She became slightly obsessed and—here's the rub—discussed it with Chris and Devi. *Mbu*—mosquito—had been the first Swahili word she'd learned. Sometimes the insects even dive-bombed into her nightmares. Eventually, mosquitoes became a metaphor for everything she feared about this trip: all the stories she'd read about a violent and chaotic continent, plus the jitters that come with the unknown.

And what wasn't unknown? All she knew for sure, in fact, was why she was going. Fi's mom had never been a big talker, but she'd been a hero, raising four kids alone. Now it was Fi's turn to do something worthwhile.

"Fi." Chris, at the door of the bedroom, waved in the air the paper on which he'd written a list of all the items he thought she should bring and might forget. Money belt. Hat. Granola bars. "Have you been using this?" he asked half-mockingly in the tone of a teacher.

"I hate lists," Fi said.

He studied her a second. "OK," he said. "Then, what do you say, take a break?"

"Yeah, c'mon, Fi. We don't want to down all your wine

by ourselves," Devi called from the living room, where an Enya CD played low.

Pulling back her dark, frizzy hair and securing it with a clip, Fi moved to the living room and plopped onto the floor across from Devi, who sprawled in a long skirt on the couch. Chris poured Fi a glass of cabernet and sat in the chair nearest her. If they reached out, the three of them could hold hands. Fi felt connected to them in many ways, but at the same time, she was already partly in another place and period. A soft light fell in from the window, dousing the room in a flattering glow and intensifying the sensation that everything around her was diaphanous, and that she herself was half here and half not.

"You know, there's lots of illiteracy in *this* country," Devi said after a moment.

"That's why I've been volunteering after work," Fi said. "But there, it's different. They've never been exposed to libraries. Some have never held a book in their hands."

"Not to mention that it's more dangerous, which somehow makes it appealing to Fi," Chris said to Devi, shaking his head. "Nai-robbery."

Though he spoke lightly, his words echoed those of Fi's brother and two sisters—especially her brother. She was ready with a retort. "I'll mainly be in Garissa, not Nairobi," she said. "It's no more dangerous there than New York City. Anyway, I want to take some risks—different risks. Break out of my rut. Do something meaningful." Then she made her tone playful. "The idealistic Irish. What can you do?"

"Sometimes idealism imposes," Chris said. "What if all they want is food and medicine?"

"You know what I think. Books are their future. A link to the modern world." Fi grinned. "Besides, we want *Huckleberry Finn* to arrive before *Sex in the City* reruns, don't we?"

Devi reached out to squeeze Fi's shoulder. "Just be home by March."

Home. Fi glanced around, trying to consciously take in her surroundings. She'd considered subletting, which would have been the most economical decision, but she'd gotten busy and let it slide. Now she noticed that Chris had stacked her magazines neatly and stored away the candles so they wouldn't collect dust. After she left for Kenya, Chris had told her, he'd come back to wash any glasses or plates she'd left out, make sure the post office was holding her mail, and take her plants back to his apartment. He'd thought of that, not her. A nice gesture, she kept reminding herself. Still. She gave Chris a wicked grin as she reached out to mess up the magazines on the coffee table. It felt satisfying, even though she knew he would just restack them later.

Chris was deep into what his colleagues called "groundbreaking" research on the human brain—specifically the hippocampus—at NYU Medical Center. He wanted a shared home and, eventually, kids. Her siblings thought they were a well-suited couple, but that was hardly persuasive. Fi's brother's wife's cousin was married to one of Fi's sisters, and they all still lived within eight blocks of their childhood homes. They considered Fi a wanderer for moving from the Bronx all the way to Brooklyn. They wanted to see her "settled," and she doubted that it mattered much to them who she settled with—or for.

But even Devi, who had arrived in Brooklyn via Iran,

agreed about Chris. "He's a scientist who studies the part of the brain that processes memories, and you work for an institution that does the same, if you think about it," Devi said once. "How perfect is that?"

Remembering it, Fi took a gulp of wine. The assumptions people made about one another were invariably wrong, she'd found. Yes, she was a librarian; yes, he was a researcher. But Chris was disciplined and logical where she was—well, she liked to think of herself as whimsical. Eventually, she suspected, her spontaneity would start to drive him batty, and his take-charge confidence would curb her style. Sometimes Fi thought Chris had become a researcher to immerse himself in a world he could analyze and define. That's not what she sought from her work. Books allowed her vicarious tastes of infinite variety, but they didn't supplant the need to venture out into the big and the messy. In fact, just the opposite. Books convinced her that something more existed—something intuitive, beyond reason—and they whetted her appetite to find it.

Occasionally, though, she felt a shock of fear that made her legs ache. She was thirty-six, after all, not a kid, and what she sought—this "something more"—seemed amorphous, even to her. She couldn't say what she was looking for, precisely; she only hoped she'd know when she found it.

What if, through inertia and social pressure, she ended up with Chris, and children, and backyard barbecues, and everything except the loose housedresses, and then what if she woke up to find herself somewhere on the gentle slope past middle age, gazing over her shoulder at a life respectable and well organized but too narrowly lived? A life that

didn't fit her. Couldn't that happen? Didn't it happen to people all the time?

"Well, here's to the Camel Bookmobile." Devi raised her glass. "Bringing literacy to the African bush."

"Hear, hear," Fi agreed. "It's going to open up whole new worlds for those people." *For me, too*, she thought, though she didn't say it. She felt light-headed with anticipation.

"My little library evangelist," said Chris in an ironic tone, shaking his head.

"Come on. Toast the project," Devi urged him.

"OK, OK," Chris said. "To Kenya. To the camels." From the end table, he picked up a book on camel husbandry—a joke gift from Fi's colleagues—and lifted it with one hand, raising his wineglass with the other.